
Notes on the Index, Continued: Italian Feminism and the Art of Mirella Bentivoglio and Ketty La Rocca

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NOTES ON THE INDEX, CONTINUED:
ITALIAN FEMINISM AND THE ART OF MIRELLA
BENTIVOGLIO AND KETTY LA ROCCA¹

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The 1960s and 1970s represent a historical watershed, a period when, for the first time ever, the participation of Italian women in the visual arts became both extensive and consistent.

In *Decostruzioniste ante litteram* (2001), Maria Antonietta Trasforini profiles a cluster of thirty-eight Italian women whose artworks from those decades incorporated both word and image. Included in this group were Mirella Bentivoglio (1922–) and Ketty La Rocca (1938–1976), the two artists with whom this article is concerned. Though their work differed in format and media, each of these women combined both language and image. Often, they used language, in particular the linguistic shifter, to confront their own historical erasure from artistic professions. Italian women artists embedded their own artistic traces in a field of activity traditionally dominated by men, and these declarations of artistic presence harnessed the spirit of self-consciousness of an emerging feminist movement.

Exhibiting together through the curatorial impetus of Mirella Bentivoglio, this generation of artists broke the confines of specific media to combine elements of both poetry and figurative art. Assessing the variety of practices these women shared, Trasforini describes the basis for this group identification:

Accomunate dalla pratica e non da legami formali o informali di gruppo, queste artiste operarono in un singolare spazio di sperimentazione e contaminazione di generi diversi, che sembra anticipare sia la multimedialità degli anni Novanta — come uso

1. I am grateful to all of the participants of the 2010 *Gender Studies e il caso italiano* conference for their invaluable feedback, and I thank the organizers for the opportunity to participate.

di molti media e tecniche — sia l'azione di decostruzione di testi e linguaggio tipiche del cosiddetto post-moderno. Nell'incontro fra segno pittorico e linguistico ritroviamo i diversi linguaggi della poesia concreta e della poesia visiva, delle scritture visuali, paramusicali e materiche sino al libro oggetto.²

Trasforini considers these works examples of post-modernist deconstruction, which attempted to abolish the hierarchy of genres while interrogating the nature of artistic authorship and provoking a critical mode of viewing and response. The intention of this strategy, Trasforini explains, was to dismantle essentialist preconceptions, and to stress the socially produced and constructed nature of images, objects, and social phenomena. Lucia Marcucci's *Il tema romantico della poesia*, according to Trasforini, offers a bomb that is about to explode all existing barriers, be they stylistic or social (figure 1). Ketty La Rocca's manipulation of a standard family photo empties the original image of its bodies, leaving only the blank social forms that they once inhabited (figure 2). Trasforini thus stresses the degree to which they called into question the existence of pre-conceived social scripts.³

Although there are some contradictions in Trasforini's essay, her overview has a lot to recommend it. It offers a rare discussion of this set of artists, and provides insight into their work by examining the social foment and sociological factors which produced it. Furthermore, her association of the media-based practices of this generation of Italian artists with the Americans that were their contemporaries or came shortly after them is in many cases entirely appropriate. Compare, for instance, Mirella Bentivoglio's *Il cuore della consumatrice ubbidiente* (1975) (figure 3) with Kruger's *I shop therefore I am* (1987). Both works highlight the consumerism of modern society and its gendered implications. However, as justifiable as it is to evoke the post-modern, deconstructive practices of the 80s and 90s, I think Trasforini draws this comparison on the basis of a some-

2. Maria Antonietta Trasforini, *Decostruzioniste ante litteram*, in *L'arte delle donne nell'Italia del Novecento*, edited by Laura Iamurri and Sabrina Spinazzé, Roma, Meltemi, 2001, pp. 181–99, 182.

3. Trasforini presents these works as a forerunner of Cindy Sherman's photographs, Barbara Kruger's photomontages and Jenny Holzer's *Truisms*. The latter pieces, which happen to date in Sherman's case from 1977 and in Kruger's to the 1980s, are all somewhat erroneously grouped together as representative of the 1990s. This inaccuracy is compounded, for Trasforini refers to La Rocca and Bentivoglio as predecessors, rather than contemporaries, of the American artists to whom she refers. Furthermore, Trasforini presumes that the same intentions can be associated with all of these works, regardless of their date of creation or geographic origin. This interpretation diminishes the uniqueness and originality of the Italian works, which as a result merely furnish additional evidence of the validity and general appeal of deconstructionist tendencies already associated with other artists. Trasforini's casual ahistoricism belies the necessity of finding more accurate frameworks for understanding these works, as I have tried to do in this article. *Ibid.*, pp. 182–3.

what limited cross-section of these artists' vast body of work. It is my intention to examine these works in terms of a more inclusive theoretical frame that is more representative of the art world in which these artists worked. This approach stresses the artist's intimate knowledge of the representative systems they deploy as much as the alienation of identity or the recycling of inherited scripts. In order to do this, I employ the notion of "indexicality" put forward by the American art historian Rosalind Krauss.

In 1977, Krauss published a two-part article in *October* magazine entitled "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America", now a classic of contemporary art historical scholarship.⁴ Krauss suggests that despite its apparent pluralism, a fundamental concern of 1970s art was "playing out the drama of the shifter".⁵ The "shifter", Krauss explains, is a term for a linguistic sign whose meaning is dependent on the context in which it is used. It is a word that remains empty until it is fitted with a precise meaning. Drawing on the work of structural linguists Roman Jakobson and Emile Benveniste, Krauss points out that common pronouns like "I" and "you" are shifters whose meaning changes across the space of the conversation or text in which they appear.⁶ "I" refers to myself, but only when I say it. If you use the word "I", it now refers, in fact, to you. The slippery logic of the shifter makes it a complicated point of reference. Nonetheless, it is indispensable to spoken or written discourse. There is another aspect to particular pronominal shifters in any language, like "I", "je", "io", or "tu", that Krauss is quick to point out. Since their meaning depends on the presence of a particular speaker, they also belong to the type of linguistic sign called the "index". An index, or indexical sign, derives its meaning from a physical relationship between itself and its referent. They are "marks or traces of a particular cause, and that cause is the thing to which they refer, the object they signify".⁷ Thus footprints, tire tracks, and cast shadows are indexical signs, whose existence depends on a physical cause and effect relationship. So are photographs, where the image is a physical result of the photomechanical process.

For Krauss, the importance of the shifter and the index lies in "the problem of naming an individuated self".⁸ In other words, the self is

4. I use Rosalind Krauss's work as a heuristic tool. I do not intend to suggest that it would have been known in Italy, or that this represents the only valid interpretive framework.

5. Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America", in *October*, 3, Spring 1977, pp. 68–81; 69.

6. Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, translated by Mary Elizabeth Meek, Coral Gables (FL), University of Miami Press, 1971; Roman Jakobson, *Russian Language Project*, Cambridge (MS), Harvard University Press, 1957.

7. Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America", *op. cit.*, p. 70.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

poised awkwardly between two positions, “me” and “you”, depending on who is doing the talking. This difficulty, Krauss argues, is dramatized through various artistic practices of the 1970s, which she suggests rely on the pervasiveness of the photograph combined with the explicit terms of the index. And this shift from conventional sign to indexical trace produces an excess of discourse, as if a surfeit of written information is required to compensate for the depleted power of the painted sign. Thus the flight from the aesthetic conventions of painting or sculpture in favor of other media entailed a fantasy of total self-presence realized through a verbal discourse that continually invoked the subject, albeit a divided one. Krauss was speaking with regards to an American context, but her observations could equally be applied to the work of Italian women artists in the 1970s.

Mirella Bentivoglio is a particularly important figure for this discussion, because she broached the problematic of women and language both as an artist and as a curator. A highly regarded Visual Poet, Bentivoglio curated a series of women-only exhibitions in the 1970s and later that led to the increased acceptance of women artists in Italy.⁹ The photograph that Bentivoglio created of herself in the 1970s offers a pithy illustration of the discourse of the self that featured in many of her works (figure 4). The image depicts the artist standing within a large foam letter “o”. If you interpret the figure of the artist as part of the piece, she forms the “i” in the pronoun “io”. This is not simply a picture of the artist and her work, but a picture of the artist as a work. This photograph of the artist performing the self, literally composing herself as an “I”, is doubly indexical—Bentivoglio both occupies the previously ‘empty’ pronoun “I” and photographs this position to leave a record of it. It is also a strong declaration of artistic presence. Though this particular “o” was never exhibited independently, the manipulation of the letter “o” and its formal equivalents, zeros and eggs, became a hallmark of her practice in the 1970s and after. Works like *Uovo e portauovo*, a glass and plexiglass sculpture from 1971, or the

9. Mirella Bentivoglio began her career as a poet and art historian. Her early volumes included two poetry collections, the first published under her maiden name, and a monograph on Ben Shahn. By the late 1960s, Bentivoglio abandoned ‘linear’ poetry for the relatively young and experimental field of Visual Poetry. She had her first solo Visual Poetry exhibition in 1971 at Milan’s Galleria Schwarz. That same year, Mirella organized her first exhibition of all-women artists at the behest of the Zonta Club International, a now defunct women’s group. She would continue to curate for the next four decades. See: Mirella Bertarelli, *Giardino*, Milano, Scheiwiller, 1943; Mirella Bentivoglio, *Ben Shahn*, Roma, De Luca, 1963; Mirella Bentivoglio, *Calendario*, Firenze, Nuovedizioni Enrico Vallecchi, 1968; Mirella Bentivoglio, *Sub-conscio*, Milano, Galleria Schwarz, 1971; Mirella Bentivoglio, *Una mostra in progress*, Mirella Bentivoglio Personal Papers, Bentivoglio Residence, Roma; Mirella Bentivoglio, *Una Testimonianza di Mirella Bentivoglio: Dieci Collettive al Femminile*, Mirella Bentivoglio Personal Papers, Bentivoglio Residence, Roma.

artist's book *Zero-seme* a decade later both illustrate Bentivoglio's recurring interest in this visual form, which she used to evoke generation and the creative power of the unconscious (figure 5).¹⁰ Thus Bentivoglio reinforces the connection with her own *œuvre* by physically stepping into it. Interestingly, the photograph also serves as the basis for another work (*Io*, 1979) currently in the collection of the Uffizi, suggesting yet again the importance of the work as a sort of calling-card or signature.¹¹

Several of Bentivoglio's other pieces offer witty reflections on the work of art as the indexical trace of the artist. In *Soggettivismo oggettivato* (1972), Bentivoglio objectifies the subjectivity of an artist through a tangle, literally, of lines (figure 6). This mess of scribble unravels itself in a word, whose bold-face ending highlights the Italian first person pronoun, and rhymes with Bentivoglio's own name. An earlier tangle, which Bentivoglio titled *Autoritratto emblematico* (1971) features a circle around the final two letters, reinforcing the self-referential nature of the piece (figure 7). Her 1973 collage *La firma* this time riffs on the artist's own name, which is cut from a 100,000 lira bill (figure 8). However, this time the artist omits the final two letters of her name, substituting them for the signature "io" at the bottom right of the collage. Discussing this work, Bentivoglio explained:

Io sono chi ha mutilato il nome, messo la firma al posto dell'opera, messo la banconota dentro il nome, messo il pronome al posto della firma. Io sono l'individuo che può esprimere la sua libertà solo attraverso la contraddittorietà, e rompe le regole del gioco con un lavoro che sta al gioco.¹²

Bentivoglio here explains the series of substitutions she has created in terms that are themselves playful. While on the one hand it is a game, it is also an expression of individual liberty. Yet "Bentivoglio" has been torn apart. The word "io" is not just a reference to her name, but also an empty signifier whose meaning depends on its use. Bentivoglio does not occupy that position absolutely. The metonymic substitution of name for work, banknote for name, and pronoun for signature both connects Bentivoglio to the work and signals a certain ambivalence towards the role of the creator with respect to traditional mechanisms of exchange.

10. Mirella Bentivoglio and Gisella Meo, *Zero al quadrato zero tagliato (il libro che si legge da due parti)*, Roma, Self-published, 1981.

11. *Autoritratte: "Artiste di capriccioso e destrissimo ingegno"*, Catalogo della mostra, edited by Giovanna Giusti Galardi, Firenze, Polistampa, 2010, p. 112.

12. *Mirella Bentivoglio: La poesia fatta pietra*, Catalogo della mostra, Macerata, Coopedit Macerata, 1984, p. 16.

So what is it that ties the spirit of self-consciousness visible in Bentivoglio's work to an emerging feminist movement? For Bentivoglio, the answer lies in her own involvement in feminism and her activities as a curator. While her contemporaries often hesitated to ally themselves with the feminist movement, Bentivoglio has touted the accomplishments of the 1970s as the "decade della donna". In particular, she has been a stalwart promoter and organizer of what she calls "le mostre-ghetto", the all-woman ghetto shows. In the introduction to the 8th Biennale Donna held in Ferrara in 1998, Bentivoglio wrote:

Le Mostre-Ghetto degli anni Settanta hanno portato frutto. Hanno permesso di far concentratamente conoscere la qualità del lavoro femminile e hanno attivato scambi d'informazione. Forse l'espressione derisoria con cui questo tipo d'esposizioni venne battezzato si codificherà in segno positivo proprio come le definizioni Impressionismo e Cubismo, che, nate da ironizzazioni critiche, entrarono a pieno diritto nel nobilitante vocabolario della storia dell'arte.¹³

For Bentivoglio, the all-woman shows she has curated since 1971, the same year she created the *Autoritratto emblematico*, have been important arenas in which to demonstrate the capacities of women artists. They have also been integral to the recognition and repeated participation of women in the artistic sphere, in particular as a remedy to the personal insecurity and hesitation that she believed had traditionally excluded women from artistic careers. If the role of the artist has traditionally been a male prerogative, then the all-woman show was a powerful means by which to question this assumption. Bentivoglio herself was a relatively new arrival on the artistic scene—until 1968, she had been a poet rather than a visual artist. Just as in her curatorial projects, the artworks she created in the first years of her practice offered her self-recognition as an artist, even if recognition from others was not forthcoming.

Bentivoglio's works have a jovial wit that is unique amongst her peers. However, she shares with her contemporaries the predilection for insistently and self-consciously restating her own tenuous position as an artist. Ketty La Rocca is an important case in point. Though she died prematurely in 1976 at the age of 38, La Rocca's work prior to her untimely death offers a constant iteration of the presence of the artist through the indexical trace and the linguistic shifter. And yet very often, the reference to the artist is veiled as a reference to another.

13. Mirella Bentivoglio, *Post scriptum*, in *Post Scriptum: Artiste in Italia tra linguaggio e immagine negli anni '60 e '70*, edited by Anna Maria Fioravanti Baraldi, Ferrara, Siaca Arti Grafiche, 1998, pp. 3–9; 4.

La Rocca's *Libro d'artista* (1974) is a relatively straightforward example of her serial self-reference (figure 9). The work is composed of dozens of snapshots of the artist's face in different expressive postures. She is grimacing, yawning, winking, whistling, smiling, raising one eyebrow in doubt, or raising both eyebrows in shock. The title of the work plays on the double possibilities of the possessive—it is an artist's book in that it is created by her, and in the most literal sense, it is also composed of her own image. In the work we witness the reversion to the conditions of photography that Krauss argued governed 1970s art making. Rather than offering a translation of the artist's vision of the world through the pictorial sign, the work offers the artist to the world. And the artist here is repeatedly captured, with infinite variations, all the better to harness that fantasy of total self-presence through the use of the photograph.

Shifters and indices often occur simultaneously in La Rocca's work—at times in ways that are not immediately obvious, but almost always in ways that implicate the artist herself. Take for example the set of works *Noi due* and *Mia sei*, respectively from 1967 and 1968 (figures 10 and 11). Both paintings mimic the graphic style of road signs and highway markers, and thus seem at first like geometric abstractions or international pop art. However, the use of the arrow is particularly interesting. An arrow, like a pointed finger, is an indexical sign, because its meaning depends on a physical correspondence between it and the direction it indicates. La Rocca's choice of letters is also significant, for both “mia” and “noi” are first person pronouns, making these seemingly impersonal works ultimately highly personal. In *Noi due*, the juxtaposition of image and text makes it seem as if the diverging arrows describe a future split—not in a freeway, but between “us two”. It is an abstract portrait of a break-up, perhaps, or of the subsequent distance that separates an artist and her work as it circulates outside the studio. The arrows in *Mia sei* guide the viewer's eye back and forth from one written “my” to another, thereby containing the gaze in a rather narcissistic or possessive circuit that repeats “you are mine”. This sense of claustrophobia is reinforced within the image by the way elements are not just juxtaposed, but also superimposed. The word “my” appears below the triangle and above it, as well as on top of the triangle and underneath it, regardless of whether you read the image up and down or back to front. The work reflects back on itself through its internal compositional logic, while the use of possessive pronouns and the arrows that point to them seem to reiterate almost endlessly the artist's claim to authorship.

This is not to suggest that these works are autobiographical. They are certainly not in any way renditions of any tawdry, intimate details of the artist's personal life. The index depends on a physical relationship between an object or person and the deposited trace or physical gesture, not an emotional one. La Rocca's deadpan road signs simply chart the physical connection between the artist and her work, even while testifying to their separation. *Mia sei* also implicates the developing discourse of Italian feminism by offering the reverse (and historical precursor, one might say) of the rallying cry "Io sono mia". Through this reference, her self-reflexive statement of authority over her own work can also be interpreted as a dual assertion of status as an artist and autonomy from patriarchal control.

La Rocca's work often borrowed from the linguistic realm to provide another means of self-presentation, as in *Installazione con j* (date unknown) (figure 12). The piece consists of a series of letter "j"s—two-dimensional floor decals and human-height sculptures. "J" is, of course, another first person reference, this time drawing on the French "je". La Rocca created several "i"s and "j"s in multiple formats throughout her career, all of which provided a sort of duplication of the self through a linguistic referent. Bentivoglio in fact owned one of these images (now in the collection of the Mart Rovereto), a photograph of La Rocca in bed with one of her "j"s, demonstrating that these letters referred to an actual human being. This particular installation is interesting, however, in that it is arrayed throughout the artist's studio, therefore creating a concrete metaphor for the artist's presence. She occupies the space, courtesy of the visual motif she deploys, whether or not she is actually there. No longer empty shifters, the "j"s thus function as indexical traces of the artist herself.

While first person pronouns were in many cases integral to La Rocca's work, second-person pronouns, and in particular, the English word "you", were all but indispensable, as in *Senza titolo*, a work from 1973 (figure 13). The use of the word "you" would seem to refer to someone other than the artist, potentially the viewer or the collector of the work. However, for La Rocca, the word bore a dual meaning, one that implicated both herself and her interlocutors. As La Rocca explained in her writings, invoking the inherent contradiction of the shifter, "you also means me"¹⁴. Though La Rocca never directly invokes Benveniste, there is a clear connection between her body of work and his suggestion that "'I' posits another person, the one who [...] becomes my echo to whom I say 'you' and

14. Quoted in *Vis à vis: Autoritrarsi d'artista*, Catalogo della mostra, edited by Saretto Cincinelli, Cristiana Collu, Maria Perosino, Nuoro, Grafiche Editoriali Solinas, 2002, p. 37.

who says 'you' to me"¹⁵. 'You' then provided a dual referent—implicating someone other than the artist as the recipient of her intended communication, while also obliquely referring back to the artist herself. Thus, La Rocca examines both her own status as an artist, a designation whose value depends on legitimation from others, and the fractured nature of the individual subject, whose self-expression relies on a system of language it is forced to internalize. In other words, the individual exists within a system of social relationships. La Rocca created a host of works that joined the indexical trace—whether it be a photograph or drawn line—with the word "you". This would become something of La Rocca's signature style, a repetition of her own personal artistic gesture joined with a recognition of the governing mechanisms of exchange (figures 14-16).¹⁶

Amongst her best-known works are a series of photos that La Rocca created in 1971 and 1972 (figure 15). The title of the series, *You*, comes from the text that is scribbled over the images of gesturing hands. La Rocca believed that the language of hand gestures was a more immediate and less mediated mode of communication than other types of visual symbols.¹⁷ In so far as they created a link between the gesturer and interpreter that was primal and direct, these gestures brought the artist and the viewer into conversation. La Rocca overlays these gestures with the linguistic shifter, again implicating both the artist and the viewer in complementary, dialogic positions. Thus the shifter not only establishes identity, it also suggests its instability. Furthermore, the presence of not one but multiple hands throughout La Rocca's work suggests a division, not only between artist and viewer, but within the artist herself, as she is like the rest of us a subject rendered through language.

The slipperiness of identity that the shifter entailed made depictions of the self problematic in ways that self-portraitists have not traditionally acknowledged. Ketty La Rocca's *Craniologie* (1973), x-rays of the artist's skull on to which she superimposes photographs and written text, are memorials to the simultaneous presence and absence of the female artist. They are indexical self-portraits that, rather than providing a subjective rendering of the artist's interior psychology, offer a literal snapshot of the

15. Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

16. The significance of the repeated word "you" was something that La Rocca's contemporaries recognized. See, for instance, the review of an exhibition held shortly after her death which quotes some lines of poetry by La Rocca: "[...] il mio unico gesto li/ you, you tenta di inceppare il processo visivo e mentale/ e di ridurre il linguaggio a semplice 'bit' d'informazione." Dario Micacchi, "La promessa di una grande pittura: Retrospective di Cintoli, La Rocca e Gnoli alla Biennale di Venezia", in *L'Unità*, 7 July 1978.

17. Daniela Palazzoli, "Esploratrice di linguaggi: Ricordo di Ketty La Rocca, artista inquieta e poliedrica", in *Corriere d'informazione*, 9 February 1976.

inside of her head. The juxtaposed photograph of the hand in one of the works joins two different forms of indexical representation (figure 17). It also provides a clue to the activity that this artist's mind has directed—the work of her own hand. These two attributes, the artist's 'hand' and her signature syllable "you", replace a palette and maulstick, the traditional accoutrements of Old Master self-portraiture. In another work, she even juxtaposes the x-ray with a Fang mask of the type that inspired Picasso in the first decade of the 20th century (figure 18). This palimpsest allows her to raise the question of her own mastery by means of allusion to one of the most celebrated painters in history. However, La Rocca's is a self-portrait created in the wake of the exhaustion of the painted sign, in which the physical record of the x-ray replaces traditional interiority. In these works, the word "you" is literally superimposed on the artist's skull, reinforcing a necessary connection between the use of the word and the artist herself.

So what are we to make of this body of works, littered with both first and second person pronouns that all somehow lead back to the artist herself? It points to La Rocca's stake in her own project, and her desire to approach the artistic enterprise as a mode of self-documentation. For La Rocca, any subject presented an opportunity to recreate the self. The artist explained that even her borrowed motifs needed to be reconstituted "according to my own memories, according to my own way of being, of feeling, of living"¹⁸. Whereas linguistic shifters could only be used circuitously as a means to articulate the self, the index provided the most direct way to objectify her own subjective experience. These works are not maudlin, yet there is a certain poignancy in the way La Rocca deployed the index in the *Craniologie* series. This is because the index is a remnant, a ghost. La Rocca, I would wager, played with these associations intentionally, given that the works were created shortly before she succumbed to cancer in 1976. Through them, La Rocca was able to fix her own trace, remaining inseparable from her work despite her eventual absence.

The repeated insistence on the presence of the artist, garnered through the use of the index and the shifter, reflected the spirit of self-consciousness of the emerging feminist movement. In making this claim, I am again questioning one of Trasforini's premises. In *Decostruzioniste ante litteram*, Trasforini suggests that the work of these artists is indicative of what she calls "a non-encounter with feminism". She claims that the prevalent characteristic of this generation of artists was a pragmatic stance towards

18. Quoted in Lucilla Saccà, *Omaggio a Ketty La Rocca*, Pisa, Pacini, 2001, p. 17.

individual liberation, in which overcoming the individual difficulties of choosing an artistic career was paramount and collective politics was a distant consideration. As this discussion has demonstrated, that argument warrants some revision. Although it is true that some of the thirty-eight artists, including Ketty La Rocca, held the feminist movement at something of a distance, others, like Bentivoglio, operated actively within it. Furthermore, even if feminism was not a primary personal consideration to all of these artists—and in fact some rejected the very idea of it—it was nonetheless an influential and important social reference. Many of these artists shared a common belief in the necessity of starting with oneself, that is, using one's own experience as a primary point of reference, which was a fundamental feminist trope. The research into and about oneself that finds such depth and subtlety of expression in La Rocca's work was the basis for the practice of *autocoscienza* as well as the feminist slogan, "the personal is political".

Furthermore, there is a very important connection between the works I have discussed and Italian feminist thought from Carla Lonzi to Adriana Cavarero—which attempted to uncover an autonomous female speaking subject that had been erased in patriarchal culture. Within all of these works, but especially in Ketty La Rocca's incessantly repeated "you", there is a recognition of serving as the other, the echoing "you" of masculine philosophy, and thus of the problematic nature of female subjectivity. As Patrizia Magli contended in 1985, women's relationship to language was problematic:

Creature più dedite all'ascolto, le donne oggi si affermano come soggetti del discorso, e, in questo modo, attraverso il duello di parola e ascolto, attraverso la complicità di parola e silenzio, tentano di attraversare tutta l'avventura del linguaggio. Ma insieme a questa cognizione sorge anche un interrogativo: la relazione tra desiderio di essere e universo della significazione non presuppone forse una predeterminazione? e il discorso non è forse, da sempre, "masculin-paternel"?¹⁹

The work of Ketty La Rocca and Mirella Bentivoglio sought a way out of this double bind. Through the use of the index and the shifter, their works asserted their presence as women artists while at the same time questioning the integrity of the presumptive male subject and undermining patriarchal discourse.

19. Patrizia Magli, *Il segno della differenza*, in *Le donne e i segni: Scrittura, linguaggio, identità nel segno della differenza femminile*, edited by Patrizia Magli, Ancona, Lavoro editoriale, 1985, pp. 11–22; 11.



Figure 1. – Lucia Marcucci, *Il tema romantico della poesia*, 1974.
Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 2. – Ketty La Rocca, *Pranzo di nozze*, 1974.
Courtesy of Michelangelo Vasta / Estate of Ketty La Rocca.



Figure 3. – Mirella Bentivoglio, *Il cuore della consumatrice ubbidiente*, 1975.
Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 4. – Mirella Bentivoglio, *Io*, photograph of the artist in the 1970s.
Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 5. – Mirella Bentivoglio, *Uovo e portauovo, genesi e cultura*, 1971.
Courtesy of the Artist.

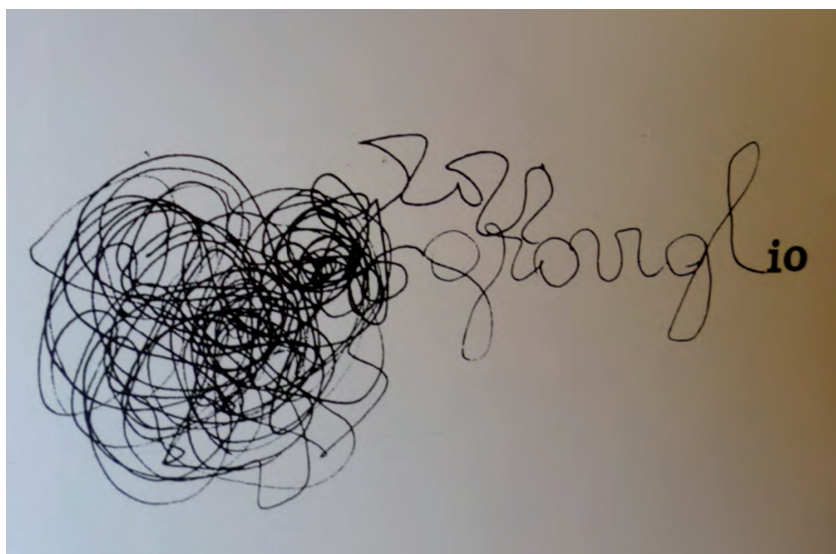


Figure 6. – Mirella Bentivoglio, *Soggettivismo oggettivato*, 1972.
Courtesy of the Artist.

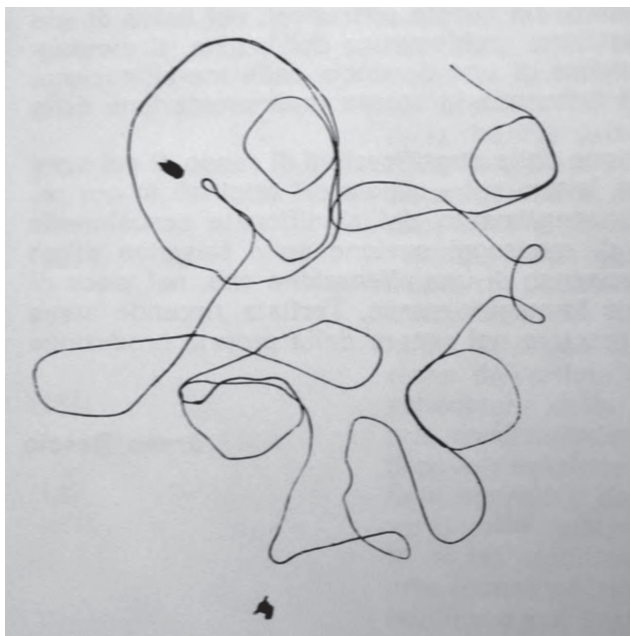


Figure 7. – Mirella Bentivoglio, *Grovigli/io (Autoritratto emblematico)*, 1971.
Courtesy of the Artist.

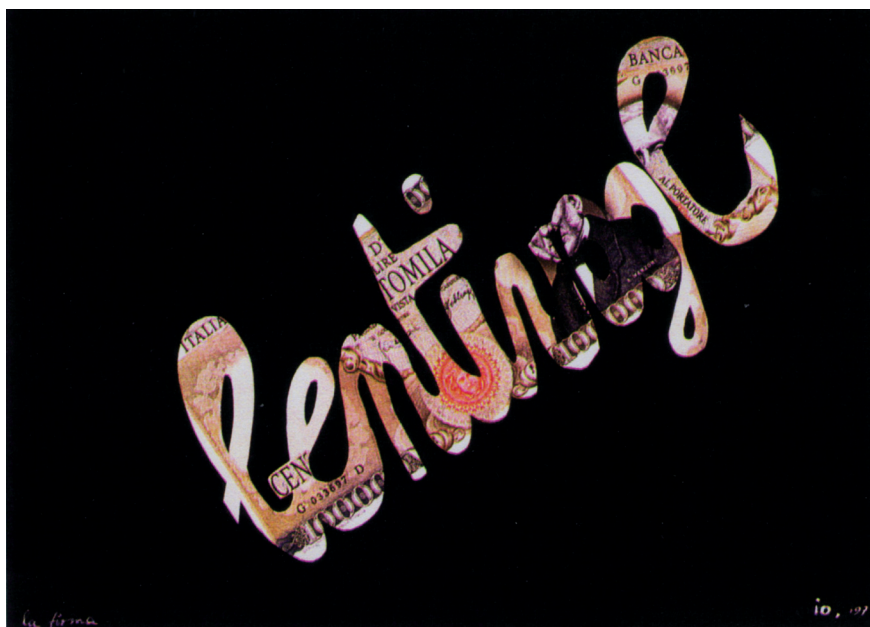


Figure 8. – Mirella Bentivoglio, *La firma*, 1973.
Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 9. – Ketty La Rocca, *Libro d'artista*, 1974.
Courtesy of Michelangelo Vasta / Estate of Ketty La Rocca.



Figure 10. – Ketty La Rocca, *Noi due*, 1967.
Courtesy of Michelangelo Vasta / Estate of Ketty La Rocca.



Figure 11. – Ketty La Rocca, *Mia sei*, 1968.
Courtesy of Michelangelo Vasta / Estate of Ketty La Rocca.



Figure 12. – Ketty La Rocca, *Installazione con j.*
Courtesy of Michelangelo Vasta / Estate of Ketty La Rocca.

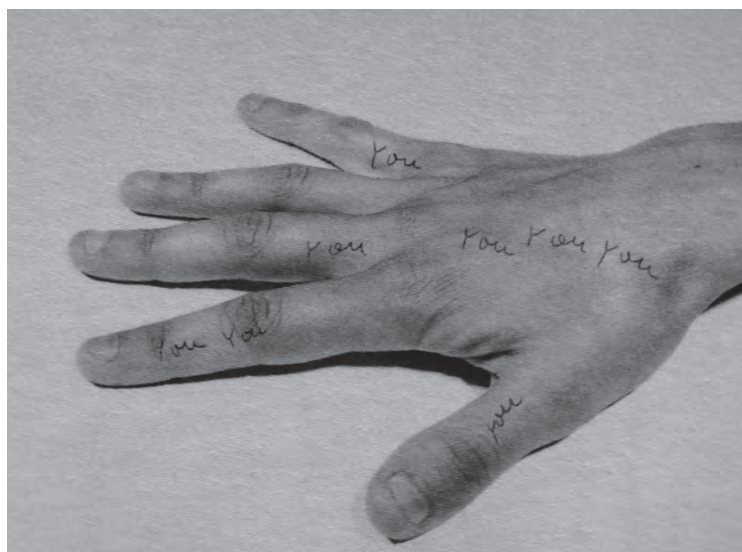


Figure 13. – Ketty La Rocca, *Senza titolo*, 1973.
Courtesy of Michelangelo Vasta / Estate of Ketty La Rocca.

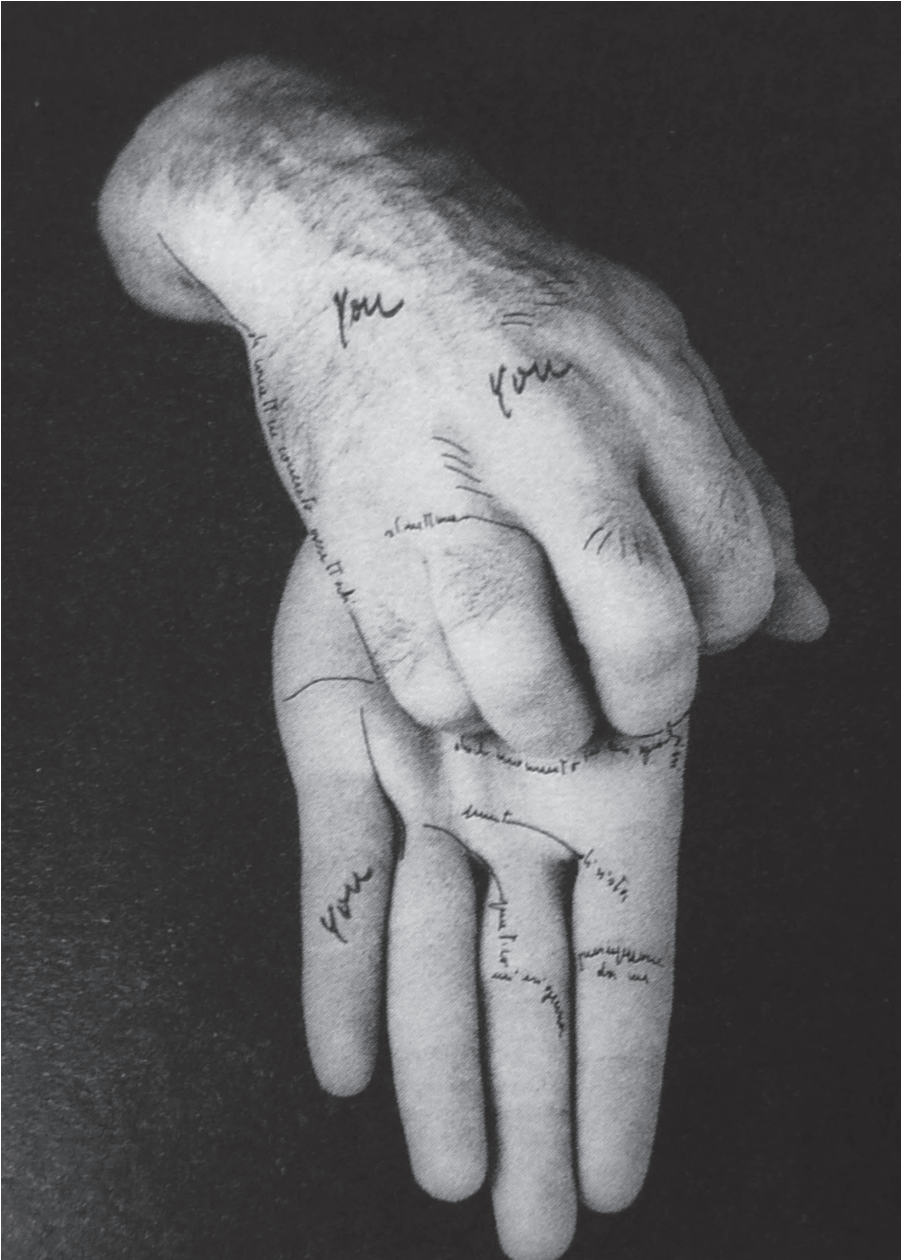


Figure 14. – Ketty La Rocca, *You*, 1971–1972.
Courtesy of Michelangelo Vasta / Estate of Ketty La Rocca.

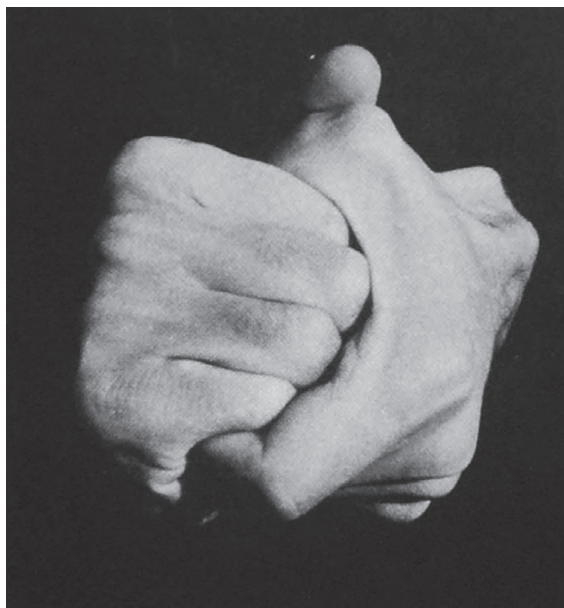


Figure 15. – Ketty La Rocca, Original image from *In principio erat*, 1971.
Courtesy of Michelangelo Vasta / Estate of Ketty La Rocca.

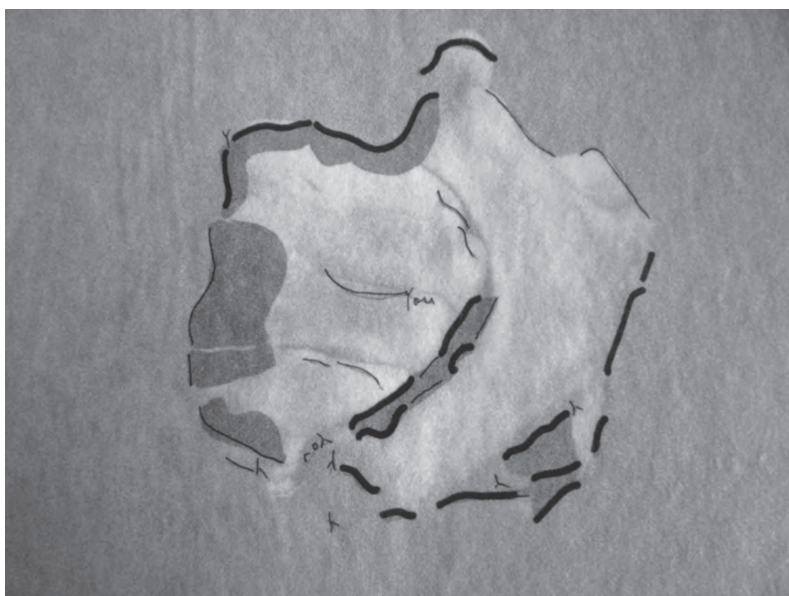


Figure 16. – Ketty La Rocca, Palimpsest of the original image
and transparent overlay from *You*, 1975.
Courtesy of Michelangelo Vasta / Estate of Ketty La Rocca.



Figure 17. – Ketty La Rocca, *Craniologia*, 1973.



Figure 18. – Ketty La Rocca, *Craniologia*, 1973.
Courtesy of Michelangelo Vasta / Estate of Ketty La Rocca (fig. 17 & 18).