

Sitting in the back  
of the radical  
feminist classroom

A reflection on  
feminist  
publishing,  
bookselling, and  
the political  
practice of  
relations among  
women  
in 1970s Italy

Camilla Paolino

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#### Credits

*A story from Circolo della rosa*  
Film, 2014, 8'55", loop

Written, directed and produced  
by Alex Martinis Roe  
Cinematography:  
Alicia Frankovich, Alex Martinis Roe  
Editor: Alex Martinis Roe  
Sound Design: Jana Irmert  
Colourist: Ivan Marković  
Titles: Chiara Figone  
Shot on location at:  
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*Sitting in the back of the radical feminist classroom*  
Camilla Paolino

One of the aspects that made *A Story from Circolo della rosa*, and Alex Martinis Roe's filmic production in general, relevant to me is what I understand to be the political project on which it rests: that of bridging the experiences of feminists from different times, in order to chart genealogies, weave connections between generations, and build transgenerational alliances for the writing of feminist histories and futures. In other words, the project to expand symbolically, across time, the political practice of relations among women that in 1970s Italy would forge materially, within space.

A similar intent has led me in recent years to get involved into practice-based research projects, driven by epistemic urgency and the need to shape collective political practices for the present in the footsteps of experiences from the past. One of these projects consisted in a transcription "marathon"<sup>1</sup>, centered on a dozen audiotapes recorded by Rivolta femminile's members between 1970 and 1972 while doing *autocoscienza*<sup>2</sup>. The latter consisted in a dialogical practice based on self-narration and mutual listening, exercised within the autonomous relational dimension of separatist frameworks and aimed at fostering processes of female subjectification grounded on reciprocity and mutual recognition<sup>3</sup>. By collective listening and transcription, the small group of womxn gathered to run the marathon, so to speak, would reflect on the legacy and currency of Rivolta femminile's theories and practices<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, by entering into a symbolic relation with the women we lent our ear to, we would grasp more and more the historical necessity and significance of *autocoscienza* as a political practice of relationships.

Among the things I learned in the process, there is one story in particular that I wish to share, for Martinis Roe's film brought it back to my mind. It is the story of an experiment of feminist pedagogy conducted by Carla Accardi in Rome in 1971, which drastically resulted in her permanent suspension from teaching and in the publishing of the book *Superiore e inferiore. Conversazioni fra le ragazzine delle Scuole Medie*, released by Scritti di Rivolta femminile in 1972<sup>5</sup>. This episode is revealing of the perils of experimenting with politics of knowledge production, but also of the transformative potential of radical pedagogies, transgenerational solidarity, oral histories, and feminist countercultural publishing. But before coming to conclusions, let us see how it all began.  
In January 1971, Carla Accardi brought Rivolta femminile's first manifesto, freshly written with Carla Lonzi and Elvira Banotti into the

classrooms of the Giovanni Papini public middle school, where she used to teach<sup>6</sup>. She then invited her students to read the manifesto together and talk it through. Encouraged by the shared reading, the girls began to tell their stories, addressing the authority of their fathers, the privilege of their brothers, the complicity of their mothers. As the conversation unfolded, episodes of gendered oppression occurring at school and within households were unearthed and analyzed. In other words, by means of self-narration and mutual listening, the girls would deconstruct the power dynamics underlying the educational system and their everyday lives, unmasking the mechanisms of a structural gender discrimination. They thus embarked on a transformative process with no return.

In its form and procedures, Accardi's didactic experiment recalled to some extent a session of *autocoscienza*, which the artist—in her forties at the time—used to practice with the other women of Rivolta femminile. A strange proximity suggested a possible relation between the two practices. In fact, among the audiotapes we listened to during the transcription marathon were discovered the exchanges taking place in the middle school classrooms, recorded by Accardi with the permission of those partaking in the forum. In our headphones, the voices of the twelve-year-old girls stood out from the polyphony of grown women's voices that dwelt in the archive. Such finding set us wondering about the possible connections between the tapes and the practices they conveyed. It was as if bringing *autocoscienza* in the classroom was a way for Accardi to provide her students with a precious tool: a political practice of relations among women, to make their own and further develop for the future. At the same time, self-narration and mutual listening among peers were proven to constitute an operational device of knowledge production, based on oral histories, lived experiences, and contingent conditions, rather than textbooks. What resulted was a situated kind of knowledge implying personal engagement and accountability<sup>7</sup>.

And, in the end, Accardi was held accountable. Because of her initiative to transpose a practice deemed “dangerous” from Rivolta femminile's autonomous relational spaces into the institutional setting of a public school, the artist lost her teaching job and was permanently removed from office. As reported in the ministerial decree issued on that occasion, among the charges against Accardi was that of having shared with the classroom *the most advanced thesis of the feminist movement (...) containing expressions which [were] seriously detrimental to morals, with a specific and underlined incitement to the 'overthrow' of the sexes*<sup>8</sup>. This operation, deeply unsettling for both the scholastic authorities and the families of the students involved, verged on the threshold of illegality—at least,

according to the law of the father—, and clearly exceeded the limits of the acceptable.

Following her suspension from teaching, Accardi transcribed the recordings and composed her book *Superiore e inferiore*, which opens defiantly with the above decree as its prologue. That is to say, she resorted to publishing as a practice of resistance against the silencing constraints imposed on her and her students. The radicality of this gesture reflected on the book's form as well. Indeed, replicating Accardi's transcribing feat within the framework of our marathon, we ended up with our own transcripts in hand and could detect significant differences with the book. By confronting the scripts, we could identify the principles by which Accardi intervened on the transcribed material, preparing it for publication. The comparison revealed a peculiar *modus operandi*, reminiscent of the writing strategy underlying Carla Lonzi's *Autoritratto*<sup>9</sup>. Not only did Accardi resort to recording and transcription to baste the book, but she also turned to the technique of montage to compose its structure. In other words, she dismembered the written conversations and reassembled their fragments in a coral exchange, organized by thematic clusters. As Giovanna Zapperi suggested in regard to *Autoritratto*, a fictional relational space was thus brought into existence, where the hand of the author withdrew and a new constellation of meaning was allowed to emerge, untethered from the authority of the writing subject<sup>10</sup>. By disrupting the linear course of the conversations and composing a fragmented unity, Accardi projected a symbolic space of collective thinking, learning, and resistance—similar in some ways to the autonomous relational spaces of *autocoscienza*—, where the notion of a unitary voice ceased to exist, replaced by the plural voice of a collective subjectivity in the making.

A voice that could be heard, then as now, thanks to the reliance on alternative editorial channels, such as the publishing house Scritti di Rivolta femminile, which proved to be a powerful weapon against the constraints of silence. Recurring to an independent publishing house of their own enabled the women of Rivolta femminile to make their writings public while preserving their autonomy from the mainstream publishing market and, ultimately, from culture—a point on which Carla Lonzi was uncompromising. While resisting the engulfing dynamics of culture, publishing remained a crucial activity for the group, aimed at circulating their thoughts, knowledges, and experiences, and leaving a trace for generations to come. This was also made possible by the concomitant practice of countercultural bookselling, which in those years radicalized as well. The emergence of radical and feminist bookshops such as the Libreria delle donne di Milano—a room of one's own in the house of culture<sup>11</sup>—, allowed the women involved to preserve their autonomy of thought and action,

while forging political relational practices, building a feminist symbolic order, and affirming themselves as speaking subjects, as beautifully depicted in *A Story from Circolo della rosa*. Feminist publishing and bookselling can therefore be understood as crucial political practices, in that they have contributed to the circulation of feminist knowledge in space and time, and to the symbolic revolution that, since the 1970s, has marked a fundamental epistemological rupture, as posited by Teresa de Lauretis<sup>12</sup>. The monologue of the father was finally interrupted, and the beneficial effects of the breach are still felt today.

Camilla Paolino lives and works in Geneva, where she is pursuing a PhD in contemporary art history at the University of Geneva, exploring the material nexus between reproductive and creative work in 1970s Italian art practice. To date, her research has been presented at Ruhr-Universität in Bochum, INHA in Paris, and Kunsthalle Bern (2022), as well as at the University of Fribourg (2021), FRI ART-Kunsthalle of Fribourg (2020), and IHA in Lisbon (2019). Currently, she co-runs the web-radio channel CANALE MILVA, with Giada Olivotto, as well as the artist-run space one gee in fog, and collaborates to the 7 *Winds* research project at Kunsthalle Bern. Camilla's recent curatorial projects include *HEAD Grad Show* at HEAD-Genève (Geneva, 2021 & 2022); *PALAZZINA#11* at PALAZZINA (Basel, 2021); *FOTOROMANZA* at Le Commun (Geneva, 2021); *Universo 25: L'odore della Convivenza* at Sonnenstube (Lugano, 2020); *PLATTFORM20* at Fri Art Kunsthalle (Fribourg, 2020); *PLATTFORM19* at Centre d'Art Contemporain d'Yverdon-les-Bains (2019).

1 This practice-based research project, initiated in Geneva in 2018, aimed at exploring collectively a set of audio archives from Rivolta femminile, entrusted to artist Angela Marzullo a couple of years before. The project was conceived as a framework for studying together, a laboratory for crafting practice-based research methodologies, a platform for testing ways of producing knowledge from experience and contingent conditions, rather than from inherited sets of precepts. Most of the learning we did within this framework is based on practices of collective listening, transcription, and conversation, and rested on epistemological principles recalling those of radical feminist pedagogies. The marathon took place in three legs and was performed collectively by a transversal, transnational and transgenerational group of womxn invited to join the project. The first leg was performed in October 2018 at the artist-run space one gee in fog (Chêne-Bourg, Geneva); the second in November 2018 at the Bern Kunstmuseum; and the third in March 2019 at the off-space Sonnenstube (Lugano).

2 Rivolta Femminile (literally "female revolt") is a neo-feminist women-only group founded in Rome in 1970 by artist Carla Accardi, journalist Elvira Banotti, and former art critic Carla Lonzi, with the aim of rethinking women's liberation and fostering the emergence of the female subjectivity by processes of deculturalization and disidentification from traditional gender roles.

3 For more on *autocoscienza*, I refer the reader to Rivolta Femminile, "Significato dell'autocoscienza nei gruppi femminili," in Carla Lonzi and Rivolta Femminile (eds.), *Sputiamo su Hegel, La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti*, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, Milan, 1977, pp. 141-147; and to Libreria delle donne di Milano, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice* (trans. Patricia Cicogna and Teresa De Lauretis), Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1990. For more on the processes of feminist subjectification enabled by practices of relationships among women and, notably, by *autocoscienza*, I refer the reader to Carla Lonzi, who expanded upon this concept and repeatedly stressed it throughout her work, both in her theoretical and political writings and in her diary. The latter opens with the following reflection: "August 1-4. Macari (Trapani). Another woman, a clitoral, recognized me as a woman, a clitoral, while I recognized her in the same terms. [...] I manifested myself in feminism because of

the sudden intuition that the unrecognized nothingness I had taken refuge in before was now revealed as the new field of woman's subjectivity. But recognition, from which the subject originates while expressing another subject who can be recognized in turn, was the operation that brought my process to the goal of *autocoscienza*". She then continues, "I have made *autocoscienza* possible for her and she makes it possible for me in this identification between clitorals as new women. [...] This is the recognition for which we reciprocally become subjects, in the act itself, that is to say, de facto and no longer only in intentions". Carla Lonzi, *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una femminista*, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, Milan, 1978, pp. 13-14. My translations. For more on this point, I also refer the reader to Giovanna Zapperi, "The making of a feminist subject: Autonomy, authenticity and withdrawal," in Francesco Ventrella & Giovanna Zapperi (eds.), *Feminism and Art in Postwar Italy. The Legacy of Carla Lonzi*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London and New York, 2021, pp. 89-110; to Giovanna Zapperi, *Carla Lonzi. Un'arte della vita*, DeriveApprodi, Rome, 2017; and to Maria Luisa Boccia, *Con Carla Lonzi. La mia opera è la mia vita*, Ediesse, Rome, 2014.

4 The alternative spelling "womxn" is employed here to express the intersectional approach we embraced in 2018, with the intention of forming and defining our working group in an inclusive manner.

5 Carla Accardi, *Superiore e Inferiore. Conversazioni fra le ragazze delle Scuole Medie*, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, Milan, 1972.

6 Rivolta Femminile, "Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile" (1970), in *Sputiamo su Hegel, La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti*, ed. Carla Lonzi and Rivolta Femminile, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, Milan, 1977.

7 Freely referencing to the definition of embodied knowledges conceptualized by Donna Haraway in her seminal essay "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1988, pp. 575-599. The notion of accountability, although in reference to the practice of entrustment and the theory of sexual difference rather than to mechanisms of knowledge production, is also elaborated by Teresa de Lauretis in "The Practice of Sexual Difference

and Feminist Thought in Italy. An Introductory Essay", in Libreria delle donne di Milano, *Sexual Difference and Feminist Thought in Italy*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1990, pp. 1-21.

8 Carla Accardi, *Superiore e Inferiore*, 1972, p. 7. My translation.

9 Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, De Donato Editori, Bari, 1969.

10 As Giovanna Zapperi explains, the technique of montage, as well as the choice of privileging oral expression and the collective dimension of a (fictional) conversation, are driven by a precise intention: that of giving up the authority and power traditionally attributed to the art critic, in order to imagine a different authorial position, able to reinvent itself on the basis of that rejection. However, despite the intention of Carla Lonzi and Carla Accardi, we cannot pretend that behind their books there is no authorship and no manipulation whatsoever. As Giovanna Zapperi has argued, drawing on Didi-Huberman (2009), the technique of montage is not merely a formal procedure, but also a way of producing knowledge that entails the act of taking position. For more on this, I refer the reader to Giovanna Zapperi, «Préface: L'autoportrait d'une femme», in Carla Lonzi, *Autoportrait* (trans. Marie-Ange Maire-Vigueur), JRP|Ringier, Paris, 2012 (ed. orig. *Autoritratto*, De Donato, Bari, 1969).

11 Taking Virginia Woolf's "room of one's own" famous metaphor as a starting point, Andrea Hajek articulates the relation between the feminist practices of publishing, bookselling, and appropriating symbolic and physical space in 1970s Italy. To think this entanglement through, she notably focuses on the experiences of Scritti di Rivolta femminile, Libreria delle donne di Milano, and the 150 hours courses in the Affori-Bovisasca neighborhood in Milan. For more on this, I refer the reader to Andrea Hajek, "A Room of One's Own. Feminist Intersections between Space, Women's Writing and Radical Bookselling in Milan (1968-1986)", *Italian Studies*, 73:1, 2017, pp. 81-97.

12 Teresa de Lauretis, "The Practice of Sexual Difference and Feminist Thought in Italy. An Introductory Essay", 1990, p. 13.

The film *A story from Circolo della rosa* by Alex Martinis Roe is narrated by the artist's voice and is addressed to a close colleague in the form of a letter, telling a story about two women. It weaves together fragments from her recent oral history research in collaboration with La Libreria delle donne and her experiences of their collective activities, as well as her exploration of related spaces, archives and texts.

The film traces the story of two experimental historians who began working together on feminist pedagogical experiments in the late 1980s and explores the nature of their relationship, which can be described as one of *affidamento* (entrustment). *Affidamento* is a social-symbolic practice exercised and theorized by the Libreria delle donne di Milano and is a reciprocal relationship of entrustment between two adult women. By referring to one another, each gives the other authority in her spheres of political practice by acknowledging her desires, competences and differences. This practice of acknowledgement involves a commitment to one another, a commitment to each other's sexual difference, and is the fabric with which the collective is formed. Alex Martinis Roe explores the lived history of this practice as a way to narrate her own political relationships, and as a way to imagine feminist futures located in networks and affiliations across different times and places.

Alex Martinis Roe is an artist researching genealogies of feminist political practices of difference. Her projects seek to foster solidarity between different positions and generations as a way of participating in the construction of feminist histories and futures.

Recent exhibitions include: *Coming Home*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art (solo), *Alliances*, GfZK – Museum of Contemporary Art Leipzig (solo), *Fabriques de contre-savoirs*, Frac Lorraine (Metz), and *Sex, Taxispalais – Kunsthalle Tirol*. Her project *To Become Two* (2014-2018) was co-commissioned as a series of solo exhibitions by If I Can't Dance (Amsterdam), Casco Art Institute (Utrecht), The Showroom (London) and ar/ge kunst (Bolzano) and has also been exhibited at Badischer Kunstverein (Karlsruhe) and Samstag Museum (Adelaide). In 2018, *To Become Two* was presented at the Centre George Pompidou, Paris, was the recipient of the Kunstpreis Europas Zukunft [Future of Europe Art Prize] and Archive Books (Berlin, Milan, Dakar) published her monograph *To Become Two: Propositions for Feminist Collective Practice*. Alex is Head of Drawing and Printmaking at the Victorian College of the Arts (University of Melbourne).