

POETICS OF NEGATION

The Personal in the
Writings of Carla Lonzi,
Hélène Cixous, Moyra
Davey, Frances Stark,
and Anne Boyer

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This thesis represents partial submission for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Royal College of Art. I confirm that the work presented here is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis. During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

ABSTRACT

In *Poetics of Negation*, I set up a dialogue between the feminist positions of Hélène Cixous and Carla Lonzi and the contemporary writings of Frances Stark, Moyra Davey, and Anne Boyer and examine how these writers have developed and experimented with a set of practices of refusal to challenge hegemonic narratives of the self. In reading their works, I attend to the forces of negation that move their writings and listen to the many ways in which they express their “no” to the suppression of female voices, the commodification of experience and the exploitation of subjectivities in line with capitalist ideas of competitive self-realisation and consumerist self-branding. My aim is to shed new light on the conceptual approaches of *écriture féminine* and *scrittura autocosciente* developed by Cixous and Lonzi in the 1970s, and the vital roles that they still play in understanding and inspiring contemporary writing practices such as those of Moyra Davey, Frances Stark and Anne Boyer.

The work of the writers discussed in this thesis can be situated at the crossroads between philosophy, literature, autobiography and criticism in what Cixous describes as an “improper” way of inhabiting the space of culture and writing from the place of difference. Cixous calls this insurgent writing *écriture féminine*; Lonzi appeals to the women of the feminist collective of *Rivolta Femminile* to practice “deculturalisation” in order to “wear off” that which ties women to male culture. They both envision a new language and a new vocabulary to express their political subjectivity. They reject uniform models of optimised selves and make writing the space in which to disrupt hegemonic narratives and multiply the differences shaping and fracturing subjectivities. Their critical analysis of the hegemonic norms and mechanisms governing the discourses of cultural legitimacy is rendered more complex by their experience as women working in the field of art and culture. By drawing on the insights offered by Lonzi’s writing and Cixous’ *écriture féminine*, in *Poetics of Negation* I attempt a reading of the works of Davey, Stark and Boyer that shed light on the imaginative power of their refusal and the many instances of “no” to the ways in which capital diminishes womanhood, those that take the form of a fragmented, precarious, heterogenous, promiscuous, exuberant, dialogical and opaque personal accounts. Together, they work towards a different culture in which experiments in the uses of the personal are shared to energise the refusal of normative models that patriarchy and capitalism perpetuate, and inspire the communal re-making of subjectivities in the sign of complex relations and differences through reading and writing. In bringing these practices together, as a community of “feminine” refusalists, and in providing an overview of these practices and their concerns, politics, methods, findings and forms this thesis hopes to contribute to their collective effort.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Crossing paths of refusal

For a long time the world was thus an idea of the world, world-as-solitude, or-as-identity, enlarged from the sole evidence of the known particular and enclosing the All as a pure extension of the particular. To be born into the world, is at last to conceive (to live) the world as a relation: as a composed necessity, a consenting reaction, a poetics (and not morality) of alterity. As the incomplete drama of that necessity.

(Édouard Glissant, *Poetic Intention*, 1969)

refusal: a rejection of the status quo as liveable and the creation of possibility in the face of negation (i.e., a refusal to recognize a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible); the decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented, using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise.

(Tina Campt, *Still Searching...*, 2018)

Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are.

(Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, 1982)

What form might writing take when the writer is concerned with the scrutiny of the conditions of her life and work to insist upon vital, unbound womanhood? How does the writer assemble her language for the demands of such scrutiny, so that her text might exist as other than being as one is? How does her way of accounting say “no” to the demand of presence and the logic of positivity?¹ What can we learn from the experiences of feminist writers and their call for a radical imagination? Throughout this study, I explore the ways in which feminist refusal informs innovative works by several writers, artists and poets. I argue that, far from being new, refusal as an ethico-political-poetic concern has a distinct history in the practices of women writers, artists, and poets who created works that defy genre and categorisation; women artists, poets, writers who are part of a robust tradition

of feminist refusals and who, through an attentive scrutiny of the conditions of their lives and creative work, have challenged the status quo of culture, conceiving of art and writing as “as a springboard for subversive thoughts”² and cultural transformations.

In this study, I attend to the traces of a quiet³ and quotidian refusal in these writer’s works. With quiet and quotidian I here describe the ways in which their practices pay attention to the unspoken and unsaid, the overlooked and unrecognised moments of experience and expression. The works of the group of women writers artists and poets invoke the presence of an other, mobilizing the negative power of imagination, of the not-yet, in order to refuse the false alternative of either conforming to the normative space of culture and social relations, or, as it has been throughout the history of Western thought, remaining silent. The relationship between the quotidian, the quiet (in terms of the unsaid, overlooked, unrecognised, the silent, the absent) and refusal, or negation, enacted by the group of women writers is the defining tension of Poetics of Negation, and of the writing practices it examines.

Emerging from my initial engagement with Cixous’ *écriture féminine* [feminine writing] as a protest writing which refuses a petty realism where fiction is not allowed to raise above its evidentiary claims, this dissertation is a study of the multiple instances of refusal and literary uses of negation in the writing of Carla Lonzi, Hélène Cixous, Moyra Davey, Frances Stark, and Anne Boyer: from Lonzi’s inhabitation of writing as a “cultural void” to *écriture féminine*’s movement of undoing and depersonalisation; to the practices of reading “obliquely” and the production of not-writing. Lonzi, Cixous, Davey, Stark and Boyer are writers of radical alienation, where the negativity of a death-bound alienation is passed through, as *écriture féminine* suggests, into a creative affirmation of materiality as a source of poetic becoming. Their writings attend to the materiality of the body, of affects, emotions and language. They are characterised by fragmentary forms and a non-linear temporality of narration. They produce unsettling effects of unfamiliarity, by playing with proximity and distance, and poetic reversals. In attending to the works of this group of women writers, artists and poets I show the ways in which their hybrid forms of writing become expression of their quotidian practices of refusal, in terms of an exercise of “emptying out” language, ideas and culture of their institutionalised meanings. They reject the terms by which their creative works are judged, assessed, and valued according to tradi-

1 Here I am referring to Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence of the Western tradition, which he describes as logocentric, or based on the purity of a singular self-present truth as word or Logos. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida argues that with the Western tradition since Plato, truth has always been associated with the spoken word, while writing has been associated with corruption, falsification of the truth of the spoken word. Within this tradition, Logos is assumed as direct self-present truth, whereas writing is understood as a corrupted copy. Derrida points out that this division has its foundation in the privileging of presence over absence. Logocentrism is a system which assumes that presence is the foundation of truth and identity while absence represents a fall from truth, a corruption, a lack. For both Derrida and Cixous, writing resists and troubles this call to presence of truth (as the good, the positive, the simple, the pure) and being a system founded on absence, continually defers the arrival of presence. See Abigail Bray, *Hélène Cixous. Writing and Sexual Difference*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 23–26.

2 Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, Summer 1976, pp. 877.

3 I use the terms “quiet” and “quotidian” to describe the ways in which their refusal is antithetical to the heroism of grand revolutionary gestures. I borrow the term “quite” from Tina Campt who, in her analysis of colonial archival images of institutional accounting and statement management, uses the term “quiet” and “quotidian” to refer to something “assumed to go unspoken or unsaid, unremarked, unrecognised, or overlooked. They name practices that are pervasive and ever-present yet occluded by their seeming absence or erasure in repetition, routine, or internalisation.” See Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham /London: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 4.

tional patriarchal standards, and experiment with practices of de-culturalisation, deconstruction and *différance*,⁴ resisting the urge of “naming” by developing practices of paying attention to the unspoken and unsaid in language and relations, and to negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power.

In this study, I write and read *with*⁵ the forces of feminist negation: with what unsettles, agitates and moves the writing of this group of women writers, artists and poets, the ruptures and the refusal to remain silent but also the quietness of their refusals: the silences, the minor interruptions, the breaks, the spaces opened by a comma, an unfinished sentence, the silence between words, the discrepancy between experience and expression, where minor differences occur as an immanent genesis of all relations and change is the only constant.

This group of women writers conceive of writing as a form of reading, and thus my attempt to read their writings takes into account the universe of references that their works bring to bear. Instead of attempting a comparison between their works, in this study I thus read *with* the works of Carla Lonzi, Hélène Cixous, Moyra Davey, Frances Stark, and Anne Boyer—attending to the ways in which they formulate writing as a feminist practice; to how their writings seek to rupture the dominant order of knowledge and culture, by turning towards and paying close attention to women’s bodies, lives and work; to the traces of negation; their stylistic choices, the resonances and the resonating dissent that moves their works.

In thinking and reading with them, I summon their voices to consider how the question of selfhood and narration in the key of quotidian refusal to surrender to the deadly forces of naming, has been attended to in their practices. Writing and reading-with implies the means to join a community of writers and readers, to read and think in dialogue with them, rather than writing from a position of mastery. It is a method that attempts to read and write with the necessities and forces that move their writing, rather than deliberating on them.

My investigation focuses on the “processes” of their writings; the ways in which the writer reflects on the meaning of her writing and making art; on the desire and forces that prompt them. It suggests a way of listening to the reverberations and echoes of their poetic “no;” the ways in which they contemplate the possibilities of giving an account of themselves

4 Derrida writes, “*Différance* is the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other. This spacing is the simultaneously active and passive (the *an* of *différance* indicates this indecision as concerns activity and passivity, that which cannot be governed by or distributed between the terms of this opposition) production of the intervals without which the “full” terms would not signify, would not function.” It is the structure of temporal delay and spatial difference without which meaning is impossible. Derrida refers to this structure as ‘the possibility of repetition in its most general form, that is, the constitution of a trace in the most universal sense’. See also Steven Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology*, (New York: Continuum Books, 2009), p. 67.

5 In “reading with” I intent to call on the voices of the group of writers around the question of selfhood, narration, refusal and negation. “Reading with” means to join a community of readers, to read and think in dialogue with these writers, rather than writing from a position of mastery. A method of empathic reading that attempt to read and write with the necessities and forces that move their processes of writing. In this study I am not interested in giving an account of common themes in these women’s writers. My investigation focus on their processes of writing, and the forces, desires and motivations that prompt them to write. In *Rootprints*, Mireille Calle-Gruber describes Cixous’ mode of speaking *with* as follow, “maintaining in a mimetic and identificational discourse the illusion that the author of the work and her reader exchange glances face to face? In this case it is a love at first sight [*coup de cœur*] making one forget that writing discourses *in absentia*, as far as the eye can see, and that the reader blinds herself in the mirror.” In Hélène Cixous, Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints: Memory and life writing*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz, (London-NewYork: Routledge, 1997). Published in French as *Photos de Racine* (Paris: Editions de femmes, 1993), p. 137.

that rejects what Jack Halberstam calls the “toxic positivity of contemporary life,”⁶ the belief that success happens to good people and failure is just a consequence of a bad attitude rather than a structural condition.

One of the conditions with which this thesis contends is the contemporary ubiquity of the confessional⁷ mode under a neoliberal⁸ regime of truth⁹ that demands continuous presence, produces happiness and freedom as a commodity, values competition and individual success, high-performance, flexibility; where what counts is the immediate response, the enjoyment and pleasure in the present moment. In a culture in which technologies have made everyone present in a seemingly immediate way, and individuals are alienated from each other although they remain always “connected,” the immediate availability of information is thus coupled with deterring any kind of reflection on the effects of one’s own doing and saying on others. We have learnt to call this condition the Empire of the Selfsame, neoliberalism, precarity,¹⁰ and the pharmacopornographic regime¹¹ of production: these are all names to describe the extractivist and commodifying logic of contemporary

- 6 With this term, Jack Halberstam refers to the way in which North American culture is afflicted by a “mass delusion” as a combination of American exceptionalism and a desire to believe that success happens to good people and failure is just a consequence of a bad attitude rather than a structural condition. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 3.
- 7 This thesis does not deal with the feminist reading of the confessional, something that is by now well-rehearsed and extensive. Autobiography scholars such as Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson and Leigh Gilmore have further developed Foucault’s theories of confession demonstrating the modern-day ubiquity of the confessional mode. See, Michael Foucault, “Technologies of the Self” in Martin, L. H., Gutman, H., Hutton, P. H. (Eds.), *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 16–49), (London, UK: Tavistock, 1988). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory. A Reader*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press; 1998); Sidonie Smith, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, (Chicago: University Minnesota Press, 2001); Leigh Gilmore, *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).
- 8 I borrow my definition of neoliberal ideology from David Harvey, who argues that, “Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” And also, “The assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade is a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking.” In David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 19. Moreover, scholar Meagan Day refers to neoliberal ideology as one which reveres competition, discourages cooperation, promotes ambition, and tethers personal worth to professional achievement [...] Since the mid-1970s, neoliberal political-economic regimes have systematically replaced things like public ownership and collective bargaining with deregulation and privatisation, promoting the individual over the group in the very fabric of society.” Meagan Davey, “Under neoliberalism you can be your own tyrannical boss,” in *Jacobin* magazine, (January 2018). Available through <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/01/under-neoliberalism-you-can-be-your-own-tyrannical-boss>.
- 9 Foucault describes the Regime of Truth as a “general politics” of truth, “that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. These ‘general politics’ and ‘regimes of truth’ are the result of scientific discourse and institutions, and are reinforced (and redefined) constantly through the education system, the media, and the flux of political and economic ideologies. In this sense, the ‘battle for truth’ is not for some absolute truth that can be discovered and accepted, but is a battle about “the rules according to which the true and false are separated and specific effects of power are attached to the true.” See Michel Foucault, Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Penguin; New Edition, 1991).
- 10 Butler defines precarity as “the politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks... becoming differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death.” (Butler 2009, 25). Butler distinguishes between the precariousness of life which suggests that social existence depends on interdependency, and precarity as a structural condition. When these systems of care and support are fragmented by the uneven impacts of capitalism and global forms of racism and exploitation, precarity emerges as an acute expression of precariousness. Precarity thus describes the way in which the precariousness of life is exploited. See Judith Butler *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009) p. 25.
- 11 In *Testo Junkie*, queer theorist and activist Paul B. Preciado describes the “pharmacopornographic regime,” a tandem of industries which amounts to “a biomolecular (pharmaco) and semiotic- technical (pornographic) government of sexual subjectivity” through the production of desire as the prevailing form of control on bodies, life, and sexuality

capital. This regime, as queer theorist and activist Paul B. Preciado observes, produces mobile ideas, living organs, symbols, desires, chemical reactions and conditions of the soul that produce its alienated subject and secure its global reproduction.

Instead of disciplining the body or the mind, neoliberalism, according to Preciado, does so through desire and the consent, the freely given “yes” of an individual’s desires and libidinal energies that are geared toward the reproduction, as she contends, of “the luxury white heterosexual technobitch”¹²—she who aligns herself with the requirements of this regime of governmentality in which political subjects are reduced to consumers and producers of pornographic content. Desire, as Preciado argues, is no longer a force of resistance, but the very motor of our neoliberal economy. That’s why, he contends, the cultural industry has become pornographic.¹³ As the market transforms into “public” that which is supposed to remain private—emotions, desires, sexuality, relations—for Preciado the cultural industry is locked into the position of reproducing and managing “the excitation-frustration circuit,”¹⁴ in which only the “cum-shot is real,” namely the immediate and incontrovertible manifestation of the involuntary impulse of libidinal energy immediately transformed into images, objects, commodities and performances of oneself that can rapidly circulate on the market.¹⁵

In this scenario, difference, so celebrated by post-structuralist thinkers, has become “an engine in that it promotes the marketing of pluralistic differences and the commodification of the existence, the culture, the discourse of ‘others’ for the purpose of consumerism.”¹⁶ Feminist narratives of self-empowerment then are constructed as life-style choices, foregrounding playful self-fashioning against regulatory structures and norms; freedom of choice, autonomy, and a grotesque optimism in the form of an imperative to be “happy.”¹⁷ Poet Anne Boyer observes that this commodification of personal accounts has resulted in “a seemingly endless production of low-paid, high-click writing of lurid confessions of victimisation in which a gloss of ‘empowered telling’ decorates the stubborn operations of someone else’s profit.”¹⁸

Similarly to Preciado, Boyer calls our attention to the ways in which women, as the privileged addressee of neoliberal ideology’s possibility of reproduction, have become active agents in its reproduction, by giving away the disruptive power of their ways of accounting as a tool of social critique and consenting to reproducing self-narratives that, as Boyer observes, reproduce “a pornography of particularisation.”¹⁹ Women thus happily

12 Ibid., p. 280.

13 Preciado argues that the cultural industry and the pornographic industry share a host of similar traits: performance, virtuosity, dramatisation, spectacularisation, technical reproducibility, digital transformation, audio-visual distribution.

14 Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie* (New York: Feminist Press, 2013), p. 304.

15 Preciado writes, “In this period of the body’s technomanagement, the pharmacopornographic industry synthesises and defines a specific mode of production and consumption, masturbatory temporisation of life, a virtual and hallucinogenic aesthetic of the living object, an architecture that transforms inner space into exteriority and the city into interiority and “junkspace” by means of mechanisms of immediate auto-surveillance and ultra rapid diffusion of information, a continuous mode of desiring and resisting, of consuming and destroying, of evolution and self-destruction.” See Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie* (New York: Feminist Press, 2013), pp. 36–41.

16 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory. The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); p. 25.

17 I am thinking here of Sarah Ahmed who argues that in capitalist societies, happiness has become an indicator of progress and of good performance, and a necessity for a successful life-style. Sarah Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 4.

18 Amelia Wallin, Anne Boyer—interview (April 2018). Available through: <https://ameliawallin.com/Anne-Boyer-in-conversation>. [Accessed January 2020].

comply with the requirement of normative discourse to give away the intimate details of their bodies and lives to “tickle” and “excite” a jaded audience.

What Preciado and Boyer argue thus is not simply that confession has become ubiquitous in Western media, but that the desire for telling and sharing one’s own story are located today in highly personalised, stylised performances of the self. In strengthening consumer culture,²⁰ narratives of self-empowerment often obscure and perpetuate the neoliberal invisibilisation of structural dynamics, which facilitate the fragmentation and disarticulation of collective politics.

Following Preciado and Boyer’s argument that current cultural production is geared toward the production of a pornographic content which hinges on a circuit of “excitation-frustration” and immediate satisfaction, this study poses the following questions, what is at stake when the writer refuses to give a clear and satisfactory account of herself? How does the feminine writer, artist, poet refuse reproducing the structures of subjectivity that oppress her womanhood? What kind of imaginary and possibilities for expression do their writings envision? What are the necessities that move and give form to their works? What creative tools do they develop to problematise the objectification and commodification of women’s lives and bodies? What role does imagining a poetics of refusal play as a grounding for an ethics of encounter and a different “culture of relations?”

The immediacy²¹ that is supposed to express the truth of the subject, as philosopher Judith Butler argues, is an illusion, since the subject is never self-present, but always already mediated by social norms and linguistic frameworks in which we “see” ourselves and others. In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), Butler asks an important question of accountability with regards to the way we tell stories: “Does the postulation of a subject who is not self-grounding, that is, whose conditions of emergence can never be fully accounted for, undermine the possibility of responsibility and, in particular, of giving an account of oneself?”²² Here Butler asks whether the opaqueness of the subject, the loss of subject, envisioned by poststructuralist thinkers necessarily led to individualistic behaviours and a lack of social accountability or it can lead to an ethical relations with others that acknowledge their opaqueness as a ground for responsibility. *Giving an Account of Oneself* is Butler’s answer to this question, in which she argues that giving an account of oneself is relational and implies the presence of an other—whether this other is the system of surveillance that asks us to identity ourselves or a reading that emerges as an afterthought of an encounter with a person, an artwork or a piece of writing. In giving an account of oneself, Butler argues, selfhood emerges as a kind of dispossession from oneself in relation to the other—namely that fact that we are not our own,²³ that “I” is bound to what is not “me.” Thus,

19 In conversation with Amy King, Boyer says: “I wanted to figure out some way to write what we need that wasn’t going to turn it into a *pornography of particularization*. That we are alienated, that we are unsure, that our next month is so regularly worse than our this one, are things common to many of us, are these hard and ordinary things of life as it is now which an algorithmic display of affect can’t soften.” Anne Boyer, Amy King, “Literature Is Against Us:” in conversation with Anne Boyer, in *Harriet—Poetry Foundation*. Available through: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/08/literature-is-against-us-in-conversation-with-anne-boyer>. [Last ccessed: October 2019].

20 For a discussion of feminism and neoliberalism see also Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, *New Femininities. Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011).

21 Rachel Peltz poses the paradoxical dynamic of presence and absence in these terms: “presence” represents “All that is good, fulfilling, and knowable’ including ‘the experience of absolute immediacy’ (ibid., p. 389). Absence represents the opposite—fear, frustration, the unknown and fragmentation. See Gaul Lewis, “Questions of Presence” in *Feminist Review* 117(1) (November 2017), pp. 117–34.

22 Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 19.

23 Ibid.

the recognition at the heart of subjectivity, what forms and allows the emergence of this “I” is one of its own inherent sociality: that one becomes a self because of the responses of and to others that have limited and instantiated my self-identity.

To give an account of oneself thus is to address an opaque and unknowable other, an invocation of this constitutive sociality of the “I” that requires, as Butler writes, “to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human.”²⁴ For Butler, the unknowingness to myself is the basis for a form of accounting that remains open; that asks questions rather than provides answers; that dares to become a subjective undoing; a more conscious inhabitation of the space of writing as the place of a discrepancy between experience and expression, between what forms us and what lies before us.

In this study, while departing from similar questions about the possibility of an opaque form of accounting that considers the responsibility towards the other that the act of giving an account of oneself involves, my path diverges from Butler’s. I locate my enquiry in the realm of art and poetic forms of writing; into the lived experience of women writers artists and poets who, because of their antagonism to exploitative gender conditions, have developed a set of practices of refusal that experiment with ways of accounting to imagine new forms of sociality. My points of departure are the feminist practices of refusal that have emerged in the context of the ’70s with the necessity to question institutionalised cultural practices and social norms that diminish womanhood. It is significant to note that Butler herself draws on secondary sources and the insights offered by Adriana Cavarero’s philosophy of the “relatable self,” which the Italian feminist philosopher has derived from an examination of the practices of the collective of feminists of the Milano Women’s Bookshop in the work of Luisa Muraro.²⁵ While Butler extracts a general concept of self-narration as relational, deriving an important corrective to the assumed self-reflective subject of Western moral philosophy, in this study I examine the feminist practices which helped shape this understanding of self-narration as constructed in dialogue and through relations, and consider it in relation to the intentions that prompted the form of their accounting; the poetics of negation and refusal that they summon in their writing. While interested in the general ethical implications of the desire to give an account of oneself in highly mediated and commodified societies, in this study I listen to the forces of negation and refusal that move the works of a group of women writers, artists and poets. *Poetics of Negation* thus examines the conceptual and literary tools they developed to respond, in the way of a consenting reaction, to give multiple interconnected and layered, open and opaque personal accounts that invoke the presence of others to take part in the storytelling, and produce more readings and more questioning of the normative space of the text and the kind of sociality it reproduces.

24 Ibid.

25 In *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, contrary to the dominant vision of self-narrative as the independent will of the person who tells her story, Cavarero, drawing on Arendt’s thought, sustains that like the sense of the self that we acquired through our relationships to others, so autobiographies are always given to us by others. Cavarero relates the story of Amalia and Emilia, two women from Milan. The story is borrowed from Luisa Muraro’s *Non credere di avere dei diritti* [don’t think you have any rights] (1987). See, Luisa Muraro, *Diotima: Il pensiero della differenza sessuale*, (Milano: La Tartaruga, 1987). Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Writing*, Trans. by Paul A. Kottman (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

For Lonzi, Cixous, Davey, Stark and Boyer, writing is not simply a literary aspiration, it is the place where the image of femininity²⁶ and women's sexuality, the forms of sociality that are reproduced and given to be consumed by hegemonic cultural discourses, can be questioned, displaced and undone in dialogue with "others." For Lonzi the feminist collective and the practice of writing become the place of this undoing; for Cixous, writing is the place of a different economy of desire, writing, reading, and attention where "feminine" alienation is a generative force which calls on the voices of other poets and writers and refusalists to search together for a language and a vocabulary to reproduce life's "revolt power."²⁷

In this study, I offer a critical account of the feminist quotidian refusal in writing. I examine the ways in which these women have reconceptualised creativity as a feminist practice and the kind of propositions, practices and literary tools of refusal they have developed to counter the Empire of the Selfsame and its neoliberal offspring, the "techno-bitch." I show how, in their works, this group of women writers, artists and poets invoke a community of refusalist and "relations-witches" (against the techno-bitch), that freely collaborate to build together a new vocabulary and language to express womanhood as vital and unbounded.

The ways in which they have attempted to produce an account of themselves bears traces of their fights against the reproduction of the terms and conditions of existence that diminish their work and life: for instance, Stark's refusal of the effects of the commodifying market-driven logic of contemporary art on artistic practices; or the ways in which Cixous and Lonzi rethink the place of women in society and in culture; Boyer questions the commodification of life and work under neoliberalism, producing terrible forms and accounts of not-writing. Their refusal takes the form of a practice of paying attention to relations: for instance, in the way Lonzi's diary examines interpersonal relationships, as she makes a portrait of herself through the voices of the women of the feminist group; in the way *écriture féminine* pays attention to the body and to the material power relations that language reflects; in the ways Davey's promiscuous writing works at undoing relations of opposition; the way Stark's sandwiches and her artistic practice are investigations of the economies of social relations in art; or again in the ways Boyer's poetry and essayistic writing attempts to account for the violence of neoliberalism on women's life and work, that occurs at the intersection of class, race, age, and gender relations. Furthermore, differences notwithstanding, this group of women writers, artists and poets represent a self in relation and their writing and art making as collaborative processes call a community of artists, poets and writers to manifest.

Countering Preciado's techno-bitch with something closer to a "relation-witch" as these women present themselves as possessed, ecstatic, joyful, but also enraged, beside themselves, resolute in their determination to change the culture of relations as part of a community of affinity and mutual care, in which making art and writing is a form of dedication.

26 In "Let's Spit on Hegel," Lonzi states, "Man has interpreted woman according to an image of femininity which is an invention of his... Man has always spoken in the name of the human race, but half of the human race now accuses him of having sublimated a mutilation... We consider history incomplete because it was written, always, without regarding woman as an active subject of it." Carla Lonzi, *Let's Spit on Hegel* (Milan: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1971).

27 "Revolt's power" is a term used by feminist artist Claire Fontaine to refer to Lonzi's search for a language and a way of living outside imposed social roles and institutionalised framework; it hints at the name of the feminist group that Lonzi co-founded, Rivolta Femminile [Female Revolt].

For instance, Davey reads the story of her family through resonances with literary figures such as the proto-feminist Mary Wollstonecraft; Stark's practice pays homage and invokes the presences of those who have helped Stark figure herself out, writing something or making a work by which the artist felt interpolated by. On the other hand, Boyer invokes the power of imagination, conjures up a poetic "no" as a generative force, writing prose-poems that resemble instructions for insurgent forms of poetic actions, or for building powerful spells against the destructive forces of neoliberal economies.

What is it that this group of women writers refuse? And how do they negate accounting in giving an account of themselves? What can we learn from the ways in which Lonzi, Cixous, Davey, Stark and Boyer have practiced their refusal in writing? What kind of questions do they raise about the potential of refusing in the present? What form of sociality do they envision? What are the tools they offer to imagine a form of accounting that is not an empty performance of excitable speech? My hope is that by reading and thinking with these works we might derive a differentiated understanding of feminist refusals in writing that recognise the generative unruly power of refusal in giving an account of oneself in writing; where accounting is turned on its head, and becomes an act of questioning, a call to a non-alienated relations with ourselves and others, one that invokes and calls forth a new form of sociality to emerge from within the space of writing.

Before moving on to my examination of the practices of Lonzi, Cixous, Davey, Stark and Boyer, I first consider the ways in which I bring this group of women writers, artists and poets into a constellation of practices that I call the "Poetics of Negation," to indicate the set of ideas, poetic intentions, conceptual, linguistic and literary tools they experimented with.

1.2 From the "Empire of the Selfsame" to the culture of relations

The group of writers, artists, and poets discussed here have challenged the stability of literary and artistic canons, plunging into the opacities of the world to which they have access—the realities of their bodies, their experiences, work and of their communities—and conceiving of their works as open and porous forms; their accounts incomplete as they acknowledge the limitations of their embodied perspectives and their knowledges and invite others into this dialogical space where an artistic and political subjectivity takes place.

Their writings contest a patriarchal, colonial, white supremacist, sexist and capitalist worldview that in the wake of the emergence of second-wave feminist movements in the mid-70s, Hélène Cixous frequently calls the *L'Empire du Propre* ["Empire of the Selfsame"]²⁸—the masculine "history of phallogentrism, history of appropriation"—which she identifies as a political and moral, semantic, ontological and sexual "Empire" that is ubiquitous and functions through appropriation, presence, transparency, control. In the famous essay manifesto "The Laugh of the Medusa" Cixous writes, "nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason [...] It has been one with the phallogentric tradition. It is, indeed the same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory

28 In French, *propre* means clean and also forms the root for propriety, appropriate, appropriation. It is property (*propriété*), possession, the self (*mon propre*), the generally accepted meaning of a word (*le sens propre*), that which defines and identifies something (the proper of the novel), the clean and the orderly, the ethical proper.

phallogentrism.”²⁹ This heterosocial monosexual hegemonic patriarchal Empire of the Selfsame, she argues, gives rise to a system defined by binary oppositions and a specific “masculine” economy that values return, unity, self-presence, self-possession and a desire to assimilate “foreign and threatening” otherness. She points out that in traditional patriarchal formulations of society, the “other” of all forms is seen as an enemy and thus something that needs to be appropriated and erased.

Taking as a point of departure the ways in which, in Western culture and philosophy, women have been represented as Other,³⁰ and calling for a different ethics of recognition, in “Let’s Spit on Hegel” (1971) and “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975) respectively, Lonzi and Cixous dis-engage with Hegel’s theory of recognition,³¹ which, as they argue, does not account for the living experiences of encountering another person. They refuse to think recognition as a “life-and-death struggle,” that attempts to incorporate the other through an act of obliteration. But their refusal is the opposite of a withdrawal. By “spitting and laughing” at the absurdity of Hegel’s theory as an act of intellectual disobedience and rebellion, they exhort other women to do the same and disidentify with “male culture” and its illusion of universality, while experimenting with embodied forms of generating knowledge about themselves, their sexuality and history. Lonzi writes, “if man’s strength lies in identifying with culture, ours is in refuting it.”³²

This refusal is simultaneously poetic *and* political,³³ and, as I will discuss in this study, brought Lonzi and Cixous to experiment with forms of accounting that are dialogical, multi-layered and multivocal, opaque, exuberant, abundant in metaphors, associations,

29 The term phallogentrism combines the notion of the “phallus” with the concept of “logocentrism.” Logocentrism emphasises the role of speech (“logos”) and claims that priority must be accorded to the role of speech in Western tradition. Phallogentrism gives priority to logical language, deeming any other language that is not articulated in a linear logic as insignificant and marginal. Derrida calls Western discursive production *phallogentric* (a neologism composed of the word phallic and logocentric). He describes it as “the attitude of metaphysical prevarication of the voice that brings the truth into the conscience.” This voice is masculine and its logic is one of opposition and sameness.

30 De Beauvoir conceives of woman as “Other” with a capital “O,” the “absolute other” of existence: defined as essence, pure in-itself, organic life. When “Other” is understood in this sense, the relation between man and woman is subsumed under the relation between subject and object, between which there is a fundamental and intractable alienation. As such, woman becomes simultaneously the object of consumption by existence and the mystical representation of its limit. In the former sense, woman is the target of pure negativity, to be possessed, shaped and controlled. In the latter sense, woman becomes an object of fear and awe, fecundity or death. See Kimberly Hutchings, “De Beauvoir’s Hegelianism. Rethinking The Second Sex” in *Radical Philosophy* (May–June 2001). Available online through: <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/de-beauvoirs-hegelianism>.

31 In the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* Hegel introduces the idea of a ‘struggle for recognition’, describing an encounter between two self-consciousnesses which both seek to affirm the certainty of their being for themselves (Hegel, 1807: 232ff.). Such a conflict is described as a life-and-death struggle insofar as each consciousness desires to confirm its self-existence and independence through a negation or objectification of the other. Feminists have problematised Hegel’s reliance on the impersonal operation of the norm on the constitution of the subject, when in fact we come into contact with these norms through living exchanges that imply a preconstitutive sociality, and not a dyad of the master and the slave. Judith Butler explains Hegel’s theory of recognition as follows, “recognition is an act in which the “return to self” becomes impossible. An encounter with another effects a transformation of the self from which there is no return.” It’s important to note that Butler corrects feminist’s critique of Hegel’s theory of recognition, and affirms that, although Hegel is sometimes faulted for understanding recognition as a dyadic structure, we can see that within the *Phenomenology* the struggle for recognition is not the last word, but in it Hegel discloses the inadequacy of the dyad as a frame of reference for understanding social life. See Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 15–17.

32 Carla Lonzi, *Let’s Spit on Hegel* (1971).

33 For Lonzi and Cixous, the political does not only and simply stem from the political scene, from events reported on the media, but it is expressed in poetic language, in art and creative forms of writing, as Cixous argues in an interview, “There is *always* a political reflexion and engagement running through it. [...] I was born political, in a sense, and it was even for political reasons that I began to write *poetry* as a response to the political tragedy.” In Kathleen O’Grady, “Guardian of Language” in Hélène Cixous, Susan Sellers, *White Ink: Interview on Sex, Text, Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 84.

full of ghosts, repetitions and interruptions. Their storytelling is a feminist call to arms: to question the normative image of femininity and of what it means to be a “woman;” and the conditions of women’s survival in a system that exploits and diminishes life. They invented ways of giving an answer by posing many more questions; of saying the same thing again and again but slightly differently; of changing the topic when a conversation was already directed on its well-defined track.³⁴ For Cixous, a “feminine” writer is “a breaker of automatisms;” someone who occupies an “improper” space, challenging the idea of mastery of knowledge as the measure of the legitimacy of an intellectual practice. So, for instance, Lonzi refuses the language of theory and philosophy and attempts to find a language that remains as close as possible to lived experience; a language that pays attention to the feelings, the emotional charge of particular moments and encounters. Cixous turns to an idea of a “*écriture*” that is a practice of *différance*, to conceptualise writing as a space of “selfsame-subversion.”

In other words, against the “Empire of the Selfsame,” Lonzi and Cixous invoke a different “culture of relations;” one which does not erode the possibility of a different relation to others. For Lonzi, a “culture of relations” is what differentiates a female sensibility, where relations involve mutual acknowledgement and prompt transformations. Significant in this respect, then, is a passage in her dialogue with artist Pietro Consagra, in which Lonzi argues that “the images men have of themselves are outside the relation, while women see themselves within it. Hence the latter are pretty aware of their need for the other, while the former [...] only see their own growth.”³⁵ For Lonzi, an autonomous subjectivity is not possible outside the space of mutual recognition. The space of the feminist collective and of writing as a feminist practice, become, as I will show, the place of a creative experimentation with this “culture of relations.”

Lonzi and Cixous insist on an understanding of a self in relation, a self that is fundamentally social, fundamentally opaque, incomplete, always constituted through relations. This close attention to relational dynamics bring them to experiment with forms of accounting that are open, dialogical, fragmentary and non-linear.

While Hélène Cixous and Carla Lonzi’s works emerge within the context of feminist practices of difference in the ’70s and rethink women’s political and ethical commitment to their sex in terms of women’s control of their bodies and reproductive capacities, Moyra Davey, Frances Stark, and more recently Anne Boyer are parts of a younger generation of women whose practices have emerged in the aftermath of these feminist movements and benefited from the transformations, opportunities and debates opened by feminists, women theorist and writers such as Lonzi and Cixous, whose critiques of patriarchal forms of creativity,³⁶ among those of many other feminists, have influenced and constituted the backbone of their writings.

34 Paolo Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson. (New York: Semiotext(e), 2008), p. 148.

35 From Carla Lonzi, *Vai pure* (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1980) as quoted in Lea Melandri, “Autonomy and the Need for Love: Carla Lonzi Vai pure” in *May Revue*, (April 2010), pp. 73–77.

36 The concept of cultural industries, or creative industries, embraces industries that combine the creation, production, and commercialisation of creative content, which can have the form of a good or a service. This term originated from the concept of “culture industry” that was conceptualised by the critical theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Adorno and Horkheimer argued that by being spectators of the ideal world that is represented through advertisement and films, citizens forget their own reality and thus become easily manipulated. See “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Trans. by John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

While it is undeniably true that the culture of relations that Lonzi and Cixous had envisioned has now been appropriated and incorporated into a culture of instant connections where relations are experienced as new opportunities for networking in the era of social media, I have found it particularly important to return to Lonzi and Cixous' proposition for a radical form of imagination that insists on a form of relationality which is deeply transformative of the self and in which writing, as a social practice, becomes an invocation and dedication to those who have enabled it and to whom the writers owe their practices.

The group of women writers discussed in this study imagines artistic communities that are "societies of mutual admiration," communities of poets who write poems of non-action and "societies for the destruction of unwritten literature." In the "culture of relations" that this group of writers, artists, and poets embody, writing is conceived as a social space; a space that sets the stage for unexpected encounters and insists on a form of radical imagination that breaks free from the oppressive narratives of women's survival under Empire.

1.3 "NegAzione:" ways of saying "no"

Throughout this study I show how negation links the mentalities of the five authors. In linguistic terms, negation destabilises any given systems of signification and allows for the multiplication of differences. Negative locutions such as "no," "not," "nowhere," "nothing," "without" dominate the works of this group of writers, creating boundless places for reading and many points of resistance. Negation operates in their works on multiple levels: It brings instability, but also enables agency, even if in negative terms. It allows for a hiatus, an empty space in relation to psychological habits, norms, codes of conduct, and environmental factors (for example Lonzi's "cultural void" and the process of "deculturalisation" that will be discussed in Chapter 1). As what is not present, negation is also a vehicle and condition of possibility of the inactual, the "not-yet." In an interview, poet Anne Boyer invokes the Keats' idea of "negative capability" in which glimpses and half-ideas are held together in a state of potential and deferred judgment and the writer lingers in the uncertainties without effective premature closure.³⁷ Boyer gives significant examples and compares negative capabilities to the ability of those who are oppressed to think freedom from a condition of unfreedom. For Boyer, as for Cixous, poetry is moved by this capacity for the negative, for imagining what is not yet; the place where a different sociality can be imagined.

In a manifesto entitled "Neg/azione" dated 1976, one of the groups of the Italian *Autonomia* movement responds to the leftist media accusations of "subversive-ness" and explains that this subversion is not violent but creative. *Autonomia* was composed by groups that organised themselves autonomously, and as the text says, "improvising their ways and tools of subversion," their languages and vocabularies birthed out of the necessity to "negate capitalist survival, the society of the spectacle and the dictatorship of capital."³⁸ The text highlights the creative dimension of this gesture of negation: a creative refusal

37 Keats writes, "I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." It is the ability to deal positively with complexity, paradox, and ambiguity in processes which have uncertain contexts and outcomes (Keats, 1970, p. 43).

38 *Autonomia operai and Autonomia dei Proletari*, "Neg/azione," (1976). Available through: <http://www.nelvento.net/archivio/68/autonomia/negazione.htm>.

that becomes a practice of improvising forms and tools for the construction of forms of sociality and forms of collective organising. It is this idea of negation and refusal —as a temporarily autonomous zone of free creative improvisation of different modes of sociality and tools of revolt in the arts and in culture— that I invoke in this study, and which inform my readings of the works of this group of women writers, artists and poets.

Within the richness and different souls of the Italian Autonomia, I situated my reading of negation in relation to Lonzi's conceptualisation of this autonomous space in the feminist group and the modalities of her quotidian practice of refusal recorded in her writing. Lonzi's practice of "deculturalisation" can be seen in this perspective as a refusal to identify with the social roles and cultural discourse of male culture. Rather than engaging with a predominantly male tradition of theorists and writers, Lonzi turns, for instance, to the figures of women saints and mystics such as Therese of Liseaux and Teresa of Avila. She is drawn to the ways these women have refused to obey the system that oppressed them, and found in their writing a place for a questioning that did not necessarily happen in the public arena and it did not constitute a body of doctrines, but as a quotidian life practice. Lonzi writes that, they "did not see limits to their ability to scrutinise and question."³⁹ It is the power of revolt, of questioning and self-questioning, which, according to Lonzi, these women carried in the silence of their lived gestures and writing, and that she herself searches to reproduce in her practice and writing. It is this search for the reproduction of "revolt's force"⁴⁰ of epistemic and ideological inversion that, as I attempt to show in this study, moves the works of this group of women writers, namely the possibility of inhabiting the negative space of a continuous process of "deculturalisation" and questioning through which an "I" and a "You" engages in a transformative dialogue.

My invocation of the term "negation" here also draws on my engagement with *écriture féminine's* as a deconstructive method and Cixous' insistence on the power of female alienation as a creative force. Like Lonzi's writing practice, *écriture féminine* is the place of creative revolt against the phallogocentric order: it reclaims the place of "feminine" alienation as a space of a material doing and a creative self-undoing that uses a whole host of literary techniques—the power of irony, of unsettling emotions, of distance and detachment; of speaking away, leaving, losing the meaning, going all the way to beyond, beyond the authorial voice and the grip of fixed meanings, breaking free from the constraints of genres, syntax and grammar—to give an account of oneself that pays attention to the traces left by the passage of the other in writing.

It is the space opened by this refusal of the violence of naming and of closing off, that opens to the possibility of imagining a different relation to the other in writing; one in which self-narration is done in collaboration. When in "The Laugh of the Medusa" Cixous declares that, "at the present moment it is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing," an impossibility that, however, Cixous argues, "doesn't mean that it doesn't exist,"⁴¹ Cixous' use of the double-negation allows her to temporarily suspend the need for naming, at the same time as it enables her to address other women, inviting them to envision their

39 Carla Lonzi as quoted in the essay by Giovanna Providenti, "Passaggi di esperienza: autenticità e liberazione in Carla Lonzi." Paper delivered on the occasion of the IAPh Symposium (31 August, 2006) and republished on Libreria delle Donne di Milano—Online. Available through: http://www.libreriadelledonne.it/_oldsite/news/articoli/contrib130707_providenti.htm. [Accessed January 2020]. Translation mine.

40 Claire Fontaine, "Carla Lonzi ovvero l'arte di forzare il blocco" in *Studi culturali*, 12:1 (Bologna: Il Mulino Editore, 2015), pp. 53–62.

41 Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 1975, p. 883.

own forms of expression and inhabit their subjectivity creatively, without norms or any kind of prescription on how to write, even if the directive comes from feminists. By choosing to not define *écriture féminine*, Cixous' account turns into an invitation to other women to invent their own ways of using writing as a subversive tool.

The “negative” power of imagination, of poetry and art and performance is one that the group of women writers discussed here grapple with and an apophatic expression of visual art, theatre and poetry influence their writing. While Davey and Stark's writing is influenced by their visual practices, Lonzi experience as an art critic and in the arts influenced her feminist practice and writing.⁴² Cixous uses language in the same way that a painter uses paint, to produce intensities by working the texture of the painting. Significant is *écriture féminine*'s emphasis on the material, “thing-like” qualities of language; the trace of the body in language—the rhythm, rhymes, resonances, assonances; the uses of notes and references as materials. Cixous also collaborated with the avant-garde stage ensemble *Le Théâtre du Soleil* and wrote a significant number of theatre-plays, and critical essays and collaborated with a number of contemporary artists.⁴³ Their engagement with writing thus is influenced by their artistic sensibilities, by their understanding of creativity as the common practice of paying attention to the vivid yet unverifiable sensation⁴⁴ which moves and touches and creates a deeply felt, unsettling connection that makes addressing another—through language, an artwork or a piece of writing—necessary. Each of the writers discussed in this study inhabit this space of female feminist negation differently. Both Davey and Stark, for instance, refuse to give away intimate details of their lives and search for forms of giving an account of themselves that invoke the communities and influences that have enabled their work, in a form of address that often resemble love letters. Poet Anne Boyer reinvents for herself a tradition of feminists and the refusalist poets. The “no” of the poet, Boyer crucially argues, is not necessarily a no to poetry: “Very often the ‘no’ of the poet is more: a ‘yes’ in the carapace of a ‘no’.”⁴⁵ Again, in this passage, Boyer emphasises the generative force of negation that takes the shape of art and writing. A force that could also be called the “promise of the negative” that art and writing as forms of giving an account makes. It is the promise that “it” will be speaking, that “I” will give an account;

42 For a discussion of the relation between Lonzi's feminism and art see: Giovanna Zapperi, “Challenging Feminist Art History: Carla Lonzi Divergent Paths” in Victoria Horne, Lara Perry, (eds.) *Feminism and Art History Now* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2017); Giovanna Zapperi, *Carla Lonzi. Un'Arte della Vita* (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2017); Marisa Volpi, *Carla Lonzi in Italia: dagli anni Cinquanta ad oggi*, (Roma: Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2003); Giorgia Bertolino, “Carla Lonzi: discorsi. Dai testi sull'art altre al lavoro della scrittura, 1960–1969” in Lara Conte, Vinzia Fiorino Vanessa Martini. (eds.), *Carla Lonzi: la duplice radicalità. Dalla critica militante al femminismo di Rivolta*. Studi Culturali. (Roma: Edizioni ETS, 2011). Michele Dantini, “Ytalya subjecta: in Narrazioni identitarie e critica d'arte 1963–2009” in Anna Mattiolo, Gabriele Guercio, *Il confine evanescente. Arte italiana 1960–2010* (Milan: Electa, 2009), pp. 262–307. Liliana Ellena, “Carla Lonzi e il femminismo radicale degli anni '70: disfare la cultura, disfare la politica” in *Carla Lonzi: la duplice radicalità. Dalla critica militante al femminismo di Rivolta*. (Pisa: ETS Edizioni, 2011). Laura Iamurri, “Un mestiere fasullo: note su Autoritratto di Carla Lonzi” in Maria Antonietta Trasformi (ed.), *Donne d'arte: storie e generazioni* (Milan: Meltemi Editore srl, 2006), pp. 113–32.

43 Hélène Cixous, *Les Sans Arche d'Adel Abdessemed et autres coups de balai: et autres coups de balai* (Paris: Gallimard, 2018); Hélène Cixous, *Correspondance avec le mur*, (Paris: Galilée, 2017); Adel Abdessemed et Hélène Cixous, *Insurrection de la poussière*, Paris: Galilée, 2013); Le Tablier de Simone Hantaï (Paris: Galilée, 2005).

44 I borrow this thought from art critic Jan Verwoert, who writes, “is a vivid sensation. Yet the reality of what you see remains unverifiable—disturbingly so—as when subconscious memories resurface in dreams. You can never quite be sure that you're not just imagining things.” Jan Verwoert, “Coming to Life“ in *frieze* magazine (May 2012). Available through: <https://frieze.com/article/coming-life>. [Accessed January 2020].

45 Anne Boyer “No” in *Harriet: A Poetry Blog*, Poetry Foundation, (April 2017.) Available through: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2017/04/no/> [Accessed May 2018].

but also that “it” cannot be said, that is a recognition of this impossibility to sufficiently account for oneself, and the failure to do so, that transforms the account into a call, an invocation to a community of refusalist poets, artists and writers to make itself heard.

Summary of the Chapters

Chapter 1: Shut up. Or, rather speak: Carla Lonzi’s writing of revolt

In Chapter 1, I examine the forms of refusal that Italian radical feminist Carla Lonzi advances in the book-montage of interviews *Autoritratto* [self-portrait] (1969),⁴⁶ where Lonzi rejects the “phoney” profession of the art critic and the idea of creativity as the prerogative of the individual. In the diary *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una femminista* [shut up. Or, rather speak. A feminist’s diary]⁴⁷ (1978), Lonzi refuses the role of the leader of the Italian feminist movement, emptying herself out of the image of femininity in which she did not feel represented. Finally, in the book-dialogue *Vai pure* [now you can go] (1980),⁴⁸ I consider how Lonzi rejects her reproductive role as woman and writer and invests writing with a political function. By renouncing the language of theory and refusing the body of doctrines offered by the Western philosophical tradition, Lonzi and the feminists of the group *Rivolta Femminile* [female revolt] developed what they called a practice of “deculturalisation,” an abandonment of the certainties and experimented solutions offered by culture. The possibility of a revolt as a negative inhabitation of the space of culture, as I contend in this chapter, finds a powerful form of expression in her use of vernacular language, the intimate style of her writing, and its dialogical and fragmentary forms; in the breaks, the silences, the pauses, and the empty space opened by the ghostly presences of others—as for instance, the silence of Cy Twombly, the silences of conversation; the details of Thérèse de Liseaux’s photo portrait; the people invoked in her diary. This chapter attends to the ways in which Lonzi refuses the manner of speaking that male culture condones by embracing a form of silence that opens the path to a state of awareness in which the potential for creativity can be realised as a form of spiritual connectedness and a medium for collective forms of action.

Chapter 2: To be propelled out of the self: Cixous’ *écriture féminine*

By foregrounding its deconstructive methodology, this chapter discusses *écriture féminine* [feminine writing] as a disruptive practice of writing. By reading together the essays “Sorties,” “The Laugh of the Medusa” and “Coming to Writing,” I show how the economy of the “feminine” explodes the phallogocentric system of oppositions into the chaos of difference, and an understanding of womanhood as unbounded vitality. By focusing on Cixous’ discussion of writing as a form of loss, and drawing on her insights on feminine alienation as a creative condition, in this chapter, I discuss the ways in which Cixous theorises writing as a practice of paying attention to the absences and the silences in language;

46 Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto* (Bari: De Donato Editore, 1969). All translations of Lonzi’s *Autoritratto* unless specified are mine.

47 Carla Lonzi, *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una Femminista* (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1978). All translations are mine.

48 Carla Lonzi, *Vai pure. Dialogo con Pietro Consagra* (Milano: Prototipi. Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1980) [Reprinted by et al. Edizioni, Milan, 2011]. All translations unless specified are mine.

to the traces of the body, of the experience of difference in writing. In this chapter, I attend to the ways in which Cixous' refusal of the metaphysics of presence "makes itself heard" in her writing: in her attention to the body, to the voice, to the traces of the sonic; the use of linguistic negation; the process of depersonalisation; the proliferation of meanings. In this chapter I argue that Cixous' affirmative philosophy of saying "yes, yes" to life is moved by the forces of a negation that attempts to destroy the certainties offered by the ways in which things "appear" to us as fixed, truth, and objective, and summon the "feminine" power of alienation to invent a language and a vocabulary to express the multiple oneness of existence.

Chapter 3: In the gaps of meaning: Moyra Davey's promiscuous writing

In this chapter, I investigate the ways in which Davey experiment with a "promiscuous" form of writing that is made of heterogeneous parts; and challenges oppositions, categories, by processes of juxtapositions, resonance and a layering that produces loss, dissonances and opens gaps. Her writing exists in the breaks between reading and writing, "wet" and "dry;" between personal and impersonal. Her personal accounts are testimonies of the artist's attempt to challenge her practice, to find a balance between the desire to reveal intimate personal details and the necessity to leave rooms for the unsaid and the unknown. In the first part of the chapter, I examine Davey's use of the personal note as a basic unit and the literary montage as way of inhabiting the in-between of forms and as dialogical compositional method. In Part Two, through an analysis of "The Wet and the Dry," I discuss Davey's practice of "oblique reading" through the invocations of writers and literary figures—Mary Wollstonecraft, to Roland Barthes, Douglas Crimp to Chantal Akerman, among others. By reading obliquely, as I show in Part Two, Davey allows writing to become a space of resonance where other voices can be heard in what resembles a dialogue. In the third and last part, I discuss how this space of resonance involves loss—a letting go that produces both a paralysing anxiety but which is also a generative force that enables making. Overall, the chapter attempts to show how Davey's promiscuous writing is in fact a quiet call to a revolt of forms.

Chapter 4: Pathologically open: Frances Stark's "sandwiches"

In the fourth chapter, I examine Stark's exuberant writing practice and argue for a reading that acknowledges the ways in which the artist mobilises the power of negative feelings as expressions of both the negative effects of consumer culture on artistic subjectivities, and the possibility of harnessing them for social transformation. I attend to the ways in which Stark's writing enacts the possibility of a different form of sociality in art based on values such as solidarity, mutual admiration, collaboration, and the desire of sharing in the joy of making art and writing. In the first part, I discuss the well-celebrated essay "The Architect and the Housewife" showing how, in this "triple-decker sandwich," Stark observes and questions the gendered social economies of artistic production, and calls for a politics of mutual admiration in which men and women collaborate. In the second part, I attend to the ways in which Stark's "politics of dedication" is reflected in the fragmentary and dialogical form of her writing and the representation of the "I" as multiple and made in collaboration. Finally, in the last part, I consider the ways in which Stark's writing inhabits the space of negative feelings and of the "not" as a form of refusal—a way of saying "no" to the reproduction of the hyper-alienated "creative type."

Chapter 5: What is it to reside without settling? Anne Boyer's poetics of refusal

How many ways are there for the poet to say “no” to the violent and toxic landscape outside of the poem? And how do women refuse to reproduce the system that extracts profit from their lives and work, their sufferings and painful experiences? How to develop a common grammar to speak of the “unspeakable” realities of brokenness, suffering, pain and illness provoked by neoliberal politics? In this chapter, I attend to the forms that refusal takes in the work of poet Anne Boyer, the ways in which Boyer conceptualises her “no” as a generative force and a creative gesture that “can protect a potential yes—or more precisely poetry’s no,” as the poet writes, “is the one that can protect the *hell yeah*, and every *hell yeah*’s multiple variations.” By a close reading of her prose-poems and essayistic and autobiographical writing, in the first part I examine the “no” of Boyer’s writing; her proposition of “not-writing” in relation to work and the refusal to work for capital and instead produce poems that say “no,” poems of nonactions, and poems that attempt to “turn the world upside down.” In the second part, I examine the “terrible” forms of Boyer’s writing: her vernacular, made of almost nothing, existing in memory and in experience, barely mediated, undisciplined, used to “remember the dead, to vanquish our enemies, and to woo unlikely lovers.” In the last part, by focusing on Boyer’s recent breast cancer memoir, I consider how Boyer’s writing attends to the “promise of the negative” and experiments with an opaque forms of accounting that are inhabited by multiple subjects that remain opaque, muddled, incomplete. In this chapter I argue that Boyer’s poetics of refusal envisions a community of refusalists that come together to make terrible forms and perform poetic reversals to imagine political subjectivities made in collaboration, beyond the horizon of neoliberal survival.

The works of the group of women writers, artists and poets discussed in Poetics of Negation intervene in the space of “relations,” where relations are not only interpersonal and existential, but also structural, formal, artistic and literary; paying attention to what happens in this space in-between, between “I” and “You,” and where, finally, a political subjectivity emerges, as I will show in Chapter 1 in my investigation of Lonzi’s dialogical writing practice, as the result of collective endeavour.



Carla Lonzi, Carla Accardi, Luciano Fabro, Luciano Pistoï and Giulio Paolini, 1965. ©Fondo Carla Lonzi, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea. All rights reserved.

CHAPTER 1

Shut up. Or, rather speak: Carla Lonzi's writing of revolt

Identity arises from this radical refusal to a Question and hence to an Answer: it fragments the Question in a myriad of expressions of consciousness that summon in dialogue a myriad of correspondences; these correspondences, and not the Answer, being an effect of the expression of another consciousness on myself when I get in touch with her.

(Carla Lonzi, "The Myth of the Culture's Propositions," 1978)

This chapter considers the way in which writing becomes a place where Lonzi engages in the process of "wearing out the unconscious ties to the male world" (*logorare i legami inconsci con il mondo maschile*), and inhabits what she calls the "cultural void" as a condition for the expression of a female consciousness. "Man's strength lies in his identification with culture, ours in his refusal" speak the women of the feminist group *Rivolta Femminile* [feminine revolt], in their 1970 manifesto. In her writing, Lonzi enacts a refusal of both the discourse of patriarchy that oppresses women and, as we shall see, the solutions offered by emancipatory ideologies¹ and the feminism of equality. It is significant then that in 1977, in conversation with Michèle Causse, French lesbian writer, translator and member of *Éditions des Femmes*,² Lonzi contests the way feminism, as Lonzi states, in being accepted by mainstream culture, had become "an ideology, which confirms, rather than throwing power into crisis."³ And this is also the reason, as Lonzi explains, for embracing a refusal of male culture as feminist practice: "my first need as a feminist has been to make tabula rasa of received ideas, a tabula rasa inside myself in order to divest myself of the assurances offered by culture."⁴ This refusal of the reassurances and "experimented solutions" of culture brought Lonzi to experiment with a feminist practice, as I show in this chapter, that is invested in

1 In the influential *Sputiamo su Hegel* (let's spit on Hegel, 1971) Lonzi observes that, "the proletariat is revolutionary towards capitalism but reformist towards the patriarchal system" Carla Lonzi, *Let's Spit on Hegel* (1971), trans. By Veronica Newman. Available through: <http://blogue.nt2.uqam.ca/hit/files/2012/12/Lets-Spit-on-Hegel-Carla-Lonzi.pdf>. [Accessed January 2020], p. 3.

2 *Éditions des Femmes* (Women's Editions) was the first women's publishing in Europe founded in 1972 by psychoanalyst and feminist Antoinette Fouque. See Bibia Pavard, *Femmes, Politique et Culture: Les Premières Années des éditions des femmes (1972–1979)* (in French). L'Harmattan, 2005. Lisa Greenwald, *Daughters of 1968: Redefining French Feminism and the Women's Liberation Movement* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2018).

3 Michèle Causse, Carla Lonzi, (interview), "Perché si sappia" in *E'già politica*, (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1977), pp. 103–109. Translation mine. All translation of Lonzi's writing, unless specified, are my own.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

the negative work of giving meaning back to already consumed or institutionalised words and realities. My aim in this chapter is to investigate the form that this refusal takes.

Lonzi's feminist practice emerged in the context of 1960s and '70s Italy, when the country's social structures were shaken by a growing political contestation characterised by the workers' strikes of the 1960s,⁵ the 1968 student revolts, and the proliferation of autonomous movements and feminist groups.⁶ The so-called "area of diffused *Autonomia*" (or social autonomy) was a broader movement of workers, students, women, and youth who preferred to develop their antagonism to capitalist society through a horizontally networked structure, guaranteeing the autonomy of each group and local reality from any attempt at unification and homogenisation within a national party structure.⁷ Rivolta Femminile and Carla Lonzi's experimentations with the collective space of the group and with writing must be then understood in this larger historical and political context of autonomy and the radical refusal of the mechanisms that ensure social and cultural reproduction.⁸ *Autonomia*, in its various forms and programs, essentially renounces some economic-political gains to refuse the proletarianisation of the workers, work, and "capitalist survival," negating "the society of consumption and spectacle."⁹ Feminist groups brought the discussion of reproductive labor to the fore and in some cases, such as with Lonzi and Rivolta Femminile, renounced communist and socialist ideologies that did not foresee the liberation of women as autonomous political subjects, differentiated from the undifferentiated category of the working class.

Lonzi exhorts the women of Rivolta Femminile to renounce their adherence to cultural models and ideologies, even revolutionary ones, because, as she says, they reproduce the same patriarchal logic. Lonzi and Rivolta Femminile chose "deculturalisation"¹⁰

5 It is in those years, for instance, that Mario Tronti published his influential work, *Operai e Capitale* [Workers and Capital] (1966), which developed a theoretical framework from which to grasp what lay beneath workers' spontaneous rejection of both factory rule and political representation. An important contribution of Tronti's analysis was the understanding that workers' resistance to exploitation was the main driving force in the social and technological development of capitalism, forcing bosses to employ new machines and new forms of organisation in the workplace. Against the assumption that the working classes were merely reacting to the crisis of capitalism, Tronti proposed that it was capitalism that was consistently reactive to the struggles of the working classes against capital. So, the destruction of capitalism involved also the destruction (and not the affirmation) of the worker qua worker. See Mario Tronti, *Operai e Capitale*, (DeriveApprodi, 2013)reprint; and Mario Tronti, *Workers and Capital*. Trans. By David Broder, (London: Verso Books, 2019); Mario Tronti's "The Strategy of Refusal," in "Autonomia: Post-political Politics" (special issue) *Semiotext(e)* 3, no. 3 (1980): 28–34.

6 The Italian feminist movement was not a unified entity. Some feminists claimed their affiliation to socialist movements, whereas others preferred to adopt a strategic form of separatism and focus on the existential practice of desubjectivation and subjectivation such as for example of the group of Rivolta Femminile.

7 *Autonomia* was parts of the "autonomy of the social," composed of counter-cultural, unemployed, and semi-employed urban youth, students, radical feminists, homosexuals, and the *cani sciolti* ("stray dogs," unaffiliated militants and activists). For a summary of the political context in which the Italian feminist autonomous groups emerged see also: <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/11/01/feminism-autonomism-1970s-italy/>; and Steve Wright, "A Party of Autonomy?," in *The Philosophy of Antonio Negri: Resistance in Practice*, A. Mustapha and T. Murphy (eds) (London: Pluto Press, 2004), pp. 73–106. Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency: Cultures of Revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978* (London: Verso, 1990). Paolo Virno, "Do You Remember Counterrevolution?," in *Radical Thought in Italy: a Potential Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 241–59.

8 The term social reproduction describes the activities that nurture future workers, regenerate the current work force, and maintain those who cannot work – that is, the set of tasks that together maintain and reproduce life, both daily and generationally. Social reproduction consists, broadly speaking, of caring directly for oneself and others (childcare, elder care, healthcare), maintaining physical spaces and organising resources as part of an indirect process of care for oneself and others (cleaning, shopping, repairing), and species reproduction (bearing children). These are the everyday tasks involved in staying alive and helping others stay alive which have traditionally been performed for low or no wages by women, immigrant, domestic workers. Cultural reproduction is part of the larger process of social reproduction through which societies and their cultural, structural and ecological characteristics are reproduced.

9 "Neg/azione" – Autonomia Operaia e autonomia dei proletari – 1976. Available through: <http://www.nelvento.net/archivio/68/autonomia/negazione.htm>. [Accessed January 2020].

10 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

as a form of action. Deculturalisation involves a radical refusal of the “the need for ideology,” that is, as the women of Rivolta write, of “leaders, scientists, thinkers,” of “the achievement of power as the basis for the assessment of actions,” of “some among the foundations of patriarchal culture, not only in the past and in the present, but also in the horizon of revolutionary ideologies.”¹¹ For Lonzi, communism was an essentially masculine project which denied the importance of women’s struggle. Deculturalisation thus is an act of scepticism toward culture, a form of intellectual disobedience that demands women to continue questioning the terms and modalities of their liberation, rather than simply adhering to them. Like the autonomist, Lonzi’s feminism does not look for a compromise with power,¹² but for a total destruction of the patriarchal system, including the kind of freedoms based on production and consumption that capitalism offers. She puts a demand on women to think against themselves, to produce a “cultural void” that makes room for a different political consciousness and new forms of expression.

If there is an aspect of Lonzi’s feminist practice that is still particularly relevant to today’s struggles against white supremacist capitalist patriarchy it is in the way she challenges women’s identification with their social identity and with the space of culture. “Self-criticism must give way to imagination.”¹³ With this statement, Lonzi expresses the double-movement of her feminist practice, one in which critique gives way to alternative visions of society and social relations that refuse the uncontested social cost of the reproduction of patriarchy. Her exhortation to women to question and refuse the place of social identification is a reminder that the struggle for liberation is always incomplete.

Lonzi’s feminist practice and writing pose a formal question of what expression can become a vehicle for a different worldview. This is a question that still strongly resonates with a younger generation of women writers and poets who are addressing the question of work and the commodification of language and life in Western societies. What visions of life and social relations does Lonzi’s writing provoke us to imagine? And how does Lonzi’s practice engender the possibility of a revolt that denounces the fallacies of capitalist patriarchal culture upon which revolt itself rests its authority? In this chapter I attend to the complex and multiple manifestations of “no” in her writing; listening carefully to the way Lonzi’s refusal makes itself heard in the silences, the gaps and breaks, the “spitting” and “laughing” and the dialogical and fragmentary forms of her writing.

The feminist group of Rivolta Femminile and the practice of *autocoscienza*¹⁴ offered Lonzi the place of this collective constitution of a political subject of refusal: “The consciousness of myself as a political subject is born out of the group, from the reality (*realtà*) that has taken the shape of a non-ideological collective experience,”¹⁵ Lonzi writes in 1978. In the the feminist group, women found the space to elaborate their experience of

11 Rivolta Femminile, *Manifesto* (1970).

12 For Lonzi and the feminist separatist group of *Rivolta Femminile*, emancipation in terms of equality was not a revolutionary horizon because, in their accounts, it only reproduced the patriarchal culture which, as the *Manifesto* states, offers women and the colonised subjects the illusion of liberation which is in fact an incorporation into the hegemonic culture which reifies the same privileges men already enjoyed.

13 *Let’s Spit on Hegel* (1971), trans. by Veronica Newman. Available through: <http://blogue.nt2.uqam.ca/hit/files/2012/12/Lets-Spit-on-Hegel-Carla-Lonzi.pdf>. [Accessed January 2020], p. 18.

14 The practice of *autocoscienza* (self-consciousness), as the word suggests and as Teresa de Laurentis has pointed out, is an auto-induced, self-determined process of achieving consciousness. This aspect sets it apart from the American consciousness raising groups whose stakes were to analyse the common condition of women’s oppression, identify common needs and desires, and find adequate ways to address these issues publicly. See Teresa de Laurentis, Milano Women’s bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice* (Indiana University Press, 1990).

15 Carla Lonzi, *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una femminista*, (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1978).

oppression and put it into their own words, without the help provided by cultural discourse; and instead allowing individual introspection to become shared knowledge and a source of mutual transformation. The experience of the collective work in the feminist group and the reality of relations constitute the material of Lonzi's reflections and of her books.

In the collective space of the feminist group, writing is no longer linked to exceptional needs or talent, but it is reclaimed in its "original function of stopping [the flow of] thoughts, granting us the possibility to clarify, organise and render them communicable to others in their becoming. It is no longer writing: all women need [to write], and all women will feel it within their means."¹⁶ Lonzi's words here strongly resonate with H el ene Cixous' exhortation, in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, which is discussed in Chapter 2, to women to write, to use writing as a feminist practice—a political tool of self-subversion as an exercise in paying attention to ordinary details and unexamined and unrecorded emotions and feelings and what they tell us about the structure of power—cultural, social, economic, linguistic—that individuals embody and are embedded in. Writing becomes the daily recording of thoughts and experiences, as they take shape and become the material of women's knowledge.

Influenced by the feminist practice of *autocoscienza*, a mode of self-analysis based on relationships and dialogue among women, Lonzi herself experimented with a form of semi-autobiographical writing that Maria Luisa Boccia calls *scrittura autocoscienziale*¹⁷ [*autocoscienza's* writing], to emphasise its dialogical and self-reflective nature. In the opening pages of *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una femminista* [shut up. Or, rather speak. A feminist's diary] (1978) Lonzi comments that the reason for writing the diary was to "question the image in which I felt I was forced to be seen by others: unexpressed and happy to represent something, not myself."¹⁸ The diary becomes a mirror of the relations, personal desires, illusions and aspirations, and profound contradictions that shape her life and relations.

In her diary, Lonzi records and contemplates the insignificant details of a meeting, conversations with the women of the feminist group, and the insights they offer. Relationships, encounters, intimate dialogues, and writing itself all become sites for this creative experimentation with an incessant process of "wearing out" (*logorare*) the ties to the male culture which produces an accumulation outside. In her journey toward a more authentic expression of the self—where authenticity is not the expression of a truer self, but, as Annarita Merico has pointed out, "the necessity of keeping present the possibility of the unpredictable to manifest,"¹⁹—Lonzi proceeds by negation.

She abandons the certainties offered by social and professional roles, by the language of theory and culture, and speaks (from the heart) of this impossibility of speaking by refusing to speak in the supposed way. Instead, Lonzi addresses other women in the common vernacular, which is rich in emotional nuances and reverberates with the sound of lived experiences. She attends to writing as the place where relations can be undone by creating ruptures in the continuum of interpretation—silences, breaks, pauses, discontinuities—that subvert meanings and forms, and give creativity the meaning of a form of spiritual connectedness.

16 Ibid., p. 42.

17 See Maria Luisa Boccia, *L'Io in Rivolta. Vissuto e Pensiero di Carla Lonzi*, (Milano: La Tartaruga Edizioni, 1990).

18 Carla Lonzi, *Taci, anzi parla*, p. 8.

19 Mariarita Merico, "Carla Lonzi: Scacchi Ragionati e Percorsi di Elaborazione della Soggettivit  Femminile" in *Segni e Comprensione Rivista Quadrimestrale—Anno XXI Nuova Serie n.63, Settembre–Dicembre 2007*, pp. 85–99.

Lonzi's writing comes from a place of the negative. It is connected to the struggle for recognition on a human level, that is to have a voice, to have a possibility to care for herself and the people she loves. By renouncing the language of art criticism and refusing the body of doctrines offered by Western philosophical tradition, Lonzi attempts to speak from within a "cultural void," using language as ground for struggle and as the common material for improvising collective action.

Lonzi's feminist refusal of the assurances offered by culture is already prefigured in the book-montage of interviews *Autoritratto* [self-portrait], published in 1969, which marks Lonzi's departure from the art world. Since the early '60s, Lonzi had been critical of what she called the "phoney" profession of the art critic, the "gate-keeper" of the art world. In *Autoritratto*, Lonzi refuses the mediation of the profession of the art critic and expresses an expanded idea of creativity uncoupled from its creator and of art uncoupled from its status as art object. Instead, she claims the encounter with lived experience of the artist as the ground for art criticism, thereby rethinking the role of the art critic as an active participant in the creative process. *Autoritratto* offers an intimate portrait of the artists and the art critic.

Instead of portraying them as virtuoso and singular, Lonzi is interested in disclosing their unexceptional and common humanity (that explains, for instance, the fact that in the final editing of the draft, Lonzi maintains the mistakes of the spoken language, the half-formed thoughts, the detours typical of live conversation, showing them in their vulnerable moments), and of the art critic as implicated in the creative process. With *Autoritratto*, Lonzi contests creativity that produces an asymmetry between the artist and its passive other, the viewer and the critic. Instead, Lonzi finds inspiration in the idea of creativity understood as a life gesture and that she recognises in the way in which female mystics had lived their lives creatively. These women did not set about to make "paintings or objects" Lonzi writes, "but produce life gestures (*gesti di vita*), as human beings."²⁰ In *Autoritratto*, Lonzi reveals the admiration for female mystics and saints such as Teresa of Avila and Thérèse of Lisieux in whom she recognises a creative condition not bound by profession or by the production of an "object" or commodity, but as a form of spiritual connectedness. Significant in this respect is a photograph which shows Thérèse of Lisieux chained to the wall of the Carmel convent courtyard posing as Joan d'Arc in prison. Poet and scholar Nicole Trigg observed that this portrait of Thérèse is representative of the restrictive roles forced upon women and enslaved people, and the determination to live and think freely regardless of the consequences. Lonzi will write of them that they "illuminated me on identity; they preceded me on this path, and although it would seem that they renounce to everything, it is clear that they have not renounced to the essential."²¹ What is the path Lonzi talks about? It is the path towards liberation, their rebellion against the institution of the Church which led them to develop a discourse on god that is a life practice; a way of living that eschewed readymade categories.

Unlike the women mystics, however, Lonzi is not interested in renouncing her sexuality. These women's renunciation to their bodies is something she finds unacceptable. Lonzi finds resonances with the way these women have lived their lives creatively, "and not in a way that obediently responded to the cultural models proposed by society."²² Furthermore, the dialogical mode of their writing, often written as an internal dialogue in several

20 Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto* (Bari: De Donato editore, 1969), p. 48.

21 Carl Lonzi, "Itinerario di Riflessioni" in *È già Politica*, (Milan: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1974).

22 Ibid.

voices, the choice of vernacular language; their attention to the insignificant details of daily routine, the trivial, the banal, the “nothing” of sensations and everyday life leaves a trace in Lonzi’s own writing.

In the *Mystic Fable*, Michel de Certeau calls this way of paying attention to quotidian and insignificant details as “the negative work of the mystic writer” who “leads us back to these particularities of experience and details of everyday life that block demonstrations of meaning. What is of fundamental importance is inseparable from the insignificant.”²³ Throughout this study, I show how Lonzi herself enacts this negative work by recording the minutiae of everyday life, by “speaking away,” an apparent wandering and marvelling at those quotidian encounters which become the place of her feminist revolt against the authority of male culture. In this chapter, I inhabit the shadows of Lonzi’s writing to shed light on the ways in which Lonzi insists on this negative inhabitation of the space of culture, and of writing, in a way that allows Lonzi to speak from within that silence—where many voices resound and resonate.

In this chapter, I attend to the specific ways in which negation manifests in the writing of Carla Lonzi. I contend that the negation of being is not only a place of women’s oppression as a system that negates and erases their existence as subjects of agency. This negation is also the locus of a potential collective revolt. This chapter considers negation as a creative practice. In Italian the noun *negazione* can become *neg/azione*—a negation that is not nothingness, but action [*azione*]. An action that negates what has been negated, without giving a positive definition, like the comma in Lonzi’s diary—between “*taci*” [shut up] and “*anzi parla*” [or, rather speak]—in which the order to remain silent is turned upside down and allows Lonzi to speak, at the same time that she refuses to say what she will speak about.

On the process of writing the diary, Lonzi explains: “It is the laborious effort [*fatica improba*] of someone who is not content with any random ground on which to build the basis of one’s own identity, but rather digs, for the foundations, as many meters as the identity to be constructed.”²⁴ This negation, refusal produces action (the writing as digging) and an accumulation outside. It is a process of emptying oneself out of previous internal impressions, convictions, old habits and that produce an accumulation of outside which transforms the person who writes and the experience itself, turning it into the common material of language. The diary discloses Lonzi’s desire, as Claire Fontaine notes, for “an amorphous and protean form of life, one stripped of its professional and social veils, reduced to its pure potentiality for revolt and freedom.”²⁵ Indeed, in her diary, Lonzi discloses the contradictions of a life that cannot be reduced to one identity or social role and which continues to exist as potential for revolt.

In this chapter, I examine the book-montage of interviews *Autoritratto*²⁶ (1969); the diary *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una femminista* (1978); and the book-dialogue *Vai pure. Dialogo*

23 Michel de Certeau, *Mystic Fable Vol. I, The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 10.

24 Carla Lonzi, *Scacco Ragionato*, (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile-Prototipi, 1985), p. 89.

25 Claire Fontaine, “We Are All Clitoridian Women: Notes on Carla Lonzi’s Legacy,” in *e-flux journal* #47, e-flux, Aug. 2013. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/we-are-all-clitoridian-women-notes-on-carla-lonzi-s-legacy/>>

26 Whether Lonzi’s feminist period should or should not start with Lonzi’s last endeavour as an art critic is up for debate. The seeds of her feminism, as Giovanna Zapperi has argued, are also to be found in *Autoritratto*, making possible a reading of the book in relation to Lonzi’s feminism. See Giovanna Zapperi, Carla Lonzi. *Un’Arte della Vita*, (Roma, IT: Derive-Approdi, 2017). Giovanna Zapperi, ‘Carla Lonzi: la creatività del femminismo’ in *Dossier di Studi Culturali*, (Torino: Il Mulino Edizioni, 2015), pp. 49–51.

con Pietro Consagra (1980), focusing on the forms of Lonzi's existential and political refusal. In recent years, Carla Lonzi's work has been having a revival of sorts.²⁷ There are multiple reasons for this renewed interest in her life and work. In part they are justified by the necessity to reassess the relationship between Lonzi's feminist practice and her writing on art and creativity, and challenge readings that consider these two moments of Lonzi's life as separate and irreconcilable. This "missing link," to which scholar Giovanna Zapperi has dedicated a study and a book entitled *Carla Lonzi. Un'Arte della Vita* gives us a sense of the important contribution made by Lonzi to rethinking the space of creativity and artistic production. Lonzi's abandonment of art did not mean that she stopped thinking and writing about art. Rather, Zapperi read this withdrawal as suggesting a shift from the singularity of the artist toward the possibility to build a feminist community in which other forms of creativity could be experimented with. It is certainly this need to develop alternative non-commodified and non-alienating forms of organising, communing in the arts and models of cultural and artistic production that makes Lonzi's life and work still relevant today. In this chapter, I examine the traces of this collective creativity and revolt's power in the forms that Lonzi's writing take, in order to attend to the multiple and complex manifestations of Lonzi's feminist refusal as a creative practice of giving new meanings to consumed words.

In the first part of this chapter, I discuss how Lonzi's refusal of the myth of culture and the "phoney" profession of the art critic is performed in the book-montage of interviews, *Autoritratto*. Rather than speaking from the authoritative position of the art critic, in the book Lonzi situates her voice among her interlocutors and in dialogue with them, in the horizontality of the group. Lonzi had edited together interviews and fragments of recorded conversations to simulate a "*convivio*" a get-together happening in a simulated unity of time and space. In her writing Lonzi maintains the qualities of spoken language, and the off-topic wandering that happens in conversation. There are two significant details that I discuss in this section and that, I want to argue, disclose traces of refusal that pass through the choices and conscious forms of her writing. Significant is Lonzi's decision to include the questions posed to American painter Cy Twombly who answered her with silences, and her choice of including the cropped image of Thérèse de Lisieux' playing Joan d'Arc. For Lonzi, the existential void sought after by women mystics and the silences of this impossible dialogue represents the possibility for Lonzi to search for "a page which has yet to be written."²⁸ In the second part, I discuss the feminist practice of deculturalisation, of "wearing out the ties to the male culture" and the practice of *autocoscienza* in the feminist group Rivolta Femminile, as an act that negates male culture to experiment with alternative collective forms of knowledge and consciousness. In the third section, I discuss

27 For example, the many monographic studies important to recall here, including Maria Luisa Boccia's *L'io in Rivolta* [The I in Revolt] (1991), and *Con Carla Lonzi- La mia vita è la mia opera* (2014); Giovanna Zapperi's *Carla Lonzi: un'arte della vita* (2017); the collection of writings on Lonzi *La Duplice Radicalità*, (ES Edizioni, 2011); and new translations of her works, including a new French translation of *Autoritratto* [autoportrait] 2013; and *Vai pure* which has been translated into Czech and published by transit.cz. Lonzi has also been celebrated in recent events, such as the conference 'Carla Lonzi: Art Critic and Feminist' organised by the Travelling Feminism research group at the Maison Rouge in Paris (2012); the program of events *Now You Can Go* (2016) London; exhibitions at Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna di Roma, *Women Out of Join* (2018) on the occasion of the donation of her archive by her son; *Il Soggetto Imprevisto. 1978 Arte e Femminismo* in Italia at FM Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea, Milan (2019); *Doing Deculturalization* at Museion, Bozen (2019); and her work has inspired contemporary artists such as Chiara Fumai, and been shared and discussed in reading groups from the *Durational Reading Group* in London to groups in Milan, Toronto, and Berlin.

28 Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, (Bari: De Donato Editore, 1969), pp. 39–40.

Lonzi's diary, paying attention to the ways in which she conceives of the "trivial" activity of keeping a diary as a feminist creative tool of a radical self-subversion. The chapter concludes with a reading of *Vai pure*. In her dialogue with her partner, artist Pietro Consagra, Lonzi articulates her refusal of woman's reproductive role as the artist's companion who provides care, support, and sexual enjoyment, bringing the conversation to contemplate the "irreconcilable points"²⁹ of two different cultures of relations. In the dialogue, Lonzi compares Consagra's autobiography to her diary in a way that highlights two different approaches and attitudes toward creativity and towards narrativizing one's own life. Lonzi accuses Consagra of having written an autobiography in which her influence on his life remains unspoken of and hence invisible, as if their relationship had no impact on his work. Instead, Lonzi poses emphasis on the collective dimension of her work, the ways in which she had called upon the women of Rivolta to take part in the conversation acknowledging the influence of the people close to her on her life and work.

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which Lonzi's writing is an invitation addressed to women to disidentify³⁰ with male culture and its forms, including the form of the autobiography which Lonzi challenges by enacting a situated subjectivity that oscillates between 'I' and the 'we' of the feminist group, through a dialogical mode of writing. She exhorts women to disidentify with gender roles and patriarchal culture and to imagine alternative forms of expression, and a type of political speech organised around multiple and contradictory voices that are invoked to form a new feminist community. In this chapter, I attend to Lonzi's refusal of male culture through the silences of awareness and experience, that mediate the role of creativity as a form of spiritual connectedness.

1.1 The undoing of the art critic in a collective portrait: *Autoritratto*

In negotiating the details of the publication of *Autoritratto*, Carla Lonzi had proposed to use an image of Thérèse of Liseaux posing as Joan d'Arc for a play, which shows the Carmelite nun leaning against a brick wall, as if seated on a low stool, resting her head on her elbow and chained by her wrists to the wall. Thérèse appears absorbed in contemplation. She stares at the camera with her lips slightly pursed, as if in an expression of boredom or disappointment. She looks solemn and sullen, fierce and restrained; stoic, yet not without emotions. The image evokes the violence of enslavement and restrictive roles forced upon women. Yet, despite the chains of their oppression and material existence as women, in the quiet expression of Thérèse we see determination, resilience; her silent revolt against the institution of the Church. In defiance of roles that would enlist them in their own diminishment, the woman and subject of Joan of Arc—here underpinned by Thérèse—represents the struggle against subjugation at all costs, as well as those costs incurred.

29 Carla Lonzi, *Vai pure. Dialogo con Pietro Consagra*. (Milano: Prototipi. Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1980) [Reprinted by et al. Edizioni, Milan, 2011], p. 2.

30 Carla Lonzi insisted on the need to disidentify with gendered roles and in general all roles that organise and hierarchize life "Man's strength lies in his identification with culture, ours in his refusal." Carla Lonzi's process of disidentifications started with her withdrawal from the art world and her disidentification with the "phoney" profession of the art critic. It continues with her refusal to become leader of the feminist movement and finally refuses to continue reproduce the patriarchal relations in the couple. See Michèle Causse, Carla Lonzi, (interview), "Perché si sappia" in *E' già politica*, (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1977), pp. 103–109.



Image of Thérèse of Liseaux posing as Joan d'Arc.
Photo by her sister Celine. All rights reserved.

Lonzi found resonances in Thérèse's creative condition and wanted to use the photograph as a cover image for the book, a decision that she described as "spontaneous and unjustified" [*improvviso e ingiustificato*].³¹ And because she did not have a justifiable answer to her choice, her proposal was dismissed by the publisher as a "typically feminine blunder"³² [*goffaggine tipicamente femminile*] and in its place they used an image of one of Lucio Fontana's slashed canvases. The image of Thérèse instead appears inside the book in a detail of quadriptych by Giulio Paolini—commissioned by Lonzi to avoid copyright infringement—and it shows a close-up of Thérèse's face propped up by her hand as she looks directly into the camera. In this new portrait, all references—the wall, the chains, the costume and other details—are erased, and the reader is confronted with the ineffable emanation of Thérèse's steady look, neither silent nor passive.³³

Thérèse's face is tilted slightly, as if looking sideways, seeking ways out of the picture frame, her steady look makes visible the firmness of a quiet and barely perceptible refusal. It is this expression that triggered empathy and resonances in Lonzi, who was frustrated with the power mechanisms of the Italian art scene of the time and felt that her creative condition as a woman remained fundamentally unexpressed. It is in the details of Thérèse's silent expression of endurance that Lonzi's dissent with the Italian cultural scene and her subsequent withdrawal from art is prefigured. It is to the image of Thérèse as Joan d'Arc that Lonzi entrusts the expression of an idea of creativity as a life gesture.

Significant in this regard is the conversation between Lonzi and artist Carla Accardi, in which the art critic shares with the artist her fascination with the life and writing of women mystics and saints because, as she says, she recognises in herself the same desire and the same commitment to art as "an experience of existential openness."³⁴ An existential openness that, as scholar Laura Iamurri observes, is already expressed in the book in its transformation of oral expression into written text, which "is configured as a necessary passage in this search for a new page built on the traces of a thought elaborated without obstinacy, in the lightness of a conversation."³⁵ I here proceed to examine the ways in

31 In Carla Lonzi, *Itinerario di Riflessioni È già politica* (Milan: Rivolta Femminile, 1977).

32 Ibid., p. 22.

33 See Nicole Trigg, 'Being Together, Apart' in *Blind Field*, a Journal of Cultural Enquiry, (2016). Available through: <https://blindfieldjournal.com/2016/07/12/being-together-apart/> [Accessed January 2020].

34 Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto* (Bari: De Donato Editore, 1969), p. 42.

which the *Autoritratto*, in its very form and content, challenges the traditional forms and modalities of art criticism and attempts the elaboration of an idea of creativity as an existential commons.³⁶ I pay specific attention to the insertions of silences, like the image of Thérèse and, as we shall see, the silences of the artist Cy Twombly, in the montage, and what these silences tell us about Lonzi's refusal.

Published in 1969, *Autoritratto* is a transgenerational collective portrait of a group of artists who were working and living in Italy during the 1960s and '70s, but it is also the self-portrait of Lonzi seen *through* the many voices that compose the book. It collects a series of interviews and informal conversations with fourteen artists—Carla Accardi (sadly the only woman in the group), Getulio Alviani, Enrico Castellani, Pietro Consagra, Luciano Fabro, Lucio Fontana, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Nigro, Giulio Paolini, Pino Pascali, Mimmo Rotella, Salvatore Scarpitta, Giulio Turcato, and a silent Cy Twombly. Some of the interviews had already been published in specialised magazines such as *Marcatrè* and *Collage*,³⁷ whereas others were recordings of personal conversations with the artists, collected by Lonzi between 1962 and '67. Assembled during her residence in the United States between 1967–68, Lonzi transcribed and edited the material into one rolling conversation simulating, as Lonzi herself writes in her preface, “a kind of banquet” [*una specie di convivio*] happening in a supposed unity of time and space.

The composition of *Autoritratto* is crucial to an understanding of Lonzi's own critical position.³⁸ The language of art criticism was perceived by Lonzi as too contrived, and incapable of accounting for the experience of the present. To the detachment of objective and verifiable knowledge, Lonzi opts for a form of subjective engagement based on participation and dialogue. For instance, Lonzi chose to preserve the qualities of the spoken language with its ellipsis, interjections, onomatopoeia, dialectal expressions, and syntactical mistakes in a way that shifts the supposed objectivity of criticism to a more personal dimension, one which, as Zapperi observes, will be vital to her later passage to feminism.³⁹ As Lonzi explains in the preface:

- 35 Laura Iamurri 'Intorno a Autoritratto: fonti, ipotesi, riflessioni', in *Carla Lonzi: la duplice radicalità. Dalla critica militante al femminismo di Rivolta*, Studi Culturali, (Roma: Edizioni ETS, 2011), p. 71.
- 36 A feminist perspective on commons, as Silvia Federici argues, begins with the realisation that, as the primary subjects of reproductive work, historically and in our time, women have depended on access to communal natural resources more than men and have been most penalised by their privatisation and most committed to their defence. In this respect, “community” as Federici argues, “has to be intended not as a gated reality, a grouping of people joined by exclusive interests separating them from others, as with communities formed on the basis of religion or ethnicity, but rather as a quality of relations, a principle of cooperation and of responsibility to each other and to the earth, the forests, the seas, the animals.” See Silvia Federici, “Feminism and the Politics of the Commons” in *The Commoner*, January 4, 2011, available at <http://www.commoner.org.uk/?p=113>.
- 37 Carla Lonzi: *Intervista a Luciano Fabro* [Interview with Luciano Fabro] in *Marcatrè*, April 1966, pp. 375–79; Carla Lonzi and Carla Accardi, in *Marcatrè*, June, 1966 pp. 193–97; Carla Lonzi and Jannis Kounellis, in *Marcatrè*, December, 1966, pp. 130–34; Giulio Paolini in *Confronto. Cinque pittori torinesi*. [Confront. Five Artists from Turin] in *Collage*, May 1967; pp. 44–46; Carla Lonzi and Pino Pascali, in *Marcatrè*, July 1967, pp. 239–45; Carla Lonzi and Mario Nigro, in *Marcatrè*, October 1968–January 1969.
- 38 During the years of her militancy as an art critic, Lonzi showed a clear determination to stir a discussion on the future of art criticism. In an article entitled *La solitudine del Critico* [The Loneliness of the Art Critic], published in 1963 in the art magazine *Avanti!* Lonzi denounces the art critic as someone “who has accepted to assess [artistic] creation with culture,” and exercise “repressive control on art and artists.” See, Giovanna Zapperi, ‘Carla Lonzi, critica d’arte e femminista. Note introduttive’ [Carla Lonzi, art critic and feminist. Introductory Remarks], p. 3. Available through: https://www.academia.edu/4377586/Carla_Lonzi_critica_darte_e_femminista._Note_introduttive [Accessed May 2018]; Carla Lonzi, *La solitudine del critico* in *L’Avanti* (13 December, 1963).
- 39 Giovanna Zapperi, “Self-portrait of a Woman. Carla Lonzi's Autoritratto” in Laurent Schmid et al. (eds.), *Laptop Radio. La radio siamo noi*, Geneva, HEAD - Link editions 2019. Translated from French by Jason Francis Mc Gimsey, p.57. In *Carla Lonzi, Autoportrait*, translated from Italian by Marie-Ange Marie-Vigueur, edited and prefaced by Giovanna Zapperi, Paris-Zurich, JRP Ringier, 2012, pp. 7–35.
- 40 Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto* (Bari: De Donato Editore, 1969), p. 31.

This book does not intend to suggest a fetishisation of the artist, but to call [the artist] back to a different relationship with society, denying the social role, and thus the power, of the critic as repressive control over art and artists, and especially as bearer of an ideology of art and of artists that is developing in our society.⁴⁰

Important here is to highlight the quality of the “call” of this book; as an invitation to express a different relationship with society. In *Autoritratto*, Lonzi questions the “phoney” profession of the art critic as “a point of distortion where the work of art loses the power which other people it could connect to, so to say, to come closer to art.”⁴¹ The book is an attempt to bridge this gap between artist, art critic and spectator, between art and life, and question the art critic’s reproduction of a system that produces exclusions, hierarchies and power relations. Lonzi’s desire to remain closer to the artist’s life and creative process influences the form the book. As Carla Accardi questions, “So, your effort to make this book which you are composing with disordered pieces... you want to get closer, closer right?”⁴² The form of the conversation allows the critic to “become part of,” to be one of the interlocutors, rather than remaining, as Pietro Consagra says in the book, “on the threshold without ever going in.”⁴³ Instead, *Autoritratto* is a book that precisely crosses this threshold of professional relations to engage the artists in meaningful relationships.

On the other hand, through the cross-editing in *Autoritratto*⁴⁴ Lonzi brings a polyphony of voices and perspectives together, in a way that, as Francesco Ventrella suggests, brings the artists and Lonzi closer to themselves in an attempt to “evacuate” the “melancholic isolation of the genius artist by means of a technologically induced resonance.”⁴⁵ Through the montage, Lonzi makes a book that is not “about” something, but instead records a series of encounters, thus sharing in the creative process. That’s why the book often wanders off topic, moving erratically, jumping between subjects and making long detours. In the preface, Lonzi explains that, “I wanted to make a book that rumbles a bit, a book which jumps from one topic to another.”⁴⁶ *Autoritratto*, as Zapperi observes, is “resolutely undisciplined and anti-disciplinary.” By abandoning the more traditional monographic book which focuses on the artist’s unique perspective, it opens to “a scattering of the artist in an array of often discordant voices,”⁴⁷ which privileges the “process”—the improvisation of a thought made in collaboration, like in the intimate encounter during a studio-visit or over an intimate dinner. The book attempts to invoke the experience of the creative process⁴⁸ as

41 Ibid., p. 34.

42 Ibid., p. 40.

43 Ibid., p. 41.

44 The title of the book seems to have been suggested to Lonzi by artist Carla Accardi who in one of the conversations remarks: “So, I was saying about this little portrait of the art critic (*ritrattino del critico*), yeah, that you can use ‘little portrait of the art critic’ as title... ah!... ah!... because this is it.” Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto* (Bari: De Donato Editore, 1969), p. 30.

45 Francesco Ventrella, “Carla Lonzi’s Art Writing and the Resonance of Separatism” in *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 21:3 (2014), p. 284.

46 Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, p. 22.

47 La radio siamo noi, Geneva, HEAD–Link editions 2019, 2019. Translated from French by Jason Francis Mc Gimsey, p.15. In Carla Lonzi, *Autoportrait*, translated from Italian by Marie-Ange Marie-Vigueur, edited and prefaced by Giovanna Zapperi, Paris-Zurich, JRP Ringier, 2012, pp. 7–35.

48 This process-oriented approach resonates with the artistic experiments of that time. Georgina Bertolino observed that a parallel can be drawn between “Lonzi’s use of writing as a device used outside the traditional literary and art historical canons,” and conceptual artist Giulio Paolini’s “rejection—as he writes in 1965—of more traditional forms and artistic materials (like shape and colour).” Georgina Bertolino, ‘Carla Lonzi: Discorsi’ in *Carla Lonzi: la duplice radicalità. Dalla critica militante al femminismo di Rivolta*, Studi Culturali, (Roma: Edizioni ETS, 2011), p. 60.

a collaborative one, where creativity is not relegated to the art object but becomes an infectious force that transforms relations. This is reflected in the dialogical and open form of the book, and makes itself immediately apparent in the very first exchanges that open the book:

Lucio Fontana: What would you like me to say if you don't tell me what to talk about... what should I say, more or less... You need to ask me questions, more or less... provoke.

Carla Lonzi: Let's start from a point, any point... I only wish to...

Pino Pascali: I would prefer a topic... Ah...! Ah...!⁴⁹

The book's opening exchange between the artists and Lonzi already discloses its character: a wandering full of turns, detours, hesitations, without goals or expectations. It also immediately makes clear, between the lines and in the rhythm of the broken sentences, Lonzi's refusal to assign a name, an order, or impose a topic of discussion. She is not afraid of this moment of hesitation when the conversation has not yet taken known paths. The artists' words appear more impatient, already falling into established paths, waiting to be addressed by the art critic. In the "unnecessary" ellipsis, signalling the pauses in speech, resides Lonzi's refusal, a silent "no" that resists established conventions, norms, and roles. "I only wish" and again a pause: we cannot know what she wishes. What we are given is that Lonzi had a wish, which is the book the reader holds in her hands. Her wish, however, is not fully articulated. Lonzi and the artists converse about art, politics, economy and private life, their interests and practices, about the hegemony of the US art market, the political events of '68, women's conditions, the Black American struggles for civil rights, and political and cultural life in Italy at the time.

Lonzi kept the quotidian qualities of these conversations in the book—even amplifying them, showing how art is not linked to exceptional capacities, but a process of paying attention to the insignificant details of experiences and marginal thoughts. For instance, Op-artist Getulio Alviani, who designed and produced dynamic-optical structures and plastic objects, speaks of the relationship between nature and function in his practice in these terms, "I am for a totally functional life in every aspect, like toilettes, no?" Artist Pino Pascali, who made playful sculptures of jungle animals out of domestic and everyday material, discloses the inspiration for his work, and his fascination with the sea, sea creatures and rocks, "I like sea rocks, and around the sea rocks there is sea, when I was a child I used to play there, I was born close to the sea, don't get me started [...] truly, a bird, I found myself in touch with a creature which is not driven by calculus, you understand, it existed before me, and it has the same presence, the same life force, and my same nature."⁵⁰ In conversation with Lonzi, Pascali, whose work has often been compared to the soft objects of Claes Oldenburg, discloses the places, memories and experiences that have influenced his practice.

Lonzi maintains the erratic movement of the thinking in various conversations, preserving the way they jump from topic to topic and the qualities of their spoken language close to experience: simple and direct modes of address, broken syntax and grammatical mistakes, pauses and interruptions. Archival photographs interrupt the flow of the text. Of the hundred and five black and white photographs interspersed in the book only nineteen

49 Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto* (1969), p. 11.

50 *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

are reproductions of artworks and installations. The rest come from personal archives: self-portraits, and images depicting the artists, their families and friends, or photographs of Lonzi and her son. Even in the installation shots, as Iamurri⁵¹ observes, the presence of the viewer and the artist, on the one hand, point to the performative and the atmospheric nature of many of the works, and on the other, add a temporal dimension as the image becomes a “document of an unrepeatable moment;” in many cases a moment in the life of Carla Lonzi, during the opening of an exhibition, or in the studio of the artist. Lonzi attempts to overcome the distance that places her in the position of the passive spectator, by, as she admits to Accardi, “exploring the person directly, rather than through his/her work.”⁵² She did not simply desire intimacy with the artists and their works; she wanted to be recognised as a creative person to bridge what she felt was a gap, perpetuated by the art critic, between creativity in the narrow sense of the term, as creation of artefacts and objects, and an expanded idea of creativity as “a kind of creative attention, an infectious, emancipatory framework for engaging one another and the world that always starts at zero.”⁵³

A significant detail here is Lonzi’s choice to include in the conversation her questions to and the silences of the absence of response of American painter Cy Twombly. Lonzi had attempted to interview the artist, who lived in Italy most of his life, and to this end had prepared a series of rather wordy, convoluted questions which betrayed a certain stifling academicism in her language. The intellectualism emanating from Lonzi’s questions stands in stark contrast to the personal tone of the conversations included in the book. For instance, Lonzi asks, “You choose the titles of your works carefully: *The Athens School*, *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, *Love and Psyche*, which recall the subjects of the Italian Renaissance school. On the other hand, antiquity with its myths has seen a resurgence of interest after psychoanalysis. Are you aware of this link, right?”⁵⁴ In the preface, Lonzi explains that some of these questions “are still colored by my precedent attitude regarding the artist [...] they carry the echo of an academic, but graceful, language.”⁵⁵ Twombly was known for refusing to talk about his work and himself and for the ways in which he had kept himself at a distance from the art world. Lonzi’s decision to include her questions and his silences in the book are significant.

The same year of the publication of *Autoritratto*, 1969, a collection of essays by Susan Sontag entitled *Styles of Radical Will* was published. In the essay opening the book called *The Aesthetic of Silence*⁵⁶ (1967), Sontag examined the use of silence in the context of modern art—from the artist’s refusal to speak to his audience and in terms of formal reduction (ex. Minimalism)—and how it discloses both a spiritual aspect, as a zone of contemplation and consciousness, and a provocative aspect, since silence is the furthest extension of a reluctance to communicate; the ability to negate art’s relationship with its audience, its history and the existent reality. Sontag highlights the contradiction at the heart of the artist’s desire to remain silent, first because the artist continues to speak through the artistic

51 Laura Iamurri, “Un Mestiere Fasullo:” note su *Autoritratto* di Carla Lonzi in Maria Antonietta Trasforini (ed.), *Donne d’arte. Storie e generazioni*, (Milano: Meltemi, 2006).

52 Carla Lonzi, *Taci anzi parla. Diario di una Femminista*, (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta, 1978), p. 771.

53 Nicole Trigg, “Being Together, Apart” in *Blind Field, a journal of cultural enquiry*. Available through: <https://blindfieldjournal.com/2016/07/12/being-together-apart/>. [Accessed May 2018].

54 Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, p. 11.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

56 Susan Sontag, “The Aesthetic of Silence” in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1969). The collection of essays, *Styles of Radical Will*, was published the same year of *Autoritratto* in 1969.

gestures (“more typically, he continues speaking but in a manner that his audience can’t hear”⁵⁷) and second because silence implies a dialogue, thus it communicates too.

In *Autoritratto*, Twombly’s reluctance to communicate can be read, through Sontag, as the artist’s desire to sever the dialogue he has with an audience, the “chronic habit of displeasing, provoking, or frustrating its audience,” that, Sontag writes, has been elevated to a “major standard of seriousness.” Silence, Sontag argues, pushes art to search for a form of communication that disrupts and frustrates the expectation of the audience, that poses questions rather than offering answers.

Unlike the “seriousness” of Cy Twombly’s silence, Lonzi turns silence, as a gesture of self-forgetfulness, into a possibility for a dialogue. As Sontag explains in an essay in 1969, silence is relational—it implies and depends on the presence of its opposite, “emptiness must produce something dialectical,” she writes, “a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence.”⁵⁸ Silence, Sontag argues, is also a way of steering attention, of calling it into question. The silence of Twombly allows the reader to pay attention to the language used by Lonzi—the elegant academicism which she rejects in the book. Silence as a form of paying attention becomes a form of speech, the possibility of a dialogue that pays attention to what is softly intimated in the relation between the questions and the absence of answers. The blank spaces opened by Twombly’s answered question hint at Lonzi’s desire for a new page yet to be written, in dialogue and collaboration.

Lonzi’s conscious choice to include Twombly’s silences open a space for contemplation, a pause between the action of speaking together, and open the possibility of asking questions. In keeping these questions in the book, Lonzi allows this silence to speak for itself, and allows the reader to witness the process through which she had slowly disengaged from a language of theory that would remain in fashion in Italian art history and criticism for a long time to come. At the same time, however, it also anticipates Lonzi’s own detachment and refusal of the silence of the artist who disengages from society, a refusal of the silence of artistic creation.

For Lonzi, art is the possibility of a dialogue, and thus her silence can only be one that breaks free from the legitimatory discourse of culture and attempts to go beyond the given and what is restrictive by adopting the silence of contemplation as the possibility to speak—the same way that mystics did in their longing for an anti-consciousness that takes a different form of consciousness;⁵⁹ a negation that opens the space for another kind of communication and a different understanding of creativity as spiritual connectedness.

In *Autoritratto*, the seeds of Lonzi’s feminist refusal are already discernible. Hers is a refusal that is not so much a withdrawal into silence, but generative of a force that produces a different mode of addressing each other, of writing and speaking. It is in the details of Cy Twombly’s silences, in the breaks between different threads of conversation, in the “...,” the spaces left blank by an interruption, a change of topic, I want to argue, that Lonzi’s negation articulates itself as a refusal to speak in the professionalised language of art criticism. It is, importantly, also her refusal as a woman and militant art critic to remain silent.

Autoritratto’s dialogical form allows multiple voices, viewpoints, and registers of speaking to emerge against the centrality of the authorial voice. The book proceeds from a place of rupture with respect to genres and the conventions of art criticism. This sense of

57 Ibid., p. 3.

58 Ibid., p. 11.

59 Ibid.

rupture is further evoked by the appearance of a Lucio Fontana's slashed canvas on the book's cover. Its image draws the viewer into the space beyond the surface of the canvas, a record of the force of a destructive gesture that keeps both creative and destructive elements in tension. Lonzi's disruptive gesture gives birth to a fragmented, layered, cumulative and non-linear narrative where personal, political and aesthetic concerns and art and life are entwined.

By opening up the space of the text to a multiplicity of voices and perspectives, Lonzi attempts to reorganise the field of relations between artist and critic, and move closer to the artist. However, the search for this intimacy involved a reformulation of the very idea of creativity as a transformative practice.⁶⁰ *Autoritratto* challenges the idea of art as an exclusive commodity and a commodifiable identity, and insists on a dispersed and horizontal idea of creativity that does not separate artist and spectator.⁶¹ While Lonzi comes to represent art as a patriarchal⁶² myth, *Autoritratto* had been conceived by Lonzi as a textual intervention into the space of art and social relations that would redefine relations between artist and spectator toward an understanding of creativity as a life-practice. Lonzi understood that to be able to change the colonised concepts of creativity and the field of art criticism, it is necessary to transform the languages and epistemological approach to art. Her withdrawal from the art world is a refusal to be incorporated and reproduce the hierarchies between artist and art critic and the power dynamics and gendered-based discriminations in the art world. The blank spaces that Lonzi introduces in *Autoritratto* also hint at the silence of someone who said it all, and has nothing else to add on the matter. This is significantly echoed by the words of Carla Accardi which close the book: "Now... I want [to address] this question woman-man, and that's all. One day one says 'no, there isn't much of a problem.' No, no, no. The next morning I wake up and the problem is still there."⁶³ Accardi's words thus anticipate a new manner of speaking, one which refuses the isolating silence of the artist, and contemplates the possibility to reformulate an idea of creativity as a transformative practice that "invested the female subject within a collective dynamics."⁶⁴ The silence of contemplation is one which Lonzi inherits from women mystics and which, as we shall see in the rest of this chapter, compels Lonzi to enter her interior world, without the distraction of conversation, where the words on the page began to speak directly to her inner self, without the mediation of the institution of art.

1.2 *Rivolta Femminile* and the practice of deculturalisation

In 1970, together with the artist Carla Accardi and writer Elvira Banotti, Lonzi founded feminist group *Rivolta Femminile*. The group made its first public appearance with a mani-

60 Federica Bueti, Giovanna Zapperi, 'Finding Resonances with Carla Lonzi' in *Makhzin.org* Issue 2: Feminisms, (interview), (April 2016). Available through: www.makhzin.org/issues/feminisms/finding-resonance-with-carla-lonzi.

61 For a discussion of *Autoritratto* and Lonzi's idea of creativity see also Victoria Home, Lara Perry, *Feminism and Art History Now: Radical Critiques of Theory and Practice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Giovanna Zapperi, *Carla Lonzi. Un'Arte della Vita*, (Roma, IT: Derive-Approdi, 2017).

62 In *Carla Lonzi. Un'arte della vita* (2017), Giovanna Zapperi writes, "Art is configured as a patriarchal myth, becoming one of the nodal points which offered Lonzi the possibility to give voice to her own search of an identity." In Giovanna Zapperi, "Un autoritratto tutto per sé: Carla Lonzi and Carla Accardi." Available through: <http://www.euronomade.info/?p=1901>. [Accessed May 2018].

63 Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto* (1969), p. 394.

64 Federica Bueti, Giovanna Zapperi, 'Finding Resonances with Carla Lonzi' in *Makhzin.org* Issue 2: Feminisms, (interview), (April 2016). Available through: www.makhzin.org/issues/feminisms/finding-resonance-with-carla-lonzi.

festo, later posted up on Rome's city wall. In the manifesto, which was likely written by Lonzi herself, Rivolta asserted its identity as a separatist group and expressed its opposition to an idea of "equality" between women and men which they perceived as "a legalised oppression and a world of one-dimensionality... what is offered as legal rights to colonised people. And what is imposed on them as culture."⁶⁵ To the hypocrisy of a system in which equality means to continue reproducing the same power dynamics, in which women are "at once captive and absent in discourse, constantly spoken of but of themselves inaudible or inexpressible, displayed as spectacle and yet unrepresented,"⁶⁶ the women of Rivolta Femminile responded by calling for a disidentification with the existing patriarchal culture. For Lonzi, what is at stake in feminist struggles was not only better visibility and access to power positions, but the less visible ways in which oppression manifests in the words, gestures and insignificant details that reproduce life daily. Creativity is the battleground for this struggle against patriarchal culture. From being considered a potential space of emancipation, art becomes "the myth of the penis." If, in *Autoritratto*, Lonzi had believed in the possibility of finding in the artist an ally and an example of autonomy, this illusion faded once the artists did not want to renounce to their privilege, and Lonzi's attitude towards artists and art changed as she came to identify it with the patriarchal myth. In her diary, Lonzi writes about the artist as: "the creative person, seemingly giving to others, in fact takes away from them the possibility of finding a centre in themselves and of aiming for their own liberation. The artist accepts the reflex of a liberation which he himself has offered."⁶⁷ In what she perceives to be a lack of dialogue and reciprocity, Lonzi renounces the kind of liberation offered by the artist, and embodies a form of creativity rooted in self-expression.

Soon after the publication of their manifesto, Rivolta started its own publishing house *Scritti di Rivolta* [writings of revolt], which published the writing of the women of the group, including Lonzi's theoretical essays such as *Let's Spit on Hegel* and *La Donna Clitoridea and La Donna Vaginale* [the clitoridian woman and the vaginal woman],⁶⁸ and her diary. *Scritti di Rivolta* published two distinct series, "*Prototipi*" [prototypes], dedicated to texts that engaged in a dialogue with the male culture⁶⁹ and "*Libretti Verdi*" [green books—from the green colour of their covers], edited by Lonzi.⁷⁰

Rivolta Femminile was a feminist separatist group, a choice that was meant to create a safe space where women could talk and share their stories and experiences freely. But, from the perspective of Lonzi, it also meant a radical refusal to join politics, culture, and art—all activities that she saw as deeply toxic and compromised in perpetuating women's oppression. This produced tensions within the group, which eventually brought an end to the friendship between Carla Lonzi and fellow member Carla Accardi.⁷¹ Rivolta Femminile

65 Carla Lonzi, *Let's Spit on Hegel*. Trans. by Veronica Newman, reprinted in Bono and Kemp, *Italian Feminist Thought: A reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 41.

66 Teresa de Lauretis, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Political Practice*. Trans. by Patricia Cicogna and Teresa de Lauretis, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

67 Carla Lonzi, *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una femminista* (Milan: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1978), pp. 31–32. My translation.

68 Ibid.

69 Maria Luisa Boccia, foreword to the new edition of *Let's Spit on Hegel*, (Milano: et al. edizioni, 2011).

70 As Maria Luisa Boccia observes, "Lonzi will put much energies in curating the series [of *Libretti Verdi*] and to retrace writing by women, expanding the area of interest beyond feminism." In Maria Luisa Boccia, *L'Io in Rivolta. Vissuto e Pensiero di Carla Lonzi* (Milano: La Tartaruga Edizioni, 1990), p. 204. Translation mine.

71 For a discussion of the friendship between Lonzi and Accardi see Giovanna Zapperi, *Carla Lonzi. Un'Arte della Vita* (Roma, IT: Derive-Approdi, 2017).

also refused any affiliation with leftist political groups and put into question socialist ideals and other revolutionary ideologies which did not foresee the liberation of women as an important aspect of the revolutionary struggle. This is a crucial aspect of Lonzi's radical feminist practice as a form of scepticism toward the tools and instruments offered by the existing culture. In *Let's Spit on Hegel*, this is articulated by Lonzi with great lucidity and power when she writes:

Our mode of action is deculturalisation. [...] It affirms the lack of any need for ideology at all. Women have countered the constructions of men simply with their own existential dimension: They have not had leaders, thinkers or scientists, but they have had energy, insight, courage, dedication, application, sense and madness. All traces of these things have been erased because they were never meant to last; but our strength lies in not having a mythic view of facts. To act is not the specialised task of some particular caste, although it becomes so when the purpose of action is the achievement and the consolidation of power. Men have mastered this mechanism to perfection; and since it is a mechanism which is justified culturally, to reject male culture is to reject the achievements of power as a basis for the assessment of actions.⁷²

Lonzi sets a clear task for herself and the women of the group, one which implies a rupture, a departure, a refusal of using the Master's tools as the only possibility for liberation. Instead, she exhorts women to use the tools offered to them by their own existential condition: their energy, insights, courage, dedication, application, sense and madness; the knowledges acquired through the examination of unexamined emotions and feelings. If it is true that in the history of Western philosophy and culture women had been othered, silenced, and (as psychoanalysis has it) lacking, Lonzi's feminist project turns women's sense of dispossession into the possibility for liberation.

Deculturalisation has its tools in the feminist practice of *autocoscienza* and in writing. Like consciousness raising sessions, the Italian *autocoscienza* involved small groups of women sitting together and discussing "issues of all kinds on the basis of personal experience."⁷³ However, the peculiarity of the Italian version of consciousness raising, as Teresa de Laurentis has pointed out, is the emphasis on self-analysis, on the individual, self-induced, self-determined, or self-directed character of this process of achieving consciousness⁷⁴ as a political subjectivity in the collective space of the group.⁷⁵ The group was a space of sharing, but also of confrontation and resonance. Giovanna Zapperi has recently argued, *autocoscienza* is perhaps "the most significant attempt to imagine a feminist autonomous space based on dialogue, horizontality and collective empowerment,"⁷⁶ that refuses hierarchies and opens to a new culture of relations.

72 Carla Lonzi, *Let's Spit on Hegel*, p. 14.

73 Paola Bono, Sandra Kemp, "Coming from the South," in *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 9.

74 In Teresa de Laurentis *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Political Practice*, trans. by Patricia Cicogna and Teresa de Laurentis, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

75 See Also Maria Luisa Boccia *L'Io in Rivolta. Vissuto e Pensiero di Carla Lonzi* (Milano: La Tartaruga Edizioni, 1990), pp. 195–96.

76 Federica Buetti, Giovanna Zapperi, 'Resonating with Carla Lonzi. Federica Buetti with Giovanna Zapperi'. *Mahkzin journal*, issue on Feminisms, 2:1, (March, 2016). Available through: <http://www.mahkzin.org/issues/feminisms/finding-resonances-with-carla-lonzi>.

Central to *autocoscienza* is the practice of *a partire da sé*: to start from oneself or to speak from one's own experience. In an essay titled *Espressione di sé e cultura* [self-expression and culture] one of the women of the group, Anna Jacquinta, sharply describes this search for a new language and a new form of expression. In this difficult process of abandoning the influences of culture on her life, such as the already acquired habits of the writer, Jacquinta writes that in the practices of the feminist group, writing becomes an exercise that “transforms language from an alienating mask to a means of expression, from a monologue that imposes listening, to the offer of a dialogue.”⁷⁷ It is in this passage from the expression of the singularity of the individual to an invitation to a dialogue, that writing as a literary activity is transformed into a feminist practice. As we shall see in the rest of this study, one aspect that characterises the works of the group of women writers are the ways in which they understand writing in dialogical and relational terms; as a practice of reading and listening that invokes the presences of all others whose contribution is acknowledged in the form of a dedication.

The practice of listening is central to *autocoscienza*, and is expressed by Lonzi in the idea of “resonance” as a collective dynamic that invests the individual. In the essay *Il Significato dell'autocoscienza nei gruppi femministi* (The meaning of *autocoscienza* in the feminist groups), 1974, Lonzi explains that, “the *autocoscienza* of a woman is incomplete if it stops at and is not confirmed in the *autocoscienza* of another woman.”⁷⁸ Instead of focusing on the process of identification among women, the practice of resonance implies a relationship through which two women can recognise each other in their differences as autonomous subjectivities. Resonance occurs when one of two objects, vibrating at a natural frequency, forces the other object to vibrate at a frequency higher than its natural frequency, producing a sound as a result of this vibration. It is meaningful that Lonzi uses the metaphor of resonance to describe that process of mutual recognition by which each woman emerges as an autonomous viewpoint in the world and each woman can elaborate her subjectivity in what Zapperi has accurately described as “a feminist autonomous space based on dialogue, horizontality and collective empowerment.”⁷⁹ Writing becomes another place not only where these resonances are examined and elaborated, but as Lonzi's diary shows, the book itself becomes a resonating body for other women across times and spaces. Lonzi's diary records the salient moments of an existential resonance which unsettles and challenges the stability of accepted conventions and norms, social roles and ways of life, and in the form of a more than 1,300 pages, becomes the shared material for a revolt that starts from within and against oneself.

1.3 Standing Beside Yourself: Carla Lonzi's *scrittura autocoscienziale*

Women dare to show the outcome of their thinking, but not the drama of their lives. Not even to themselves (Neppure a sé stesse). I am interested in the way, through which passages of experience (passaggi di esperienza) which gestures,

⁷⁷ Anna Jacquinta, 'Espressione di sé e cultura' in *E' già politica*, (Milan: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1977), p. 68.

⁷⁸ Carla Lonzi, *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una femminista*, (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile), p. 35.

⁷⁹ In conversation with the author.

tones, decisions, conflicts one arrives at given conclusions [...] If one searches for the squaring of the circle, namely if one accepts a preconstituted form to fit one's own form, self-expression does not take shape.⁸⁰

Finding new words and developing a voice to speak of one's experience as woman becomes, as one of the women of Rivolta Femminile, Anna Iaquina writes, a process of unlearning consolidated habits and knowledges, prevalent modes of writing and listening, and engaging in a general process of undoing concepts, ideas, and forms of expression that the women of Rivolta Femminile considered colonised by patriarchy. In this section, through *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una femminista*, I want to argue that the diary is not only the record of Lonzi's process of *autocoscienza* but that the book itself becomes an invitation to other women to do the same, to engage in this creative process of self-undoing that is open to the possibility of creating communities, and engages alternative forms of sociality in a collective experiment.

In her work on Lonzi's oeuvre, writer Maria Luisa Boccia speaks of "*scrittura autocoscienziale*" to describe Lonzi's dialogical mode of semi-autobiographical yet depersonalised writing, through which she explores the space of inter-subjective relationships.⁸¹ Interestingly, despite the obvious stylistic differences and the different intentions that guide the two publications, both *Autoritratto* and the diary share Lonzi's interest in the possibilities offered by the literary montage, the qualities of the spoken language, the repetition, the incomplete sentences and interruptions. While *Autoritratto*'s dialogue is in multiple voices, the diary is an internal dialogue in several voices written as a series of "encounters" which shape Lonzi's voice as a political subjectivity and that presents itself as multiple, contradictory, open and the result of a collective endeavour.



Jacqueline Vodoz, Carla Lonzi with a friend, mid-1970s. ©Fondazione Jacqueline Vodoz e Bruno Danese, Milano. All rights reserved.

80 Carla Lonzi, *Armande sono io*, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, Milano, 1992.

81 Adriana Cavarero explains that autobiographies are always *given to us by others*: "the identity of the self, crystallised in the story, is totally constituted by the relations of her appearance to others in the world." Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. Trans. and with an introduction by Paul A. Kottman, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

In the preface of her diary, Lonzi explains that “in the book I speak of relationships, not people.”⁸² In the 1,305 pages that compose the diary, and which record a period between 1972 and 1977, Lonzi invokes the presence of her interlocutors⁸³ who offer her insights into her own life; *Taci, anzi parla* is more than a simple private journal or an autobiography. It is, as the subtitle of the book declares, “a feminist diary.” Lonzi turns the private and solitary activity of writing a diary into a tool of self-subversion. The diary becomes a form of collective narration, as Lonzi measures her experience in relation to her interlocutors: her friends and family, her sister, Marta; her partner, artist Pietro Consagra; her artist friends; Italian intellectuals of the time such as, for instance, Pier Paolo Pasolini. But more than anyone else, her addressee is the women of Rivolta Femminile, who are called upon to take part in this dialogue.

The diary is a heterogeneous body of writing in which Carla Lonzi attempts to negotiate the terms of her own existence as a woman and find a direct form of expression, a voice that is simultaneously autobiographical, yet depersonalised; theoretical, yet deeply rooted in experience. The diary is carefully edited by Lonzi, who chooses her words so that they can remain expressions of a singularity that emerges within the common material of grammar and words. However, this singularity is not unified; it presents itself as a multiplicity of different fragments, like the montage of the diary made of essayistic reflections, unsent letters, citations, old writing, diary entries, poems, transcripts of dialogues, dreams, which are organised according to the size of their font.⁸⁴ The choice of the literary montage is significant as it offers Lonzi the possibility of presenting a temporary totality composed of different fragments held together by gaps, breaks, cuts, ellipsis, silences and intervals that give meanings to the moments that Lonzi recalls, as they offer the writer the possibility of disclosing the motivating force and forms of dynamism that animated and held together the ensemble of social relations that are invoked in the diary.

By transcribing the conversations and her thoughts, Lonzi literally traces the unfolding of her consciousness, as if in retracing the various stages of her process of *autocoscienza*. At the same time, in her attempt to “objectify” her consciousness in the materiality of both words and the book, Lonzi makes the process of her *autocoscienza* available to other women in the near and far future. The publication of *Taci, anzi parla* can be considered a form of textual intervention into the collective space of the feminist group. As the title of the diary suggests, *Taci, anzi parla* [shut up. Or, rather speak], is a speech act,⁸⁵ an exhortation and invitation addressed to other women to speak up, to make their voices heard.

At the same time, while being addressed to others, the speech act “taci, anzi parla,” is also a note to the self, a maxim that performs the function of an admonition addressed to the self as other, and to all other selves. In other words, the diary seems to be invested with the power to speak back to Lonzi reminding her of what she has set out to do, that is to speak as woman *with* other women.⁸⁶ Agency, in this case, does not only belong to the

82 Carla Lonzi, *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una femminista*, p. 7.

83 Despite having assigned them fictitious identities, they are recognisable: Simone, Sara, Ester, Nicola, Riccardo are the generic names for her partner Pietro Consagra, her friends Carla Accardi, Elvira Banotti, her sister Marta.

84 Lonzi explains in a note that, “the diary strictly speaking has been written in a larger font; the latter [smaller font] has been used in the case of dreams, letters, citations, old writing, poems et al., All the letters transcribed here, if not otherwise stated, have not been sent.” Lonzi, C. (1978), *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una Femminista* [shut up. Or rather, speak: diary of a feminist], (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1978), p. 9.

85 I am here referring to the performative aspect of language. Speech acts can be requests, warnings, invitations, promises, predictions and the like.

86 The diary opens with a moment of resonance between Lonzi and Sara. In a diary entry Lonzi writes, “1–4 August, Macari (Trapani), 1972. Another woman, Clitoridian, has recognised me as woman, Clitoridian, at the same time as I acknowledged her in the same terms.” Carla Lonzi, *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una Femminista*, (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1978), p. 13.

writer, but writing is given agency, the power to act on Lonzi's (she speaks of "self-objectification") as much as on other women's consciousness. The diary records Lonzi's experiences, but as a body of experiences and an object that records Lonzi's *autocoscienza*, it can be of use to other women who might come across it at a relevant time in their lives.

What the diary *does* is set the reader up for a profound experience: after undergoing the process of reading the full volume, for instance, I experienced what Lonzi would call "resonance" in Lonzi's words and struggle. In her velleities, her ambitions and passions, her love for truth and justice, her mistakes and misjudgments, the pain and loneliness of her process of coming to consciousness of her condition as a woman in a society that did not recognise her desire for living a life without a frame, I recognised something of my own life and experience as woman and art critic working in the arts and coming to consciousness of herself as political subject.

Taci, anzi parla, transforms the sense of alienation and incommunicability into a necessity to communicate differently and a possibility to speak as the endeavour of emptying the name woman from any identification or identity, even a feminist one: "all distinctions, and categories that were [an] expression of the construction of my identity," writes Lonzi in the diary, "to start with my dissent—I couldn't see another woman as woman—[they] do not belong to me anymore."⁸⁷ The diary testifies how the journey made possible by Lonzi's refusal—of either an alienated existence or the abdication of her body under conditions of patriarchy—is a painful process that involves loss, disorientation, and is without reassurances.

In the preface of the diary Lonzi refers to the process of writing as an experience of self-objectification to describe the process of detachment that explodes the self into a myriad of expressions of consciousness that cannot be summed up into one single identity. This process of self-objectification is as disturbing as it is transformative. The diary becomes "a treasure of findings; findings from which there is no going back." Here Lonzi's words bear a striking resemblance to those of Beguine Margerite Porete who, in *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, writes "After a Soul has entered the Land of Freedom, there is no going back."⁸⁸ In *The Mirror of Simple Soul*, Porete traces the step of her process of self-annihilation through which the mystic discloses the resonances of goodness in the world, in the minute and insignificant details and objects of everyday life which become a reflective mirror of a life force that does not separate and make hierarchies of being.

The experience of non-duality in Porete's mystic path to self-annihilation—revolutionary in the context of the theological debates of the time as it refused the mediatory discourse of theology and of the Church in favour of an apophatic writing that pays attention to the correspondences and traces of the "divine" in the world—I want to argue, resonates with Lonzi's desire to undo institutionalised gestures and ideas, and refuse the mediation offered by culture, and disidentify with the image of the self in which she did not feel reflected, in order to make room for the emergence of a subject continuously made and unmade by relations.

87 Liliana Ellena "Carla Lonzi e il neo-femminismo radicale degli anni '70: disfare la cultura, disfare la politica" in *Carla Lonzi: la duplice radicalità. Dalla critica militante al femminismo di Rivolta*, Studi Culturali, (Roma: Edizioni ETS, 2011), pp.134-35.

88 As quoted by Barbara Newman in "Annihilation and Authorship: Three Women Mystics of the 1290s" in *Speculum—A Journal of Medieval Studies* Vol. 91–3 (July 2016). Available through: <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/686939?mobileUi=0&>. [Accessed January 2020].

However, Lonzi's process of self-undoing does not seek union with the divine. Instead, Lonzi's diary attends to the possibility to undo and transcend the limitations of a culture which continuously objectified and vilified women, by undoing its discourse and forms, by refusing to reproduce established social roles and norms. The significance of this questioning is expressed in the words of the poem that gives the title to the diary. In an entry dated January 30, 1973, Lonzi transcribes an old poem comprising of a series of questions addressed to her sister, Marta. It reads:

Sister, where are you, my sister?
Are you playing piano
Or translating Plato? Are you feeding
The children or roaming the shops
Absentmindedly? The skirt you bought
Don't you like it? Are you undecided about its colour?
The concert begins, ends
The meeting, the train departs,
Comes a friend from London,
A friend of Sandro. Were you waiting for me?
Ah, you are busy.
I find you pallid, although
I see that you eat. The oldest interrupts
Always, the same the youngest.
Do you truly answer to everything?
You neglect nothing about them?
You want them to be happy with the most
Exceptional mother, all for themselves?
Is it enough for you to be an exceptional mother?
And as a sister, friend and the rest?
Why do you hang up the phone? Did you
Not suffer enough solitude?
And me? Do you know me? Do you care? Do you count on me?
Or, it does not matter... Shut up. Or, rather speak.⁸⁹

The repetitive questioning is as relentless and oppressive as the multiple social roles and types of work that Marta performs in her daily life to fit in the context of an ideal of bourgeois family in a patriarchal society. In the poem, Lonzi addresses Marta about the meaning of all her commitments, of the social roles she embodies, and the sense and meaning of her doing. She asks her sister if she is happy to fulfil her duties as architect, teacher, mother, wife. Lonzi, who had refused her social and professional position,⁹⁰ wonders if her sister has time for herself, beside taking care of others; and also if she ever thinks about her

89 Carla Lonzi, *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una Femminista* (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1978), pp. 247–48.

90 It should be noted here that Lonzi's refusal to work is a part of the larger protest movements that emerged in Italy in the '60s and '70s. philosopher Paolo Virno writes, "One of the primary slogans of the movements was "the refusal of work," which did not mean a refusal of creative or productive activity but rather a refusal of work within the established capitalist relations of production. [...] Self-valorisation was thought of as the building block for constructing a new form of sociality, a new society." In Paolo Virno, "The Ambivalence of Enchantment" in Paolo Virno, Michael Hardt, (eds.), *Radical Thought in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

sister. The line “is it enough for you to be an exceptional mother?” resounds harshly as words of resentment and disappointment, but are also entrenched in a strange sense of Lonzi’s superiority; or better, words moved by an unsettling anger and necessity to know, by which Lonzi both disidentifies with her sister and calls forth her presence in an offer of dialogue.

The irony of the last line lies in the unexpected turn performed by the word “anzi” (rather). It is in the hesitation, the act of unsettling provoked by the adverb “anzi” which unites and separates the two verbs “taci” and “parla”—in the gap between the act of remaining silent and the act of speaking that, for Lonzi, it is possible to give new meaning to consumed words, concepts, gestures, relations. The diary thus enacts a refusal of “pre-constituted forms and ideas,” without which “the expression of the self cannot take place.”⁹¹ This refusal of the already given, as demonstrated by the diary, is uneventful and quotidian and for this same reason, more radical and powerful. The account of daily events and details of experience, the straightforward and unembellished language is not meant to please, impress or entertain the reader. Some passages of the diary might be difficult to get through as Lonzi’s desire for scrutiny and self-analysis can, at times, appear obsessive and excessively self-centred, the work of a narcissistic personality. Furthermore, the reader might find some descriptions and reflections unnecessarily lengthy, or tedious, and stylistically unrefined. But *Taci, anzi parla* is not there to prove Lonzi’s literary abilities, nor does it exist to inscribe itself in the pantheon of great writers and poets. The diary is not only a resonating body; it is also an invitation to the reader to engage in that process of relational self-analysis and mutual recognition, which is at the core of the practice of *autocoscienza* in the feminist group. More than a literary masterpiece, *Taci, anzi parla* is an existential and political tool that can be used by women who live in different times and spaces. The diary possesses an infectious energy: it provides a framework for engaging with each other and a world that defies existing categories, a source of inspiration for us today.

Furthermore, the writing of *Taci, anzi parla* opens up a conceptual and poetic horizon for an understanding of the personal as an instance of rupture and refusal—Lonzi’s writing resembles the act of patiently and painfully weaving together the threads of an existence that finds continuity with the living in the interruption of universalistic, Western-Eurocentric notions of the self, while gesturing toward the positive force that animates corrosive negation. It is a moment of negation which suspends subjectivity and a certain desire for subjectivity: Lonzi refuses the discourse of identity, mastery, property and the realm of the proper. It is a rejection of the terms of a diminished subjecthood through which patriarchal culture has established and consolidated itself. A refusal of the commodification of identities. *Taci, anzi parla* is a feminist call to examine the operations of power on our lives, including women’s own complicity with oppression.

For Lonzi, liberation then can only be achieved by “destroying the institution which made us inferior beings,” and this also involves destroying the edifice of the Western capitalist system and patriarchal culture. This act of refusal of reproduction which Lonzi’s diary engenders is an act of care: a caring and powerful rejection of “the achievement of power as a basis for the assessment of actions.”⁹² It is this rejection of the reproduction of power relations, social and professional roles and the language of culture, that lies at the heart of Lonzi’s practice and which she discloses in her diary. Lonzi reinvests the minor

91 Ibid.

92 Rivolta Femminile, Manifesto (1970).

form of the diary with the political power to speak against the status quo of culture and its mechanisms of legitimation, and to express the irruption into the scene of the different viewpoint of the “unexpected subject.” Lonzi chose her words carefully, as writing “starting from oneself” becomes one place where these ties [to the male world] can be unmade,” and where “the apparently innocent and armless” activity of writing a diary becomes a weapon against the operation of patriarchy.

1.4 *Vai pure*: Lonzi’s feminist refusal of social reproduction

For Lonzi, patriarchal culture is sustained by a desire for assimilation, ownership, possession, gain, profit, violent appropriation, and an understanding of relations as means toward an end. The book-dialogue with her twenty-year partner artist Pietro Consagra, entitled *Vai pure. Dialogo con Pietro Consagra* (1980), records the last days of a relationship, the one between Lonzi and Consagra, on the irreconcilable differences between two “cultures of relations,” which attribute different values to relations, love, sex, work, and creativity. As the dialogue addressed the traditional role assigned to women, the commodification of sex and the question of autonomy Lonzi’s refusal of the couple, as Claire Fontaine has observed, “becomes a sort of metaphor, a theatre where the forces of society play out.”⁹³ At the heart of this discussion is Lonzi’s refusal to reproduce social relations in a male culture that only affords women a subordinated role (of spectator and entertainment for the male artist) and subordinate interpersonal relations to social and professional success. Lonzi and Consagra are separating because she doesn’t support him in his artistic endeavour in the way he would like, namely to be “cheered up, helped, even a little entertained”⁹⁴ because, as Consagra admits, “Perhaps now that I am getting old, I am someone who needs to be treated like a father, like a priest....”⁹⁵ Lonzi can only refuse to accept Consagra’s demand to play “the courtesan,” to become “the godmother of the ship, the president’s partner, the artist’s muse.”

She does not recognise herself in that role, nor can she accept the priority that Consagra reserves to the production of the art work. In a passage of their dialogue Lonzi says: “If one gives priority to the production of the artwork, [it is] to the detriment of the human relationship.”⁹⁶ Lonzi recognises in Consagra the imprint of a patriarchal type of sociality that is organised around his creative work, men’s needs and desires, and in which relationships are instrumental and “always temporary in a way that does not pose them as states of consciousness which would create another viewpoint, but as material stimuli which grant the artist [the opportunity] to enrich his intuitions....”⁹⁷ Again, in this dialogue, Lonzi denounces the myth of creativity which produces hierarchies and subordinates others (the spectator, the art critic) who become “material stimuli” for the production of the art work. In the book, Consagra becomes the epitome of a culture that poses the individual at its centre and obfuscates power relations, thus making it impossible for relations to be meaningful and transformative. While Consagra confuses autonomy with the individual freedom to do as he pleases (to have someone who entertains him when he feels tired or

93 Claire Fontaine, ‘We are all Clitoridian Women: Notes on Carla Lonzi’s legacy,’ (2013).

94 Carla Lonzi, *Vai pure*, p. 5.

95 Ibid., p. 6.

96 Ibid., p. 29.

97 Ibid., p. 25.

lonely or uninspired), for Lonzi, the inter-subjective space of communication is the true place of autonomy.

To explain this crucial difference, in this long dialogue, Lonzi makes a comparison between the kind of “artistic prose” of Consagra’s autobiography, *Vita Mia* which the artist had published that same year (in 1980) and the way Lonzi had conceived her diary as a collective space; a place in which to acknowledge and reflect on the influence of other people on one’s own work and life. Lonzi observes:

The way in which you look at life, at your past, all the people (*figure*) that influenced and intervened in it, all the goings-on, the reasons that might have driven people into your life, for good or bad—you don’t possess this knowledge hence you have to gloss over it, you can’t make it clear [to yourself]. Thus, you go into the kind of ‘artistic prose’ [*prosa d’arte*], in a type of prose grounded in personal sensitivity, and personal inventiveness, but not in this indisputable humanity [*umanità assodata*] that comes from a relationship, in a relationship.”⁹⁸

In this illuminating passage, Lonzi differentiates between Consagra’s writing, “grounded in personal inventiveness” which overshadows the influence of others and of relationships on who we are and what we do, and her diary which speaks of relationships. While Consagra seems interested in authorising his life and turning it into a work of art, in *Taci, anzi parla* Lonzi observes, “it is possible to recognise what has been [the impact of] your presence in those years in my life, from your book one cannot see what my presence in your life has been, I am not there at all.”⁹⁹ It is this absence and silence in the language and discourse of men that Lonzi’s diary gives voice to; to the relationships which she understands as places to experiment with ways of living together and in which to freely collaborate, rather than a place to reproduce already worn out concepts and ideas. Lonzi insists on the way her writing is not the result of personal inventiveness, but the result of a collective endeavour. She refuses to bend to the needs of the market, the myth of phallic creativity and to an ideology that promotes the kind of individual success which overshadows the collective nature of work and existence. She refuses to reproduce cultural forms in the same way that she is determined to refuse the reproductive role of the woman in the couple, and with *Vai pure*, she breaks this silence.

In *Vai pure* Lonzi unmask the demon of work and the gender struggle hidden inside love. If, for Consagra, the relationship becomes either a refuge from or a launch-pad for his artistic career, for Lonzi the space of the relationship has the potential to undo social roles, habits and “already experimented”¹⁰⁰ [*soluzioni già sperimentate*] ways of living. Lonzi is not willing to accommodate the way in which Consagra subordinates his relationship to the priorities of his professional career. Contrary to Consagra, who cannot separate life and work, in the book, Lonzi understands this separation as necessary to revolt against and resist the commodification of life and creativity. For Lonzi, the power of revolt lies precisely in understanding this subtle difference that makes every life gesture into a work of art realised in collaboration.

98 Ibid., p. 93.

99 Ibid., p. 45.

100 Ibid., p. 9.

The title of the book, *Vai pure*, expresses a refusal in the form of a consent to let go: “vai pure” as if to say “I won’t hold you here any longer;” now you can go. This letting go is a loss, that, as we shall see in Chapter 2, leaves open the possibility for action and agency. The reasons for making the recordings of this four-day conversation public can perhaps be understood in relation to the possibility that the book, this body of experience that constitutes the expression of two different understandings and cultures of relationships, might function as a tool for other women to engage in that necessary dialogue with men and let go of social roles and toxic relationships that are imposed upon them by patriarchal culture.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the multiple ways in which Lonzi’s refusal of reproduction is manifest in her feminist practice and writing—in themes, influences, intentions as well as formal experimentation. I have paid attention to details of Lonzi’s work, such as: her interest in the life and works of women mystics; her conscious stylistic choice of including Cy Twombly’s silences in *Autoritratto*; to the poem which gives the title to the diary and which says, in the apophatic manner of poetry, this refusal. The focus of my reading in this chapter has been the instances of negation which characterise Lonzi’s experimentation with writing and the possibilities of a negative inhabitation of the space of culture through the processes of deculturalisation and self-objectification in *Taci, anzi parla*.

Lonzi’s life and work expresses, as Claire Fontaine observes, “the possibility of living a life without a frame, a life that questions itself and intensifies itself without hiding behind obligations, habits, opportunism—a life that is, in fact, truly an artwork.”¹⁰¹ It is this idea of creativity as an emancipatory framework to engage each other in a transformative relation—which, as I have showed is influenced by Lonzi’s fascination with the life and writings of Joan d’Arc and Thérèse of Liseiux—that *Autoritratto* expresses, and which characterises the beginning of Lonzi’s feminism.

In this chapter, through a reading of three major works—*Autoritratto*; *Taci, anzi parla*; and *Vai pure*—I have examined the ways in which Lonzi’s feminist gesture of revolt is shaped and enacted in her life and work and what kind of alternative visions of reality it offers; and where she gathers the sources of her power to speak, and speak from within the heart of the silence and away from silence. Lonzi’s writing can be understood as a tool for the reproduction of “revolt’s power;”¹⁰² that is the ability to say “no,” to resist, fight, revolt, to question the given, to think against oneself and refuse the reproduction of “already experimented solutions,” ideas, social roles and concepts that she perceived as colonised by patriarchy.

In the first part of this chapter, I have examined the ways in which *Autoritratto* refuses to reproduce the conventions of art history and challenges the role of the art critic as a “gate-keeper” in the Italian art system of that time. The impossibility of responding in a professional way to the existential and political questions that artistic practices pose is the driving force behind the book. I show how in the book, Lonzi renounces the authoritative position of the art critic, instead introducing herself as part of the conversation, as one of

101 Claire Fontaine, “We are all Clitoridian Women: Notes on Carla Lonzi’s legacy” (2013) p. 7.

102 Ibid.

the interlocutors taking part in the conversation. In *Autoritratto*, Lonzi remains loyal to the physical and contingent dimensions of oral expression, her transcription preserves the syntactical mistakes, dialectal expressions, half formulated thoughts and sentences in an attempt to capture something fleeting and contingent, something of the person, of their way of thinking and being in the world that exceeds the artwork and its discourse. In reading *Autoritratto*, I attended to the details of Lonzi's choices, to the "wandering" character of her montage; and especially to "telling" details such as the inclusion of Cy Twombly's silences; and the inclusion of an image of Saint Thérèse de Lisieux's playing Joan d'Arc, which opens to Lonzi's universe of references.

Autoritratto constitutes a turning point in Lonzi's life. After its publication, Lonzi abandoned the "phoney" profession of the art critic and co-founded the feminist group of Rivolta Femminile. In the second part, I gave an overview of the history of the feminist group of Rivolta Femminile and their practices of *autocoscienza* and resonance and the process of deculturalisation that are central to the feminist practice of Rivolta and to Lonzi's own work. I then moved to a discussion of the political use that Lonzi made of the intimate minor genre of diary, *Taci, anzi parla*. Composed of heterogeneous material, I show how, in the diary, Lonzi carries out what she calls a process of self-objectification or disidentification with her social and professional role. Significant in this respect is the poem that gives the title to the book in which Lonzi addresses her sister, Marta, about her social and reproductive role as woman, architect, mother, wife. As the poem included in the diary suggests, the diary is a form of self-questioning that addresses other women in a process of questioning their reproductive role. The diary thus becomes an identity-contesting and ego-depleting exercise, the endeavour of emptying even the concept "woman" from any fixed identity. In the diary, Lonzi documents the process of coming to consciousness of a woman who does not recognise herself in the forms of representation, language, and discourses that culture offers as "emancipatory," and experiments with alternatives, horizontal and dialogical forms of expression and relations. Lonzi's introspective approach, as scholar Giovanna Zapperi has observed, is still influenced by the modernist notion of autonomy and self-knowledge. Yet, at the same time, the diary records a risky process of experimentation with relationships, and the profound transformation that arises from it. Here lies the radicality of Lonzi's diary: by insisting on feminism as a gesture of scepticism and self-questioning, Lonzi makes a demand on herself and on other women to continue questioning the terms and modalities of their liberation, rather than to simply adhere to them. The diary expresses Lonzi's dissensus with a male culture that excludes what it cannot know, understand, or categorise. It is a dissensus that produces a political subject, cracking open the unity of the given in order to sketch out a new topography of the possible.

In the last section, I discussed Lonzi's *Vai pure*. To discuss Lonzi's refusalist poetics, I have drawn reference to the way in which Lonzi differentiates between Consagra's "artistic prose" and her own autobiographical writing which pays attention (and homage) to the transformative role of relationships in her life, presenting the subject in its vulnerable process of living and understanding. Lonzi rejects the heroic narratives of the self-made self and the story of successful integration of the individual into what society demands of him or her to be; and enacts a refusal to neutralise the influence of others in the formation of the self.

At a time when the political potential of the personal in writing seems to have been irremediably compromised by a culture obsessed with the self, in which personal writing has become what Anne Boyer has called "a pornography of particularisation," where women are happy to give away intimate details of their sexual preferences and emotions and feelings

to accommodate the demand of a market hungry for confession, Lonzi's refusal suggests the possibility of a subversive use of personal writing as a quotidian political practice.

“[What] exists is a relation, a dialogue,”¹⁰³ Lonzi tells Consagra in *Vai pure*. Lonzi's refusal is grounded in the recognition of the power of quotidian forces in our lives; and the importance of grounding thinking in an attention to the minute and often overlooked gestures of everyday life that can be revelatory, and which lead to those “findings” that, as Lonzi notes, the writer of the dairy cannot turn away from.

103 Lonzi, *Vai pure*, p. 70.



From left to right: Ariane Mnouchkine, Hélène Cixous and Liliana Andreone, 1985.
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CHAPTER 2

To be propelled out of the self: Cixous' *écriture féminine*

—*Losing is all that's left, I say.*

—*Losing is all we've got left to lose, you say*

The impossibility of not telling, I cannot do otherwise, one can only tell otherwise, with always the same need to make sense of what you've lost, the need not to lose this feeling of losing, the need to feel yourself not losing this feeling that you are still losing the irreplaceable."

(Hélène Cixous, *Hyperdream*, 2006)

How does writing break free from the rigid law of individuation? Where does 'I' end and writing begin? How does one lose oneself and let writing come to you? In this chapter, I read *écriture féminine* [feminine writing] as a deconstructive practice and examine the ways in which it attends to the force of *différance*:¹ the unassimilable excess of meaning; the process of layering; the use of metaphors and other literary figures that break away from the constraints of a phallogocentric discourse; the practice of listening and paying attention to minor details of the everyday, of emotions and feelings; the breaks, the absences and the openings; the process of undoing narrative stability in order to disturb the ground of communication, against and as a movement that destroys the masculinist "Empire of the Selfsame."²

I further argue for a reading of *écriture féminine* that acknowledges the forces of negation and understands it as disruptive writing practice—an exercise in saying "no" to the phallogocentric system that represses what it cannot explain or contain; a "no" that enables multiple expressions of difference. It is a "no" that, I want to argue, is another way of saying "yes," one that preserves the possibility of transformation, of becoming (of the not-yet). Cixous' *écriture féminine* conceptualises the possibility of a poetic writing that is a place of revolt against the myth of male culture; a revolt in which one is not afraid of losing oneself, detaching from and finding a voice at the margin of the symbolic³ order. Throughout this chapter, I show how Cixous conceptualises *écriture féminine* as a practice of listening to unconscious forces, paying attention to insignificant details of experience, to human

1 Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 27.

2 Refer to the use of this term in the general introduction. See also, Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clement, 1975 [86], *The Newly Born Woman*. Trans. by Betsy Wings and Introduction by Sandra M. Gilbert. (Minnesota: University Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 80.

emotions, necessities, and feelings—of what in language speaks through absence and inactuality, of what is not directly accessible through appearances and presence, potentiating the structure of language to be bent and transformed.

Hélène Cixous is known in the Anglo-American context as the author of “The Laugh of the Medusa” and “Sorties,” two essays in which she elaborates her idea of an *écriture féminine* and develops a critique of patriarchal culture. One of the key concerns of *écriture féminine* is the question of radical alterity⁴—of unsettling the oppositions and binaries, and the very ground of phallic representation, challenging the denial of the body and of immanence within Western culture. Although, as Mireille Calle-Gruber has observed, Cixous remains wary of the grip of ideological thinking and prefers “the terrain of imagination to that of feminist ideology,”⁵ Cixous’ writing is informed by and partakes in the theories of sexual difference⁶ (although it must be reiterated here that Cixous entertains a rather ambivalent relation to philosophy and theory, as disciplines rooted in the violence of abstraction and naming and the production of rigid categories), which focused on disclosing the repressive structures within the socio-symbolic system which reduces difference to a set of oppositions and binaries. The theory and practices of sexual difference entail the need to revisit the site of the “feminine,” to undo the man-made representation of Woman in order to develop a new “women’s language” capable of bringing the unrepresentable into representation in a non-dialectical manner, and to express women’s different life experiences.

If woman could constitute herself as subject, and the “feminine” represented in language, what would this voice sound like? As we have seen in Chapter 1, Both Lonzi and Cixous identify in language the repressive structures through which patriarchal culture reproduces itself. Since woman has figured within this socio-symbolic system as the other of man, both Lonzi and Cixous suggests that the inscription of women’s sexuality and history could recast the prevailing order.⁷ They conceive of their writing as a tool for the deconstruction of this language and for imagining non-coercive and liberatory alternatives.⁸ Yet, Lonzi identifies in the “minor” form of the diary and the intimate dialogue as a

3 With the symbolic is understood the social world of linguistic communication, intersubjective relations, knowledge of ideological conventions, and the acceptance of the Law. In the French post-Freudian psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan, the words Imaginary and the Real are employed to describe two of the three stages in the development of the self, the third being the Symbolic. Lacan sees the introduction of what he calls ‘the Law of the Father,’ the child’s entrance into the realm of language, or the place of the Symbolic. Once the child has reached the Symbolic phase, the imaginary becomes only accessible *through* the father’s law. But the child still dreams of reconstituting the bound with the mother. The Real would be the space where this desire could be fulfilled, the place of no lack, except that, for Lacan, the real is out of reach. Like the Imaginary, according to Lacan, the Real cannot be directly accessed, but only through the Symbolic (that is through the mediation of language).

4 Moira Gatens puts it in *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality* (1991): “Otherness, or alterity, is here linked positively to the issue of sexual difference. However, the aim is not the simple reversal of the hierarchy between man and woman, masculine and feminine... but rather involves challenging and unsettling the coherence of the opposition itself. This aim is achieved by showing the ways in which woman, the feminine and female sexuality exceed the complementary role they have been assigned in the oppositions man/woman; masculine/feminine, phallic sexuality/castrated sexuality.” See Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality* (Indiana University Press, 1991).

5 Hélène Cixous, Mireille Calle-Gruber *Rootprints: Memory and life writing*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. (London-NewYork: Routledge, 1997). Originally published in French by Editions de femmes, as *Photos de Racine* (Paris: Editions de femmes, 1993), p.152.

6 Feminists of sexual difference argued that parallel to political action, women necessitated an alternative discourse to the one of patriarchy. Thus, the need to identify “genealogy of women” that could become frame of reference for one’s own analyses, understanding and self-definition. Teresa de Lauretis, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social Symbolic Political Practice*. Trans. by Patricia Cicogna and Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

7 See Verena A. Conley, *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1991), p. 5.

8 Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Authorship, Autobiography and Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

place to experiment with a non-literary use of writing that lays bare the expectations, contradictions, and social and cultural mechanisms that shape her identity as woman. The terrain of Cixous' struggle are philosophy and literature, which as she argues, have historically been "against" women. Lonzi's feminist practice refuses to engage cultural discourse, dismissing the Western philosophical tradition altogether in order to start a dialogue on a human level with the women of the feminist group, the French feminists of sexual difference, most of whom studied and worked in universities and operated from within the realm of academia. Thus together they engaged in a project of reinscribing "feminine" desire in discourse and in a dialogue with post-structuralist⁹ theories and Lacanian Post-Freudian psychoanalysis, with whom they share the idea that language is the primary source of access to desire.

According to Lacan's post-Freudian psychoanalysis, we exist in the symbolic order of language, and within this symbolic order, the subject internalises the cultural rules of patriarchy. The female child enters the linguistic order as gendered subject and is subjected to the Law of the Father.¹⁰ In this system, the female child exists in the shadow of the Father, besides which she figures as lack,¹¹ an absence. Feminists of sexual difference contest this assumption and, while drawing on psychoanalysis, *écriture féminine* defiantly laughs¹² at this Lacanian theory of lack in which women's desire is unspeakable. Drawing on the Freudian case of Dora and hysteria¹³ reveals to Cixous the force of the "feminine" a corporeal resistance against the masculine domination of language. Cixous insists that in

- 9 Under the umbrella term "Post-structuralism" are grouped a heterogenous and disparate group of thinkers. It originated as a reaction against structuralism, which first emerged in Ferdinand de Saussure's work on linguistics. By the 1950s structuralism had been adapted in anthropology (Lévi-Strauss), psychoanalysis (Lacan) and literary theory (Barthes) with the aim to provide a framework for rigorous accounts in all areas of the human sciences. Post-structuralist critiques of structuralism typically challenge the assumption that systems are self-sufficient structures and question the possibility of the precise definitions on which systems of knowledge must be based. The starting points for a post-structural theoretical vision within this enormous terrain of interdisciplinary scholarship are language, signification, and semiotics. Gary Gutting, "Post-structuralism in the Social Sciences" in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 7, (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 600–604.
- 10 Here the "Law" is intended as the symbolic order theorised by Lacan. In the socio-linguistic formation of the child, Lacan individuates the father as the bearer of the law. The father is thus less a living enjoying individual than the delegate and spokesperson of a body of social Law. In investigating the structure and operations of language, Lacan is interested in the power and structuring principles of the larger category of the Symbolic, which is the pre-existing domain of language and law, the social and cultural structure into which the child is born. This body of *nomoi* (law) is what Lacan calls the big Other of the child's given sociolinguistic community. Insofar as the force of its Law is what the child at castration perceives to be what moves the mother and gives the father's words their "performative force" (Austin), Lacan also calls it the "phallic order." See Agibail Bray, *Writing and Sexual Difference* (2014); Luce Luce Irigaray, *Speculum. De l'autre femme* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974). Trans. by Gillian C. Gill as *Speculum: Of the Other Woman* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1985); See also Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- 11 For Lacan, the feminine comes to represent the impossible, the untought. An important aspect of Lacan's theory which becomes a subject of contestation for feminists is the notion of feminine *jouissance* qua mystical *jouissance* beyond the phallus. The primacy of the phallic signifier makes language phallogentric, depriving women from their own signifier. The lack of feminine signifier that Lacan theorises here offers an impetus to the feminist cause especially to Irigaray and Cixous to find ways for the voice and writing of women. See Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" Trans. by Annette Kuhn, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 7:1 Autumn, (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 44–55.
- 12 The very title of Cixous' famous "The Laugh of the Medusa," as Bray notes, "highlights the moments in the text when the maternal figure laughs at the absurdity of phallogentric assumptions that women lack." In Abigail Bray, *Hélène Cixous: Writing and Sexual Difference*, (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 65.
- 13 Throughout Western history, hypotheses about the etiology of hysteria have been based on the premise that woman is weakened by her inherent tendency towards a divided nature. What remains constant throughout the history of hysteria is the sense of the enigma of woman (the mysterious other, the "dark continent"). Feminists such as Cixous, Irigaray, Clement have questioned Freud's psychoanalytic account of hysteria in order to reveal a different story, one in which hysteria is an act that threatens to disrupt the symbolic system. See Gabrielle Dane, "Hysteria as feminist protest: Dora, Cixous, Acker" in *Women's Studies – An interdisciplinary journal*, Vol. 23 Issue 3 (1994), pp. 231–255.

order for the “feminine” to be presented in language, it would need to rupture the Phallogocentric system of signification, and “infect the linguistic order with the chaos of difference.”¹⁴ It is the “feminine” as an infectious force that opens the space of signification that is theorised by Cixous in *écriture féminine*, understood as a subversive practice of writing that throws the linguistic order into chaos. In her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975), as the title suggests, Cixous laughs at the patriarchal system, at the Lacanian notion of woman as “lack,” and in a gesture of refusal of the phallogocentric order of discourse that silences and erases women’s voices, *écriture féminine* insists on a different inhabitation of language and the symbolic system, one driven by the libidinal economy of the “feminine.” It must be said here that the “feminine” of which Cixous speaks is not an essence of femininity;¹⁵ it is not identical to woman. Rather, as will be discussed in the first section of this chapter entitled “In the Key of ‘Feminine’,” it is a marker of difference. In this section, I examine the ways in which *écriture féminine* enacts a double-movement that “shatters the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the ‘truth’ with laughter.”¹⁶ This disruptive gesture is accompanied by one of construction, a work of unearthing, unburying, unnamng what has been buried and repressed. I foreground the relation of *écriture féminine* to Derrida’s *différance* and deconstruction. Cixous agrees with Derrida’s critique of Western metaphysics¹⁷ as a logocentric system based on presence, where meaning is immediately given and dependent on a system of exclusion where “A” comes into being through the exclusion of “not-A;” where “A” renders its negative (not-A) invisible, as a no-thing. In *Of Grammatology* (1979), Derrida argues that, at least since Plato, truth has been associated with the spoken word and writing with a corrupt copy of the truth, a stand-in for logos, and in this way producing a false hierarchy between spoken word and writing; a division that, according to Derrida, has its foundations in the metaphysical privileging of presence over absence.

Derrida deconstructs transcendental consciousness, transcendent object, or facts of nature—that presents itself as some kind of cosmic fixed point, eternal truth, or unalterable meaning. Such a system violates existence by reducing it to presence, and excluding what cannot be made present. Derrida argues that writing, as a system founded on absence,

14 Gabrielle Dane, “Hysteria as feminist protest: Dora, Cixous, Acker” in *Women’s Studies – An interdisciplinary journal*, Vol. 23 Issue 3 (1994), pp. 231–55.

15 For a long time, the reception of *écriture féminine* had been influenced by readings which emphasises the supposedly essentialist nature of this kind of writing. Notably, literary critic Toril Moi laments that “it is after all patriarchy, not feminism, which has always believed in a true female/feminine nature: the essentialism which lurks behind the desire to bestow feminine virtues on all female bodies necessarily plays into the hands of the patriarchs.” In her essay “Writing the Body,” feminist literary scholar Ann Rosalind Jones calls out Cixous on her belief of the body as source of liberation. She argues, “the body is a site of struggle and very often of oppression hence the female body hardly seems the best site to launch an attack on the forces that have alienated us from what our sexuality might become.” Pauline Johnson argues that Cixous’ belief in imagination idealises women’s exile from phallogocentric culture, offering a romantic form of rebellion. See Toril Moi, “Feminist, Female, Feminine” in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, *The Feminist Reader* (UK: Black Well, first edition: 1989; second edition: 1997). Pauline Johnson, *Feminism as Radical Humanism* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994). Teresa Ebert, *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire and Labour in Late Capitalism* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996). Ann Rosalind Jones, “Writing the Body. Toward an Understanding of *l’Écriture féminine*” in Elaine Showalter (ed.), *The New Feminist Criticism. Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), pp.361-375.

16 Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” Trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, Summer 1976, p. 888.

17 The metaphysics of presence maintains that entities are present in Being, their presence is the manifestation of Being. Derrida has suggested that the desire of Western philosophers to develop a “metaphysics of presence”—a set of concepts which reflect, capture, or otherwise adequately represent reality in human knowledge—has succeeded only in misrepresenting it. For Derrida, thus the central concepts and categories of the Western tradition—substance, sameness, essence, identity, subject, object, inside/outside, etc.—must be deconstructed.

continually defers the presence of experience and truth, troubling and resisting this call into the presence of truth (as the good, the positive, the simple). For Derrida, what is excluded from speech leaves a trace in writing; a trace which manifests as difference,¹⁸ and deconstruction pays attention to these traces—to the slow and barely perceptive shifts in meaning that open the space of signification to difference.

However, if Derrida tends to desexualise discourse practices arguing that difference always exceeds sexual difference, Cixous strategically sexualises difference, investing it with a feminist significance and the “feminine” power of unsettling any given gesture or concept. For Cixous, this “exclusion,” this absence of which Derrida speaks in terms of trace, coincides with the erasure of the voices of non-compliant women from the history of Western literature and theory; the silencing of their agency and their place in the resistance against capitalism and patriarchy. By attending to the exclusions of women and of the “feminine” force in language; to all those inactual potentialities of language, Cixous’ writing is an attempt to open language to the play of *differance*, to the possibilities of language to undo its gendered biases, and generate multiple possible forms of expression and meanings driven by a libidinal economy of excess that does not fear the loss of identity. If the examination of women’s lives had disclosed the mechanisms of violence and exclusions that reproduce patriarchy, then Cixous asks how women can inhabit the space of discursive exclusion as a space where a new form of sociality can be imagined, one that escapes the eternal repetition of the same. In this chapter, I find it useful to revisit Cixous’ *écriture féminine* as a disruptive writing and reading practice that inhabits this “absence” from the patriarchal linguistic order as a possibility for a different expression of the existent, one in which losing oneself in writing one gives birth to a different subject conceived as a multiplicity of subjects that refuse to be named as they appear in multiple guises and forms.

Although Cixous’ focus on the body would seem to reverberate with Lacan’s theory of “feminine” *jouissance* and is associated with an affirmative philosophy of desire, of saying “yes” (as Cixous writes in “The Laugh of the Medusa”) to the forces of the unconscious and of the female body, in this chapter, I have shown how *écriture féminine* is animated by the forces of a “feminine” negation. I contend that the “yes, yes”¹⁹ of *écriture féminine* is also a “no” that demands a different inhabitation of sameness, where a comma overturns—and the yes both affirms and negates. Cixous seeks out a form of alterity that does not renounce the body, and in doing so she poses the question of how to approach what is not-present, not-same, not-me, not-writing and not-personal in writing without the desire for appropriation and ownership.

Écriture féminine is an invitation to women to attend to the invisible forces that give shape to a life: the unfamiliar, the strange, the opaque, the unknown, the forgotten are all important sources of women’s power. The ability to lose one’s own certainties and move into a zone of indeterminacy where, as Cixous writes, “you know nothing about being. Or saying. You don’t know. We don’t remember this world at all. The world we remember,

18 In *How to Avoid Speaking: Denials* (1986), Derrida denies the analogy made by scholars between deconstruction and negative theology and stirs the discussion in the direction of negative theology as a “textual practice.” The French word “dénégation” translates Freud’s term “Verneinung” which implies that negation is in fact an affirmation. See Jacques Derrida, ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials in *Derrida and Negative Theology*. eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989): pp. 73–136. Shira Wolosky, “An ‘Other’ Negative Theology; or, the Difference of Language in Derrida’s ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’” *Poetics Today* Vol. 19 n. 2 (Summer 1998), pp. 261–80.

19 Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clement, *The Newly Born Woman*. Trans. by Betsy Wings and Introduction by Sandra M. Gilbert. (Minnesota: University Minnesota Press, 1986), p.85.

where we were just last evening has become so far away suddenly you might think you'd dreamed it."²⁰ Cixous emphasis on what cannot be known must be understood here in relation to her critique of the metaphysics of presence and insists on a different inhabitation of language and writing, one grounded in the absent presence of difference, of what passes between, the space between expression and experience.

For Cixous, writing begins with a moment of loss. Susan Sellers²¹ has noted that in texts such as "Coming to Writing" (1977) Cixous describes how the conditions of her life—the multilingual environment in which she was born (where French, Spanish, German, Arabic were spoken), her childhood in Oran during the French occupation of Algeria and the social exclusion she was subjected to due to her Jewishness; the war in Algeria, and her father's premature death from tuberculosis, her mother's work as midwife—have influenced her initiation into writing and her *écriture féminine*: becoming, as Cixous observes, "causes and opportunities."²² She locates in her father's death the important event that prompted her to write and in "Coming to Writing," Cixous writes:

In the beginning the gesture of writing is linked to the experience of disappearance, to the feeling of having lost the key to the world, of having been thrown outside. Of having suddenly acquired the precious sense of the rare, of the mortal. Of having urgently regained the entrance, the breath, to keep the trace.²³

It is in order to "keep the trace" that Cixous begins to write. A trace that requires Cixous pay attention to the mortal, what is not immediately present. The loss of her father throws Cixous into a state of despair, a disorienting loss of certainties that agitates Cixous' writing. However, in the economy of Cixous' writing, as the passage quoted above shows, loss is not linked to a patriarchal logic of destruction—it is not the loss that brings with it the silence of death. Instead, death becomes an initiation into the mysteries of life, into living deeply and thinking down through the depths of the unspoken and unsaid; attending to the absences in writing; to the necessities and desires that move writing. The experience of loss is a major theme in Cixous' work, and writing is a way of inscribing this loss: "everything is lost except words," Cixous writes.

In the second and third sections, entitled "Alienation" and "To call oneself abroad," I examine the ways in which loss, in its complex and multiple dimensions, is conceptualised within *écriture féminine* as "feminine" alienation. I discuss *écriture féminine*'s relation with deconstruction, and the ways in which it reconceptualises, from the place of the "feminine," ideas of alienation, loss, self-undoing and destruction in writing. My argument here is that *écriture féminine* is not only an affirmative practice of writing. It is also and importantly a disruptive writing practice, "a springboard for subversive thoughts, the precursory movement, of a transformation of social and cultural structures,"²⁴ a place of revolt against

20 Hélène Cixous, *Hyperdream*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), p. 7.

21 Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Authorship, Autobiography and Love*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 1.

22 Hélène Cixous, "From the Scene of the Unconscious to the Scene of History." Trans. by Deborah Carpenter, in Ralph Cohen, *The Future of Literary Theory*, (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 16.

23 Hélène Cixous, *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. Deborah Jenson, Trans. by Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson, Ann Liddle and Susan Sellers. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991) [Translation of selections from *La Venue à l'écriture* (1977), *Entre l'écriture* (1986), and *L'Haure de Clarice Lispector* (1989)], p. 19.

24 Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, *Signs* 1:4 (Summer 1976), pp. 875–93.

women's identification with the image of obedient and passive femininity and the type of visibility (ultra-sexualised) offered to them by patriarchy.

In the section "Alienation," I discuss the concept of alienation in relation to *écriture féminine*. In understanding writing as a form of alienation, in which experience is translated and transfigured in the unconscious and in the act of writing, Cixous conceives of "feminine" alienation as a creative gesture that rips the self away from itself—unsettling the secure ground of the Western subject. As we shall see, this type of alienation, which emerges from the recognition of the materiality of language and of one's own subjectivity, is not the same as entering into an alienating and objectifying relationship with the self, to fall into a nothingness of language and being. Against an empiricism that remains blind to the invisible forces which govern our lives, in this section I pay attention to the ways in which *écriture féminine*, as sound artist and writer Salomé Voegelin explains, "makes the heard into a thing that is not an object in the lexical sense but a sonic thing of perception,"²⁵ by, for instance, turning a noun into a predicate. I show how *écriture féminine* pays attention to the aural dimension of poetic experience; the sonic substance of language: her use of assonances and alliterations, repetitions, rhymes, homophonies, the multiple voices (and "invisible friends") that speak, simultaneously inhabiting the text. "Feminine" writing meets sound in its own invisible materiality. The ruptures that open her history also open visible norms. The Medusian's laughter is the sonorous trace of the crossing of a boundary; the wrecking of partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes.

In "The Laugh of the Medusa" Cixous declares that, at the present moment it is impossible to define a "feminine" practice of writing, an impossibility that, however, "doesn't mean that it doesn't exist."²⁶ Cixous doesn't give the reader a positive answer as to what "feminine" is or looks like. The use of a double-negation here sets the "feminine" free from the necessity to manifest as this or that, and allows for the concept of "feminine" to continue producing differences, taking on many different meanings (as an additive process). In this chapter, I attend to the instances of negation in *écriture féminine* as they become "vehicle and a condition of possibility of the inactual,"²⁷ of the not-yet—but also and more importantly of what is never lost at the very bottom of loss, the unlost to which Cixous attends in her own writing. Another way in which *écriture féminine* attends to the multiple manifestation of a "feminine" alienation is by recognising that, in writing, the "self" is matter among matter; it is one of the many human and non-human protagonists of the text, just as there are tears, laughter, the roundness of an orange, a wall that divides, the materiality of the flesh which is woven by histories, politics, culture, and desires.

In the third and last section, "depersonalisation," I examine the ways in which Cixous approaches this experience of alterity by what she describes as closeness "without any familiarity."²⁸ Bray explains that it "is a form of closeness because it makes room for the singularity of the other's materiality and allows the possibility of an intimacy with the other

25 Salomé Voegelin, "Writing the Ephemeral" in *The Routledge Companion to Sounding Art*, Marcel Cobussen, Vincent Meelberg, Barry Truax (eds) (London/New York: 2016), pp. 61–70.

26 Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, (1975), p. 883.

27 This requires a kind of transformative exchange between inside and outside, self and other, personal and the most a-personal aspects of experience. As Mireille Calle-Gruber pointed out, "the writing works at measuring relationships: at grasping the point where the minuscule difference makes a great separation." Hélène Cixous, Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints: Memory and life writing*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. (London-New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 151.

28 Hélène Cixous, "What Hour Is It O'clock?" in Hélène Cixous, *Stigmata*. Escaping texts. Trans. by Keith Cohen, Catherine A.F. MacGillivray and Eric Prenowitz. (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 1998), p. 81.

without being determined by what has already been written.”²⁹ Cixous’ encounter with the work of Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector is significant in this respect. Cixous champions Lispector’s writing as an example of *écriture féminine* which pays the utmost attention to the insignificant details of everyday life and language; listening to the rhythm of syntax, the vibrations of matter, the bodily and the musical, and to the voice. Cixous invokes Lispector’s power of “de-personalisation” which creatively engages with the suspension of subjectivity to attend to “the mystery of alterity.” The prefix “de” of depersonalisation points to a negation, a separation, a moving away from “personalisation,” from the personal, and from the attempt at anthropomorphizing. As I show in this last section, depersonalisation brings about an experience of alterity rooted in the singularity of existence. For Cixous, Lispector’s work knows how to transcend the boundaries of the immediately sensible and apparent to explore the mysteries of an existence that is as singular as it bears no specific name. By reading through Cixous’ reading of Clarice Lispector’s most autobiographical writing, *Água Viva*, in this last section, I consider the ways in which the textual economy of *écriture féminine*—the personal as material for writing—is rethought as that which surpasses and exceeds the merely subjective and autobiographical. In a culture where individualist values prevail and the performance of appearance has become a condition of creative work and of life as work in the 21st century, how does *écriture féminine* resist the process of a call to presence? What is the legacy of *écriture féminine* as a feminist disruptive practice of writing and forms of poetic resistance? How does *écriture féminine* say “no” to the Empire of the Selfsame, to its call to present?

2.1 In the key of the “feminine”

Published France in 1975, “*Le Rire de la Méduse*” first appeared in a special issue on Simone de Beauvoir in the journal *L’Arc*³⁰ and was later translated into English as “The Laugh of the Medusa” and published in one of the first volumes of the American feminist journal *Signs*.³¹ The essay “Sorties” first appeared in Cixous and Clément’s *La Jeune Née*, a collaborative project and one in a series of texts published under the rubric of *Feminin future*.³² An excerpt of “Sorties” was published in an English translation in 1977,³³ and the whole essay appeared in English as “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays” in Betsy Wing’s 1986 translation of *The Newly Born Woman*.³⁴ Although there are substantial differences between the two essays, both share much material and a common purpose, namely to develop a critique of the repressive system of binary oppositions which define Western literary and philosophical traditions. They do a very good job in outlining the basics of Cixous’ philosophy of writing, documenting the emergence of an insurgent writing, *écriture féminine*, which, as Cixous writes, “exceed[s] the discourse governing the phallo-

29 Abigail Bray, *Writing and Sexual Difference*, p. 182.

30 Hélène Cixous, “Le Rire de la Méduse,” in *Simone de Beauvoir et la lutte Des femmes*, *L’Arc*, 61, pp. 39–54.

31 Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, Summer 1976, pp. 875–893.

32 Ian Blyth, Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Live Theory*, (New York–London: Continuum, 2004), p. 2.

33 Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément, “La Jeune Née: An Excerpt.” Trans. by Meg Bortin, *Diacritics*, 7:2, (Summer 1977), p. 64–9.

34 Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*. Trans. by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). All references to *Sorties* in this study are to this edition.

centric system... taking place... somewhere other than in the territories subordinated to philosophical-theoretical domination.”³⁵ *Écriture féminine* attempts to shatter the intellectual “self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory” patriarchal discourse that “has kept women at the margin of history,” and exhorts women to use writing in order to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in history.³⁶

Feminists of sexual difference focus on the irruption of a female subjectivity on the scene of history and culture; revisiting the site of the “feminine” by analysing the linguistic and conceptual structures constitutive of the symbolic order. Going into details about sexual difference would exceed the scope of this study, but it is important here to remind the reader that the project of sexual difference is one of “speaking the silence of women within the language which is one and the same for everyone” and that this speaking from the site of the silenced “feminine” implies both a process of “retrieval (memory) and creation (imagination)”³⁷—a work of “unforgetting” the histories of oppression and resistance as well as of imagining a use of language that would both recover those dismissed histories and provide new forms to express the realities of women’s lives, work, and wild imaginations.

Cixous’ use of the qualifier “feminine” (which she always includes within inverted commas to indicate its provisional character) has been notoriously criticised by feminist scholars for “fall[ing] back into a form of biological essentialism”³⁸ which reduces its political significance and value for the feminist struggle against oppression. More positive readings have focused on Cixous’ shifting and inconsistent use of philosophical and political concepts. For instance, Ian Blyth argues that confusion around Cixous’ use of this term and her essentialist tendencies are partly due to her “inconsistent” and “ambivalent” use of terminology, which sometimes focuses “on sex-specific experiences, such as motherhood” and “elsewhere strives to distance her argument from so-called ‘essentialist notions of the body.’”³⁹ Ironically, when it comes to expressing a position on Cixous’ use of the qualifier “feminine,” both critics and defenders seem to share the same assumption that Cixous’ philosophy of writing could be reduced to a feminist ideological position. Key to this assumption seems the attempt, on both sides, to compress complex thoughts and layered language into readymade ideological instruments to fight along clearly defined battle lines, and “establish a point of view... from which phallogocentric concepts and controls can be seen through and taken apart.”⁴⁰ Since Cixous is not delivering strategic political tools she is either accused of essentialism or excused for not being consistent enough. Cixous chooses the unstable ground of desire and the opacity of poetic language as the battleground of her struggle, exploring the “feminine” imagination with the purpose of displacing unconscious mechanisms that have limited women’s conception of the self. In this respect, the “feminine” of *écriture féminine* invokes the power of women’s desire in revolt to shatter the phallogocentric system, in unbounded and ecstatic textual *jouissance*.

35 Hélène Cixous, “Sorties” in *The Newly Born Woman*. Trans. by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 92.

36 Ibid.

37 Rosi Braidotti, “Sexual Difference Theory” in *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011 2nd Edition), pp. 92-93.

38 Toril Moi, “Feminist, Female, Feminine” in *The Feminist Reader*, edited by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore. (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2nd edition 1996), p. 125.

39 Ian Blyth, Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Live Theory*, (New York–London: Continuum, 2004), p. 24.

40 Ann Rosalind Jones, “Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *l’Écriture féminine*” in Elaine Showalter, *The New Feminist Criticism. Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 362.

This opening of the text to play and the proliferation of differences recalls Derrida's use of *différance*, a graphic difference, a spelling error, which in its contradiction of sign as presence, "questions the limit which has always constrained us, which still constrains us—as inhabitants of a language and a system of thought—to formulate the meaning of Being in general as presence, or absence, and the categories of being or beingness (ousia)."⁴¹ Likewise, the writing of "feminine" desire by Cixous is designed to question repressive structures in our thought and writing.

"Feminine" and "masculine" thus do not correspond to the categories of man and woman in an exclusive way, but to an economic differential in the manner of desiring and spending: "there is no timeless essence of femininity and masculinity, only subjects caught in a network of historical power relations."⁴² They point to different ways of relating to pleasure and the law of the father which produces, "a whole huge system of cultural inscription that is legible as 'masculine' and 'feminine.'"⁴³ It is the "specula(risa)tion" of woman, the marking of woman with masculine logos, which Cixous, like Irigaray, calls into question. In "Sorties" and "Medusa," Cixous outlines the main differences between the two economies, and characterises the "masculine" as a desire for and toward death:

I learnt everything from this first spectacle: I saw how the white (French), superior, plutocratic civilised world founded its power on the repression of populations who had suddenly become "invisible" like proletarians, immigrant workers, minorities who are not the right colour. Women. Invisible as humans. However, of course, perceived as tools—dirty, stupid, lazy, underhanded, etc. Thanks to some annihilating dialectical magic. I saw that the great, noble, 'advanced' countries established themselves *by expelling what was foreign; excluding it but not dismissing it; enslaving it*. A commonplace gesture of History: there have to be two races—the masters and the slaves.⁴⁴ [italics mine]

In this passage, Cixous reflects on the history of war and violence of the white supremacist colonial regimes by referring to her personal experience of exclusion as a Jew in Oran at the time of the Vichy Regime—an experience that she frequently returns to in her work. She denounces the exclusion and dismissal, the repression of the "foreign," of what cannot be fully comprehended in what she describes as a "masculine" economy characterised by desire for possession and profit, violent appropriation, ownership, gain, profit, in which the "other" (whether it is a person or the unconscious, the irrational, the foreign, the strange, the "feminine," the forces that govern our lives) has to be tamed, repressed, subjugated; and where, as Cixous writes, "loss and expense are stuck in the commercial deal that always turns the gift into a gift-that-takes. The gift brings in a return. Loss, at the end of a curved line, is turned into its opposite and comes back to him as profit."⁴⁵ Cixous substitutes the masculine, capitalist economy of return, profit and appropriation with a "feminine"

41 Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. by Alan Bass as (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 10.

42 Verena A. Conley, *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1991), p. 59.

43 Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clement, *The Newly Born Woman*. Translated by Betsy Wings and with an introduction by Sandra M. Gilbert (Minnesota: University Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 80–81.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

45 *Ibid.*

economy based on giving and loving. The revolt against the old order then is not a regime change, but it passes through a re-inscription of a “feminine” sign system which the “masculine” has excluded from writing, where images are disjointed and inappropriate. If the desire for appropriation and death that governs the “masculine” capitalist economy is one of the destruction and repression of the “feminine” element which led to the paralysis of imagination, *écriture féminine* overturns given images and meanings through a proliferation of multiple forms of expression in an economy characterised by accumulation (excess) via subtraction (loss).

For example, she reinscribes the “feminine” in the idea of death, alienation and detachment. Cixous has written extensively about the way in which the death of her father marked her coming to writing, in a way that places death as a generative loss; and how the memories of her midwife mum helping women giving birth influenced Cixous’ understanding of alienation as a creative process and an experience of profound transformation of the relation between life and death. Against an economy of appropriation that only produces wars and divisions as the “immediate bloody death” inflicted upon “the uncontrollable elements,”⁴⁶ *écriture féminine* operates:

In-between, undoing the work of death—to admit this is first to want the two, as well as both, the ensemble of the one and the other, not fixed in sequences of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamised by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another.⁴⁷

The locus of the “feminine” is for Cixous a space in-between; the “feminine” marks a cut, the cut of sexual differentiation that aims not to reproduce division, but rather to produce difference. It is synonymous with bisexuality, doubling, the relational, the displaced, the potential of multiple differentiations. It stands for an economy of abundance and no-return, in which loss is not bound to profit, but promises of openness and unconditional love and respect. Cixous’ favourite poets, as she writes in her powerful essay “Readings,” are those who have developed “a sense of positive loss, like Clarice Lispector, or Anna Akhmatova, in whose poetry we read of something never lost at the very bottom of loss, or Marina Tsvetayeva, in whose texts the stakes are something that she never had. Theirs are all texts of despair, that is, of hope.”⁴⁸ It is this sense of positive loss (of giving “something she never had”), at the cusp between an economy of the gift and a capitalist economy that severs relations and commodifies identities, that Cixous situates *écriture féminine* as an economy where loss is never lost.

This economy of abundance influenced by *differànce* is reflected in Cixous’ use of chains of “infinitely regenerative substitutions,”⁴⁹ of metaphors that produce an “incessant displacement by which a word is and is not the word, it is also its opposite, its neighbour, its phonic double.”⁵⁰ Cixous’ writing, as Calle-Gruber has observed, “replaces, it substitutes,

46 Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, p. 879.

47 Ibid., p. 885.

48 Hélène Cixous, *Readings. The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva* (University Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 111.

49 Jacques Derrida, *H.C. for Life, that is to say...* Trans. by Laurent Milesi and Stefan Herbrecter (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 25.

50 Hélène Cixous, Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints: Memory and life writing*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz (London–NewYork: Routledge, 1997), p. 23.

it puts in the place of (one address for another, a word, a phoneme, a grapheme for another, one meaning for another), it changes subjects, it replaces the subject, identity, gender [*sexe*], or language itself[...].”⁵¹ Substitutions have the effect of producing linguistic events by contiguity, and by layering different meanings, producing losses and slippages.

Cixous adopts French as if it was a foreign language; approaching it from outside, as a stranger—pushing syntax and grammar to its limits; playing with the double meanings of words or expressions;⁵² by employing neologisms, alliteration, and playing with the sonic dimension of language, continuously oscillating between presence and absence; what it is and what it is not, in a way that attempts to disarm the power of death that Western philosophies have armed the language with. She experiments with a form of writing that attends to the absent and present, the alternation of “I” and “you,” with brevity and repetition, producing movement in the text; acceleration, instances of negation, as a verbal event that colludes what is present and what is absent, the actual and the inactual.

Écriture féminine makes present in writing what is lacking in actuality, and it does so by doubling the negative of death “to say ‘no’ to oblivion. Or you might call it a waste of words.”⁵³ It is in this respect that it is possible to read Cixous’ claim, in “Sorties,” that, although “a feminine practice of writing is impossible” to be theorised, “it does *not* mean it does *not* exist.” This double negation allows Cixous to claim a writing that “takes place and will take place somewhere *other* than in the territories subordinated to philosophical-theoretical domination. It will *not* let itself think except through subjects that break automatic functions.” (All italics are mine.) In this brief passage Cixous uses the negative three times, and in the whole text “no” is repeated thirty-four times. Here Cixous seems moved by a desire to restore a necessary void to “break automatic functions” and at the same time this void is filled with the wasteful yet unlost words of her more than seventy pages of multi-layered poetic-philosophical and political meditation on a form of writing that speaks with a Medusian’s laugh. *Écriture féminine* is an investigation of the materiality of thinking and language, of emotions and feelings (the materials of writing that have been traditionally described as “feminine”) as a source of power and revolt that aims to undo the thought of thoughts and experience and leaves room for the unthought, what is “lost” in the exuberant exchange between the life and writing. *Écriture féminine* forces the block represented by the closures and limitations imposed upon imagination by the economy of the “masculine” that reduces meaning to appearances, to what is present, in an exuberant poetic gesture that affirms life’s power of revolt.

2.2 Alienation

In *Hélène Cixous: Writing and Sexual Difference* (2004), Abigail Bray reads the “feminine” as a radical reinterpretation of alienation. Bray explains that to accept the classical social and psychoanalytic narratives of what it means to be woman is to enter an alienated relationship

51 Jacques Derrida *H.C. for life* Trans. by Laurent Milesi and Stefan Herbrechter, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006).

52 In the mode of an *antilogika*, that, as Canadian poet Anne Carson explains, is the equivalent of “painting a picture of a thing that moves inclusively over the negative and the positive, defining the things that are by excluding the things that are not, evoking the absent in order to measure it against the present.” Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 103.

53 Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 108.

with one's own desires. If in the history of psychoanalysis, women have been dispossessed of their ability to be active agents of their desires, Cixous sees in this alienation the possibility of re-claiming a different way of desiring that has not been colonised by patriarchy and does not coincide with the desire for ownership, but is alienated from it. It exists as its double. It is this distance produced by the cut that is the differential potential of sexual difference, that which allows a doubling of desire that, according to Cixous, frees the potential of desiring differently.

Cixous argues that women have already been separated from their bodies, and not only in the negative sense imposed by culture. Cixous further argues that the act of giving birth is a form of alienation which, however, carries a message of love: it is a form of caring for and giving oneself to the forces of the others that inhabit us.

Alienation happens when things that should naturally go together are kept apart. The main use of alienation in English refers to a condition of estrangement, distance, detachment, and fragmentation, and it is connoted negatively. The German use of the term alienation possesses an existential dimension, in the sense of an unhomeliness, as a constitutive condition of human existence, that Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory deals with. At least since Freud, alienation and lack had been associated with the "feminine." In Irigaray's reading of Marx's description of speculative economy, Marx refers to the ways in which, through capitalist production, women become "objects of value" on the marketplace, or commodities of masculine speculation. Just as a commodity becomes "dispossessed of [its] specific value" and "re clothed in a form that makes it more suitable to men," so too are women "transformed into value-invested idealities."⁵⁴ Accordingly, women's value does not flow from their bodies, their language, or their natural constitution as singular beings, but "from the fact that they mirror" man's need for exchange. "By submitting women's bodies to a general equivalent, to a transcendent, supernatural value," Irigaray argues, "men have drawn the social structure into an ever greater process of abstraction, to the point where they themselves are produced in it as pure concepts."⁵⁵

With Hegel and Marx alienation is used to translate terms such as *entäusserung*, which can mean externalisation, and *entfremdung*, which is more like estrangement, and this conceptual and philological ambiguity is often encountered, as scholar Marina Vishmidt explains, in the discourse of theatre, aesthetics and art history.⁵⁶ Marx applies alienation to the conditions of labour under capitalist social and property relations, so that alienation is "the condition of people suddenly dispossessed of access to any means of survival and having to look to the market for any prospect of the continuation of their existence."⁵⁷ In this case, alienation is more than an existential matter. It is the structural condition of a capitalist society.

The idea of "not-belonging to oneself" is rooted in the humanist, post-Enlightenment critique of religion and divine powers which keep society subjugated and alienated from historical time and the possibility of action. Alienation, as Vishmidt claims, "draws our attention to the imperative to bracket the human," and refers to "a social ontology of

54 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Eng. trans. by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke as (Ithaca-New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 181.

55 Luce Irigaray, "Women on the Market" in Alan D. Schrift, *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethics of Generosity*, (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 188.

56 Marina Vishmidt, "Relatable Alienation: The Logic and History of an Idea," (2018) paper delivered on the occasion of A Symposium on Alienation (2018). Available through: https://www.academia.edu/38307287/Relatable_Alienation_The_Logic_and_History_of_an_Idea. [Accessed January 2020].

57 Ibid.

dispossession.”⁵⁸ that is both a lack of control and a lack of freedom. In this respect, alienation is meant to describe a distance and a constraint: distanced by one’s own desire, and constrained to follow or fit into an established structure. *Écriture féminine* puts an emphasis on a form of alienation, a distance that allows forms of revolt against the constraints of established meanings and structures, and through the power of imagination (as the non-actual; as a form of alienation) to subvert the order of language as structures that govern our lives. A form of generative alienation that, as Cixous writes, “risk loss not in order to gain a whole organic self (that is a phallic myth that pathologises the fragmented “feminine”), but a self which dares to play with fragmentation, schisms, distance without experiencing annihilation.”⁵⁹ *Écriture féminine* suggests a poetic use of self-writing that by alienating ourselves from ourselves, by fragmenting and dispersing our desires, activates the possibility of new forms of sociality generated in collaboration and created in a collective manner by using the common materials of grammar, language and imagination.

2.3 To call oneself abroad

*We might say this is only a metaphor;
but it is the dream of every author to arrive at such a transfiguration of the self,
such a remove that I become vine.*
(Hélène Cixous, *The Author in Truth*, 1991)

Écriture féminine values the power of imagination, the poetic and the quotidian to disorient and defamiliarise the familiar, with what we already know or think we know, in an attempt to keep open the space of the possible to accommodate the presence of all possible other voices that inhabit the text as a social space: “writing—begins, without you, without I, without Law, without knowing, without light, without hope, without bonds,”⁶⁰ writes Cixous. For Cixous, writing starts in the body, in the materiality of living and of language; in the material of the unconscious.

In the economy of Cixous’ writing, the gesture of writing is accompanied by a “relentless process of de-selfing, de-egoisation”⁶¹ which lends an ear to the multiple sensible manifestations of the existent when—“the flesh tears, writhes, rips apart, decomposes, revives, recognises itself as a newly born woman.”⁶² The language of the “newly born woman” is pregnant with the traces of this body: in the traces of sexual difference that are hidden in the gendered grammar of the French language; in the slippage of meaning provoked by the change of a vowel. In a note included in her dialogue-book with Mireille Calle-Gruber, Cixous notes that writing “presupposes an unconscious belief in something, a force and a materiality that will come, manifest itself, an ocean, a current that is always there...”⁶³ This writing that stems from the material world also demands a reinvention of

58 Ibid.

59 Abigail Bray, *Hélène Cixous: Writing and Sexual Difference* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 59.

60 Hélène Cixous, “Coming to Writing” in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 38.

61 Hélène Cixous, “The Author in Truth” in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 156.

62 Ibid., p. 36.

63 Hélène Cixous, Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints: Memory and life writing* (1997), p. 41.

the self that, Cixous argues, is possible when the writer, “develops both the perceptive and the affective tools to become other-than-human,”⁶⁴ and take “a trip around the world to make an entrance from the other side, this time as a stranger.”⁶⁵ The value that Cixous attributes to this experience of estrangement is remarkable here, as it gives us insights into the way Cixous conceives of the relationships self-other, as one where we become the other-than-oneself, in a delicate exercise of undoing the self in ourselves, rather than attempting to occupy the position of the other. In the essay “Coming to Writing,” Cixous makes a parallel between the experience of positive loss of self in writing and the experience of alienation in giving birth that might help clarifying this. Cixous writes:

And so when you have lost everything, no more roads, no direction, no fixed signs, no ground, no thoughts able to resist other thoughts, when you are lost, beside yourself, and you continue getting lost, when you become the panicky movement of getting lost, then, that’s when, where you are unwoven weft, flesh that lets strangeness come through, defenceless being, without resistance, without batten, without skin, inundated with otherness, it’s in these breathless times that writings traverse you, songs of an unheard-of purity flow through you, addressed to no one, they well up, surge forth, from the throats of your unknown inhabitants, these are the cries that death and life hurl in their combat.

And this tissue from which your pains tailor this body without borders, this endless wasteland, this ravaged space, your ruined states, without armies, without mastery, without ramparts—you didn’t know that they were the gardens of love. Not demand. You are not jealousy, not calculation and envy, because you are lost. You are not in touch. You are detachment. You do not beg. You lack nothing. You are beyond lack: But you wander stripped down, undefined, at the mercy of the Other. And if Love comes along, it can find in you the unlimited space, the place without end that is necessary and favourable to it. Only when you are lost can love find itself in you without losing its way.⁶⁶

In this evocative passage, through a series of substitutions, of spatial and bodily metaphors, Cixous describes this moment of loss of coordinates: to get lost, disorientation (“no direction”); loss of fixed signifiers and signified (“no fixed signs”); de-hierarchisation (“no thoughts able to resist other thoughts”). Notably, here Cixous’ use of negation—used by Cixous fifteen times: no roads, no directions, no fixed signs, no demands, no jealousy, no envy, no calculation, not in touch, do not begin, and lack nothing, without losing—a waste of words through which the gesture of “giving birth” accrues possible meanings.

“No” progresses from an act of destruction of “fixed signs” to a “no” that “lacks nothing,” that does not need to be taken apart and where “no” does not need to oppose,

64 Rosi Braidotti, “On the Female Feminist Subject: From ‘She-Self’ to ‘Self-Other’” in *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011 Second Edition), pp.117.

65 Hélène Cixous, “The Author in Truth” in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), p.175.

66 Hélène Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” In *Signs*, 7:1, (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1981), p. 48.

but becomes another way of saying “yes;” a doubling of the negative that recuperates the subversive potential of a moment of loss and detachment through “a waste of words:” the sentences, characterised by brevity, run after each other and accumulate in a movement that implies an interplay of excess and loss, of absence and presence.

Cixous’ loss of self is also an invitation to listen to the unconscious (“this tissue”), the enormous region which collects “all sorts of signifying elements” or else “events that time has transformed into signifiers... jewels, materials of the earth, that are propitious for a future book.”⁶⁷ It is in “this endless wasteland” and “ravaged space”—“your ruined states, without armies, without mastery”—in these “gardens of love” and “unlimited space” that the self “climbs down” and loses itself, in the huge reservoir of the unconscious, a space that Cixous identifies with wealth and abundance.⁶⁸ The emphasis placed on the unconscious as a space of abundance, and thus a source of subversive writing, might be explained by considering the unconscious not only as a reservoir of existing motifs to be unlocked, but also and more importantly, a place where semantic drifts occur.

Cixous’ writing follows the rhythm of the body, of the unconscious, with its free-associations and repetitions. A “cardiac rhythm” that “obliges the discourse to come out of joint”⁶⁹—where a comma and a full stop never ends overturning. Deleuze describes Cixous’ writing as “stroboscopic,” that is characterised by movement, and speed, “wild” speeds, where “the narrative comes alive, and the different themes inter-connect, and the words form variable figures, according to the accelerated speeds.”⁷⁰ A speed that, according to Deleuze, puts a double demand on the reader: it is a work which demands to be read slowly, but also quickly (although you may have to re-read it, faster and faster). Let’s consider an example of Cixous’ fragmented and accelerated way of writing, a passage from her work of fiction *Deluge* (*Déluge*), published in 1992:

And suddenly, it’s reality [la réalité]. Right in the middle of the dream [du rêve], an isle [une île] in an ocean [un océan] of dreams, and it’s the earth [la terre]. It is *she*. It is *he*. It’s reality. But reality with perfect features, like in dreams. Good fortune is like that. Fortune arrives. Looks at us. We see each other. The absolute simplicity of the mirror is produced: the two people are suddenly the same.⁷¹

Here, Cixous substitutes the gender of the word “dream,” “isle,” “ocean,” an inversion of gender pronouns, moving between the “masculine” and “feminine.” Sentences are characterised by brevity; but also an abundance of short sentences that accumulate. Each sentence performs what it says: “it’s earth;” “it is she.” But each sentence is also a potential new beginning. Each full-stop announces a possible turn: a new image, a new set of concerns, a new layer in the text. It is only through the relations between and the accumulation of them that the passage accrues meaning.

67 Hélène Cixous, Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints: Memory and life writing*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. (London-New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 29.

68 Verena Andermatt Conley, *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1991), p. 62.

69 Hélène Cixous, Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints: Memory and life writing*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. (London-New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 46.

70 Gilles Deleuze, “Hélène Cixous or Stroboscopic Writing.” Trans. By Martin McQuillan. The text first appeared in the *Littérature* review section of *Le Monde*, (August, 1972).

71 Hélène Cixous, *Déluge* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1992), p. 148.

There is a disruption of syntax and textual logic. There is loss: loss of parts of vowels or constants of words, like in the neologisms that populate her writing: the word *sext* (a word composed of sex + text); or *de-pense* (unthink and spend); *readwriting* (reading + writing); *Juifemme* (Jew + woman); *donnarance* (woman + orange); *Inseparab* (inseparable + Arab, to express the experience of exclusion in Algeria alongside that of Arabs who were considered “others” by French people); *malgérien* (mal + Algeria—to express Cixous’ painful experience in the land of Algeria); *inarrivée* (in + arrive; a non-arrival); *voiluptés* (veils + voluptuous to describe a veiled sensuality) *Illes*, which plays on the gender of words in French grammar fusing the masculine pronouns *ils* with the feminine *ells*; or *cielle* (the sky-her, which transforms the sky which in French is masculine into the feminine); *mensonges* (mes + songes: my dreams which also plays on the *mensonges* as lies). In these neologisms, absence and presence, the present and the past, the new and the old are held together in tension. The loss of parts of vowels or words however, does not annihilate the old meaning but on the contrary, generates a new word, a new meaning, a new story.

The uses of puns, alliterations, assonances, the creation of neologisms, the play on the signifiers; the pauses, the silences, the resonances and reverberations all are “functions which set you on the track of the mysteries of language.”⁷² Cixous uses the evocative power of words to great effect. So, an orange is not only a fruit and a colour, it is Lispector’s coloured accent, the oran/ge which carries the memory of Oran, the city where Cixous was born; the juicy oranges of Algeria, and then this orange also becomes oran/ge the initial of George, the name of Cixous’ father. “One word calls another and ‘Oran’ and ‘Orange’ resonate with Iran and the moment Iran comes in Iran leaves the place for another associated word...”⁷³

The resonances are not only in the order of meaning, they are also material and experiential as Cixous insists on the musicality of language as the production of sonorous events which improvise a critique of the mechanisms governing the production of language and discourse. As the “other” of writing, speech becomes the shadow of writing; a persistent and barely visible presence. One should read Cixous’ texts in their original language, French, and out loud to appreciate them for what they are, sonorous events.⁷⁴ Cixous makes use of the possibility of music and language to imagine, evoke, sound and resound, in order to restore to language, as she says, to “...its vocal chords, carefully handling the echo chamber, the sound boxes, the metaphorical journeys; burrowing between words, between letters, between strokes in order to deconstruct our dead language habits.”⁷⁵ On the other hand, this bending and twisting of language seems to have the effect of releasing and unblocking the unconscious, allowing the free improvisation of meanings and subjectivities. Yielding to language in this manner implies a loss of control, of mastery as well as an openness to improvise meaning. It is a writing that articulates the construction of meaning, that retraces and questions idiomatic differences, while breaking down the organisational principles of the text, of sexuality, and discourse in order to disallow a reading colonised by power; and gesture towards a generative meditation on what is occluded by language: sound. Cixous identifies the “feminine” with music, the vocal, the aural.

72 Ian Blyth, Susan Seller, *Hélène Cixous: Live Theory*. (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 100–02.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

74 Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*. Translated from Italian and with an introduction by Paul A. Kottman. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 142.

75 Hélène Cixous, Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints: Memory and life writing*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. (London-New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 166.

The phonic produces a rhythmic disruption in the meaning of the text, and the emergence of the voices from within the text refuse to perform a closure and insist on remaining open. Cixous' sentences are like windows which give access to the other side of the self: speech cuts writing as song cuts speech. Cixous' emphasis on the sonic in language takes its motive from reconstruction—not so much a reconstruction of a unity between words and speech, but the emergence of an insistent materiality which disrupts the capitalist economy of the “masculine” and the status quo of culture. For Cixous, the materiality of existence, of the unconscious, of language and the body, of that which carries the traces of this process of differentiation opens to the possibility of a positive form of alienation, of self-detachment, which, she argues, can deeply transform our understanding of human relations.

2.4 depersonalisation

De-proprietation, depersonalisation, because she, exasperating, immoderate, and contradictory, destroys laws, the “natural” order. [...] What happens to the subject, to the personal pronoun, to its possessives, when, suddenly, gaily daring the metamorphoses (because from her within – for a long time her world, she is in a pervasive relationship of desire with every being) she makes another way of knowing circulate? Another way of producing, of communicating, where each one is always far more than one.”⁷⁶

The deheroisation of myself is undermining subterraneously my building, accomplishing itself, unbeknownst to me, like an ignored vocation. Until it be finally revealed to me that *the life in me doesn't have my name*.

And I too have no name, and this is my name. And because I depersonalise myself to the point of not having my name, I answer each time that someone says: I.⁷⁷

In her analysis of Clarice Lispector's book *Near to the Wild Heart* in an essay entitled “Reaching the Point of the Wheat,” Cixous quotes this passage from Clarice Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.*⁷⁸ to explain how, as in other novels, Lispector reflects on writing as a process of undoing the structures and modes through which we give sense to life; to question preconceived models, habits, preconceptions and established ways of looking. This involves a questioning of the centrality of the individual's perspective, of the knowing subject, of the regime of presence imposed by the Empire of the Selfsame upon life. Like Cixous, Lispector is someone who pays attention to sounds that the realities surrounding the subject make, and how they give us insights into the mysteries of life that do not belong to the individual nor do they belong exclusively to the human.

Through her reading of Lispector, Cixous describes depersonalisation as a process through which the centrality of the self is dispersed in the space of a text composed in multiple keys, tones, and voices. A process of de-centering the authorial voice, a renunciation to mastery over the text which Lispector powerfully enacts in her most openly autobiographical

76 Hélène Cixous, *Sorties*, p. 96.

77 Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.* Trans. Ronald W. Sousa. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1988), p. 171.

78 The book is a poeico-philosophical investigation of existence that traces the journey of a spiritual rebirth. As the narrator undoes her mistaken spiritual constructions, there comes a gradual revelation of her material circumstances: a life of comfort; the life of a rentier who lives off her investment; a bohemian artist isolated from the average Brazilian life and who has no family and no interpersonal commitments. See Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.* [A paixão segundo G.H.]. Trans. Ronald W. Sousa. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1988). Hélène Cixous, “Reaching the Point of Wheat, or a Portrait of the Artist as a Maturing Woman” in *New Literary History*—Feminist Directions, Vol. 19, N.1, (1987), pp. 1–21.

text, *Água Viva*. Originally published in 1973, Lispector's *Água Viva* is a meditation on life and the creative process, in which the author explores a new way of writing about the self. The book took several years to make and in the second draft, Lispector removes the many explicitly personal references, in what she called a process of "drying out." *Água Viva*, which literally means "living water," is not exactly a dry book. Its poetry springs from the fluid realm of the unconscious—a site of multiple differences and differentiations; where the ego recedes into the background inviting a proliferation of different forms of interconnected material existence to emerge.

Água Viva is also a river, a channel, a passage, an opening, a break that facilitates the movement between self and world, between the informal and the formulated; the created and the uncreated; the realm of the proper and that one of the improper; subjectivity and its undoing. It is writing, making art: "I throw myself into the line of my drawing,"⁷⁹ she writes, that makes *Água Viva* an autobiography of writing itself. For Lispector, like for Cixous, the immersion of the self in the common material of language and writing open the possibility of an informal space of existence that defies oppositions and escapes normative definitions.

Água Viva is an eventless narrative in which Lispector's dissociations, her different perspective, forever break out in numerous directions. In the book, Lispector refuses to understand the relationship between singularity and totality, particularity and universality, the specificity of personal experience and the impersonal dimension of life (the impersonal realities of language, affects, relations) in terms of opposition. Instead, she follows the movement of an invisible crossing over, the instant of metamorphosis ("I let myself happen"⁸⁰), and with the devotion of a mystic writer, Lispector pays the utmost attention to the insignificant details of existence that reveal to her the truths of a life that does not belong to her, to the subject: a life without name. It is for this reason that her writing longs for a form of depersonalisation that, rather than establishing authorial subjectivity, puts it on hold so that the book can become a "thing that bubbles."

It is a "strange corps-a-corps," writes Hélène Cixous of *Água Viva*, "one does not know if it is one of love or struggle [...] Something disengages itself and even if there is no story, there will have been a movement, a movement of liberation, of interminable propulsion." This is the propulsion behind *écriture féminine*, one that challenges the silence of the text, of the blank page to speak, to insubordinate and exist in a state of perpetual deconstruction.

Depersonalisation as a decentralisation of the viewpoint of the author, as a dissolving of the boundaries of the self in writing is, however, more an aspiration of Cixous' *écriture féminine* than something that Cixous herself manages to achieve in her writing. In support of this claim, I would like to point out the arguably problematic way in which Cixous approaches the work of Lispector through the lens of her own theory of *écriture féminine*. Scholar Elena Carrera has observed that Cixous does not choose to talk about the historical circumstance that surrounded her encounter with Lispector, but her own "subjective, dream-like version of her experience of reading Lispector."⁸¹ I agree with Carrera's observation that Cixous tends to identify with Lispector to the point that her reading reduces

79 Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*. New translation by Stefan Tobler. Introduction by Benjamin Moser. (New York: New Directions Books, 2012), p. 17.

80 Ibid.

81 Elena Carrera, "The Reception of Clarice Lispector via Hélène Cixous: Reading from the Whale's Belly in Modern Languages Publications Archive, (1999), p. 89. Available through: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/17537.pdf>. [Accessed January 2020].

the distance between Lispector and herself, rarely allowing for more than one reading nor for Lispector's voice to speak for itself.⁸² The proximity that Cixous creates between her experience and the writer's in the act of writing while shedding light on one aspect, risks overshadowing the multiple ways in which Lispector's writing opens up to different possible readings. This is a risk that anyone who has ever written about art knows well, and is faced with in approaching the autonomy of the artwork and the larger trajectory of the artistic practice through the filter of one's own expectations and desires. This dilemma of transcendence is precisely what *écriture féminine* attends to.

Cixous' writing struggles to achieve a writing that is truly depersonalised, and thus leaves the project of an *écriture féminine* still open and to be accomplished. Yet *écriture féminine*'s invitation to pay attention to the power relations that are hidden in the givenness of common meanings and habits; to the question of the "approach" (of how to ethically approach writing); and of a different inhabitation of the common space of language that keeps open the in-between space where existence is in a state of becoming—is still valid and relevant today to the struggle against the status quo of culture. The call to the power of imagination, and to a poetic inhabitation of the space of alienation to overturn a violently alienated order of the world, *écriture féminine* calls to a poetic refusal that still holds potential, as it is demonstrated in this study by the concerns and works of a younger generation of writers which includes, but is in no way limited to Moyra Davey, Frances Stark and Anne Boyer.

2.5 Not-personal

An *écriture féminine* challenges hierarchical binary oppositions, genres and genders to produce a writing that is diffuse, volcanic, sensual and bodily; in other words, poetic. If *écriture féminine* as a writing of difference enacts a displacement, then what is the place of the personal in this poetic of displacement? The primary sources of Cixous' texts are her personal experience in the same way that the books she loves, as she admits, are "journals of experiences. They are books that have recorded, and indeed left intact, the emergence of an experience that has been located or noticed for the first time."⁸³ Cixous' writing explores an unclearly localised location of experience: the space of emotions, feelings, impressions and observations. But also, and more importantly, it is the mysteries of the known that her writing explores, what "has been located or noticed for the first time"—which doesn't mean it is something new—but the appearance of what is not apparent. That's why Cixous' texts, while possessing the qualities of journals of experience, are not, strictly speaking, autobiographical—because the biographical lives next to fiction, philosophy, poetry, literature and psychoanalysis.

The autobiographical is only one of the many layers of her heterogenous texts. Biographical elements add density to her texts, but do not overdetermine them. In the essay *Writing Blind*, Cixous writes, "my business is to translate our emotions into writings. First

82 Adam Joseph Shellhorse identifies as problematic the fact that Cixous does not problematise or situate Lispector's concerns in the larger cultural context of Brazil in the 1960s and '70s, nor does she explore the problem of identity and subaltern desire, rarely speaking of the political implications of Lispector's syntax. See Adam Joseph Shellhorse, "Figurations of Immanence: Writing the Subaltern and the Feminine in Clarice Lispector" in *Política Comun*, Vol. 6, (2014). Available through: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/pc/12322227.0006.012?view=-text;rgn=main>. [Accessed January 2020].

83 Hélène Cixous, Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints: Memory and life writing*, p. 57.

we feel. Then I write. The act of writing engenders the author. I write the genesis that occurs before the author.”⁸⁴ In the essay, “*October 1991...*” she writes, “I like being in the present; am interested in what’s in process.” As Ian Blyth observes, “What Cixous calls in this essay [October 1991] the ‘eternity of the instant’ encapsulates an immense range of emotions, details, comings and goings, all of which take place in the infinitesimally small moment of time.”⁸⁵ But this instant is also in a perennial state of disappearance. It is here that writing intervenes to record and memorise the feeling of a moment for the reader; to make the reader experiences “how it feels like,” something that would never fully be present. Cixous’ writing taps into the space of feelings and emotions, into the place of the unconscious and of experience. And while experience is the material of her writing, *écriture féminine* displaces the personal, the sensible into the space of poetic intervention, where, as Cixous describes it:

a reality [is] ...continuously worked over by fiction because of several factors: the surplus reality produced by the indomitable desire in the text; that which, beginning with the subject, tears itself away, through desire, from what already exists [*le déjà-là*], from the given [*donnée*], to project itself out into what does not yet exist [*le non-encore-là*], into the unheard of.⁸⁶

The personal is traversed by the disruptive force of *écriture*, an “indomitable desire” which “tears itself away”—that is slip to let go the desire for ownership, and becomes an affirmative gesture of poetic invention—the desire to experiment with the common material of language and share in the joy of this moment of unruly becoming. Cixous’ writing projects our imagination outside the givenness of experience; what is present and known—what is. Instead, she creates surpluses of realities, where one reality of perspective never dominates all others.

In her analysis of Cixous’ writing, literary scholar Calle-Gruber observes that, in the economy of “feminine” writing, the biographical pushes Cixous’ writing in two different directions: “to the periphery of me by means of the others; to the intimate by means of the intersections of these yours-others.”⁸⁷ It is this double-movement, of moving to the periphery of (undoing) the self, and closer to “these yours-others,” that, I want to argue, gives a disruptive quality to the use of the personal within the economy of *écriture féminine*. Like the concepts of alienation, loss, femininity, the experience of giving birth, the personal as material of writing is displaced in the place of the poetic, in the common material of language: syntax, grammar, words, verbs, and nouns that become adjectives.

In her analysis of Clarice Lispector’s book, *Água Viva: How to Follow a Trinket of Water*, Cixous writes: “Before organising myself I have to disorganise myself internally: and disorganisation is absolutely necessary. It is positive. Something has to be dissolved in order to experiment with a first stage of freedom.”⁸⁸ In a way that strongly resonates with Anne Boyer’s emphasis on poetry as the place where the world can be “turn upside down,” Cixous invokes the poetic qualities of language to produce doubles a surplus reality that

84 Hélène Cixous, “Writing Blind” in Hélène Cixous, *Stigmata. Escaping texts*, p. 143.

85 Ian Blyth, Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Live Theory*, (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 77.

86 Hélène Cixous, “The Character of ‘Character’” in Eric Prenowitz (ed.), *Volleys of Humanity: Essays 1972–2009* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 41.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

88 Hélène Cixous, “Água viva: How to Follow a Trinket of Water,” in *Reading With Clarice Lispector*. Trans. by Verena Andermatt Conley. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), pp. 69–70.

exceeds the personal, and in which the self gets lost, in a multiplicity of appellations to others to manifest. For Cixous, in writing it is possible to imagine a collectivity at work—working against the work of language, pushing its limits. In *Coming to Writing*, Cixous notes:

Who makes me write, moan, sing, dare? Who gives me the body that is never afraid of fear? Who writes me? Who makes my life into the carnal field of an uprising of texts? Life in person. For a long time now, the names that are only right for the urge to possess have not been right for naming the being who equals life... Neither father nor mother, nor brother nor man nor sister, but the being that love proposes we should become at that moment because it pleases us or is important to us in the scene, in these arms, on this street, in the heart of this battle, in the hollow of this bed, in this protest, on this earth, in this space—marked with political and cultural signs, and permeated with sings of love. Often you are my mother as a young man, and I am often your daughter son, your mineral mother, and you my wild father, my animal brother. Others, entirely unforeseen, that have come over us only once. Flowers, animals, engines, grandmothers, trees, rivers, we are traversed, changed surprised.⁸⁹

Cixous' writing attempts to follow the rhythm of life in its incessant becoming, its multiple transformations: as one thing transforms into another and another and another and another until what is left is writing, a stage "where you meet yourself among many others through whom flashes the thoughts of anyone-like-you."⁹⁰ The experience of estrangement is one Cixous is familiar with: from her childhood in Algeria, her experience of dislocation and linguistic disorientation, and her struggle to find a personal identity as a Jewish woman writer in post-war France. Born in Oran, Algeria in 1937 to a Spanish-French-Jewish father and a German-Jewish mother, Cixous grew up speaking German and French, while also hearing Spanish and Arabic. Her multilingual household profoundly influenced, as Cixous writes, her relation to language: "I am indebted for never having had a rapport of mastery, of ownership with any language; for having always been in the wrong, guilty of fraud; for having always wanted to approach every language delicately, never as my own, in order to lick it, to breathe it in, to adore its differences, respect its gifts, its talents, its movements."⁹¹ If *écriture féminine* is in part a form of personal writing it is in the manner—the delicate way—in which the writer assembles together the pieces of her text; the way in which she becomes a resonating body "for the sounds of the world;" addressing the invisible people, greeting those who are waiting for their turn to speak.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I read Cixous' *écriture féminine* as a disruptive textual practice. A textual practice of differing, where meaning and the subject of writing are continuously deferred,

89 Hélène Cixous, "Coming to Writing," p. 44.

90 Hélène Cixous, "At Circe's, or the Self-Opener." Trans. by Carol Bové, in *Boundary 2* Vol. 3:2 (Winter 1975), p. 388.

91 Hélène Cixous, *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. Deborah Jenson, trans. By Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson, Ann Liddle and Susan Sellers. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 22.

slipping away, in the interplay of presence and absence, appearance and disappearance. Through this practice of meaning unmaking, Cixous reread concepts and ideas, like, for instance, the idea of alienation and lack that has informed Western culture, in order to rekindle their potential to signify, pointing to other configurations of meaning. In this chapter, I argued for a reading of *écriture féminine* that acknowledges the multiple expressions of “no” that Cixous’ affirmative philosophy of life as *écriture féminine* (a saying “yes”) in order to challenge the capitalist economy of the “masculine.” I have attempted a reading that, by focusing on alienation and loss and the deconstructive character of the “feminine,” sheds lights on *écriture féminine*’s power of the negative as the inactual and potential, that for instance, manifest in Cixous’ frequent use of linguist negation and double-negation that produce a proliferation of meanings that refuses the presence implied by the act of naming. Cixous insists on the impossibility of naming, clearly defining, a “feminine writing,” which, however, does not prevent this kind of writing from proliferating, in many different forms. I have attended to the ways in which Cixous’ reconceptualises loss and alienation in writing from the perspective of the “feminine;” the ways in which loss informs Cixous’ personal experience, politics and formal choices.

In this chapter, I consider how Cixous’ *écriture féminine*, in its multiple and complex meanings, attempts to reimagine the relationship to alterity from the perspective of the alienated “feminine,” in a way that demands of the reader a more powerful and conscious inhabitation of our cultural commonplaces.⁹² Profoundly influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis and the Derrida’s destruction, *écriture féminine* explores the possibilities of an economy of expenditure in writing which breaks free from the appropriative logic of the “masculine” and contemplates the possibility of a writing of non-mastery, where loss and excess break the capitalist economy of profit, and the given modalities of an exchange in which one wins and one loses. While accepting to occupy a position on the side of loss, *écriture féminine* calls for a poetic and playful inhabitation of loss, one which engenders its potential for openness and transformation.

In writing, this means that Cixous refuses to remain “chained” to a realism that can only show what it can see and take it as a truth and instead invoke the power of a cut of sexual difference that breaks the chains allowing writing to escape, to fly. *Écriture féminine* pays attentions to the incongruities of the pictures, the traces, the negative, the absent, the pauses, the unconscious elements and how they keep the text open to the possibilities of transformation—that is of movement. This keeping open of the space of action, this movement that oscillates between positive and negative, is at the core of the process of differing of *écriture féminine*.

Écriture féminine invokes the power of imagination to subvert the order of language and hence open the possibility of transforming the structure of society. Cixous’ call to use the power of imagination to subvert the linguistic, poetic and social structures strongly resonates, as we shall see in Chapter 5, with Anne Boyer’s exhortation to use poetry as a tool that can “turn the world upside down,” producing inversions and routes for escape. The practices and poetic knowledges of refusal generated by feminist practices such as *écriture féminine*, as I will show in this study, still hold this subversive potential as writing “tools”—to be further explored and experimented with.

92 Betsy Win, “A Translator’s Imaginary Choices,” p. vii.

In the first and second part of this chapter, I introduce the “feminine” and the ways in which the concepts of the “feminine” and of “alienation” are elaborated in Cixous’ *écriture féminine*. I’ve discussed Cixous’ reading of the “feminine” as loss of the self, and the positive condition of alienation. As Cixous writes in *Hyperdream*: “So all is not lost I tell myself; therefore nothing being totally lost, nothing is lost.” Cixous reinscribes “loss” into an economy of the “feminine” where, as she writes, “nothing is lost”—because in this moment of disorientation produced by loss, Cixous argues, there is not only muteness and a sense of not being able to make sense of things, but the possibility for change, for “a revolution in our habits,” as Cixous argues, as the mind works “to cast itself beyond itself” using “imagination to drag itself forward.”⁹³ *Écriture féminine*’s emphasis on the power of imagination which sets in motion an undoing of the socialised self brings Cixous to use a language that negates, unsaying the already said; deferring the moment of naming and producing a proliferation of possible new beginnings and images. Examples of the use of linguistic negation and double negation, as I have shown in this chapter, are frequent in Cixous’ *écriture féminine*. The use of linguistic negation drives writing toward loss and excess—as an interruption produces a loss of meaning (we don’t know what things are, but we know what they are not), and at the same time, it also produce an excess that is both material (the necessity to use more words to describes “what is not”) and intellectual (we can only speculate on what it could be).

Another important literary strategy based on a negative inhabitation of the self in writing is the idea of “depersonalisation.” In the fourth section, I introduced “depersonalisation” as a writing tool. Influenced by the work of Clarice Lispector, Cixous describes depersonalisation, or *demoisation*, as a process of radical displacement of the self in the relationship with the ensembles represented by the text, which produce the possibility of a free improvisation of subjectivities. To give an example of such depersonalisation, Cixous observes the way in which Lispector’s writing attempts a displacement of the self in the space of the living, that is both the place of the human and of the divine, in order to de-anthropomorphise existence, and de-hierararchise the living, remaining close to the materiality of language and things. I have also shown how the process of de-personalisation is more of an aspiration of Cixous’ writing and this is particularly tangible in her reading of Lispector. Scholar Elena Carrera argues that Cixous’ poetic engagement with the work of Cixous is “exploitative”⁹⁴ and as Conley suggests, “excessively and narcissistically identifies with Lispector’s writing,”⁹⁵ as Cixous elaborates on the impact of their encounter on her own writing and subjectivity. I agree with Carrera and Shellhorse that Cixous’ reading of Lispector tends to overemphasise the similarities between the two writers, leaving out the context in which Lispector lived and worked and which might have inspired the Brazilian writer. This results in a monologue rather than a dialogue with Lispector. This is precisely the ethical dilemma at the heart of Cixous’ conceptualisation and practice of *écriture féminine*, namely the relationship to alterity (in all its different forms of expression). For the writer, this question is linked to the possibility of inhabiting different characters which might or might not become different articulations of the self, and the risk, as Lispector says in her

93 Cixous, *Hyperdream*, p. 11.

94 Elena Carrera, “The Reception of Clarice Lispector via Hélène Cixous: Reading from the Whale’s Belly in Modern Languages Publications Archive, (1999), p.89. Available through: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/17537.pdf>. [Accessed January 2020].

95 Verena A. Conley, *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1991), p. 84–85.

own words, is that “because I depersonalise myself to the point of not having my name, I answer each time that someone says: I.” Lispector’s ambiguous statement might be read both as a renunciation of the self in the encounters with all others, or it could be read as an act of appropriation. Cixous’ writing is certainly a reminder of the risk implied in any desire for recognition and identification. All of which does not invalidate the Cixous’ meditation on writing, the literary tools and devices that *écriture féminine* as a feminist disruptive practice of writing offers for contemplating the possibilities of ways out from the scene of a present in which an individual’s desires, experience, and the commons represented by language have been commodified by the Empire of the Selfsame.



Moyra Davey, *Seven*, 2014. Courtesy the artist and Murray Guy, New York.
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CHAPTER 3

In the gaps of meaning: Moyra Davey's promiscuous writing

I think it started with Simone Weil's spin on Homer's phrase "Already he lay, far from hot baths," to which she adds: "Nearly all of human life, then and now, takes place far from hot baths." I began to reflect on some of my siblings and nieces and the precariousness of their lives
(Moyra Davey, "Hot Baths/Cool Letters," 2017)

Like her intimate photographic practice, Davey's writing carries the traces of a subject yet her work is not, strictly speaking, confessional. While informed by Davey's life¹—her illness, her anxieties of production, her compulsive desire to take notes and collect things, and her fascination with literary figures and music technologies—her writing is neither meant to grant privileged access to intimate details of the artist's life, nor is it a spontaneous overflow of unexpressed unconscious feelings or emotions, and nor is she interested in producing "shocks" in the reader. In an interview with editor Liza Birnbaum, the artist explains that, "If I have this drive to reveal intimate stories, then I am always looking for ways to embed or buttress those stories in such a way that they become visible, readable and not simply dismissed as confessional, overwrought."² What does Davey mean when she states that she wants to make her account "visible" and "readable?" And how does this visibility and readability differ from other forms of self-exposure? How does Davey "buttress" her intimate stories? What kinds of forms and literary strategies does she employ to make her personal accounts readable, without giving away the details of one's own life?

One way in which the artist makes her personal accounts "readable" is by inviting others to speak; by invoking their presences, lives and works; by reading "obliquely" in a way that, for instance, allows her to tell her family's story through Wollstonecraft-Shelley's biographies; or by reading the works of Barthes and Benjamin as a way to speak about her relationship to writing and photography. This chapter investigates the ways in which Davey experiments with a "promiscuous" form that is influenced by her approach to photography, her

1 See Chris Kraus, "Description Over Plot" in Adam Szymczyk (ed.) *Speaker Receiver*, (Basel/Berlin: Kunsthalle Basel and Sternberg Press, 2010).

2 Liza Birnbaum, (2015), "An Interview with Moyra Davey" in *Big Big Wednesday #3*. Available through: http://www.greengrassi.com/file_columns/0000/0276/moyradavey_press_e.pdf. [Accessed November 2017].

interest in feminist writing³ and in literary histories. It is a form of giving an account of one-self that, as I will show, decentralises the “I,” vacating the illusion of an autonomous and fully-knowable self; and pays attention to the minute details of encounters and daily life and the precarious relations and structures that organise it; to the unspoken, unsaid, the unrecognised, the absent, the not-yet. In this chapter, I show how Davey’s promiscuous writing exists in the gaps, in the breaks where normativity and categories are suspended and can be challenged. Davey’s practice is one that challenges existing oppositions and separations between, for instance, writing and reading, interior and exterior, personal and impersonal.

Borrowing from critic Douglas Crimp,⁴ Davey calls her writing “promiscuous” in terms of “an embrace of materials, formats, histories and genres, and lastly but perhaps most importantly, an investment in language. I am a believer in heterogeneity as an enabler and enhancer of the story wanting to be told,”⁵ she writes in the essay “Caryatids and Promiscuity” (2014). And indeed, Davey’s literary montages are composed of heterogeneous material, often in the form of personal notes, which the artist borrows from many different sources, including her readings and her photographic practice.

The intimacy of Davey’s writing presses past the disciplinary boundaries, challenging the narrow limits of both intimate photography and personal writing. The artist describes her method of composing texts as one that oscillates between the *vérité* approach of the street and the controlled environment of the studio practice. This promiscuity is a feature of Davey’s writing, in which elements rub against each other, opposites produce ruptures and losses, and open gaps and silences cut through separations, disclosing differences that are fundamentally inseparable.⁶

The promiscuous qualities of Davey’s writing can be appreciated in the ways the artist writes as a reader—enjoying the moments of the casual encounter; the discoveries granted by a passage in a book; the illuminations prompted by something someone said, a commentary that invokes the spectre of writing, of a presence. In the essay “The Problem of Reading” (2003), for instance, Davey suggests that reading entails an active listening to “a distracting blip in her head [which] travels from one desultory scene to the next, each one competing for her attention.”⁷ For Davey, reading is “done with pen and notebook,”

3 In an interview with Elizabeth Lebovici, Davey comments: “I edited a book collection, *Mother Reader* [...] The process of editing that book totally revived my feminism. I had been an ardent feminist in the ’80s and early ’90s. I never stopped identifying as a feminist, but in the late ’90s, having a baby and the process of reading all that literature and of editing that book renewed me as a feminist. These themes of autobiography and shame are very relevant to women’s discourse, I think.” Moyra Davey, M. and Elisabeth Lebovici, Moyra Davey. BOMB, n.129 (2013), pp. 28–35.

4 In *October*, Douglas Crimp writes, “Having learned to support and grieve for our lovers and friends; having joined the fight against fear, hatred, repression, and inaction; having adjusted our sex lives so as to protect ourselves and one another—we are now reclaiming our subjectivities, our communities, our culture... and our promiscuous love of sex.” Crimp described promiscuity as a way of speaking that interrupts the more “proper” narrative. See <https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2016/11/the-pleasures-of-promiscuity-an-evening-with-douglas-crimp/>; <https://www.documentjournal.com/2016/11/douglas-crimp-malik-gaines/>; Douglas Crimp, *How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic*, in: *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002.

5 Moyra Davey, ‘Caryatids and Promiscuity’ in *I’m Your Fan*. Camilla Wills (ed.), (London: Camden Art Center, 2014), p. 35.

6 I borrow the term “difference without separability” from Black Feminist Denise Ferreira da Silva. In her essay *On Difference Without Separability*, Denise Ferreira da Silva poses the question, “How do we end the world as we know it?” To end the world as we know it, da Silva observes, requires releasing thinking “from the grip of certainty and embrace the imagination’s power to create with unclear and confused, or uncertain impressions,” inventing new practices and ways of being together. Denise Ferreira da Silva, “On Difference Without Separability” in Jochen Volz and Julia Rebouças (eds), *Incerteza Viva: 32a Bienal de São Paulo*, (exhibition catalogue), (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2016), pp. 57–66.

7 Moyra Davey, *The Problem of Reading*. Vermont College, (2003), p. 5.

and entails “a generative, creative cycle of taking in and putting out,”⁸ that takes the risk to produce something new.

The artist calls this hospitality of writing, oblique reading: a reading done “with a sort of free-floating attentiveness to the page and a diffusion of consciousness that tends to set me thinking about my own work and ideas.”⁹ It is this “free-floating attentiveness” and “diffusion of consciousness,” as a generative mode of paying attention to attention itself—asking questions of the kind of where does this come from? What seizes you? What sense does it make?—that brings Davey’s promiscuous writing close to the tradition of feminist writing of refusal embodied by Lonzi’s *scrittura autocoscienziale* and Cixous’ *écriture féminine*, and their understanding of this form of attentiveness as the power of a writing that revolts and rejects established ways of seeing and looking. Davey’s approach to writing is close to Cixous’ practice of “readwriting.” Cixous uses the term “readwriting” to point to the way in which her writings are often also readings of the works of other authors, and that this gives her writing its dialogical form. However, as Marta Segarra has pointed out, “Cixous’ reading consists not only of a tribute to her passion for literature, but also of a dialogue, sometimes even an ironic misappropriation or a passionate ‘digestion’.”¹⁰ In all these cases, the terms suggest a constant hospitality to texts from other poets, writers and thinkers.

It is no coincidence then that Davey finds inspiration in writers whose home might have looked like Davey’s, with shelves full of books filled by the work of literary figures who are themselves avid readers and note-takers, meditative types whose works pay attention to the minutiae of everyday existence and the necessities and conditions of life that shapes works of art and writing. They are writers who privilege factual observation over interpretation; detailed and acute descriptions over the pathos and sentimentalities of traditional autobiographical forms. Literary figures such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag, Jean Genet, Roland Barthes, who have enabled her to make works and writing that pay attention to the unrecognised, vernacular and accidental in photography and language. Writers with whom Davey shares knowledge of the intoxicating power of art making and writing, and a certain cold and detached attitude, yet not less rebellious and dissenting—risking the challenge of what seems impossible.

When Davey was bedridden with multiple sclerosis, writing helped her to find a new way of working—a more economical way of making art that did not require her to go outside. A kind of photography which could take seed in words.¹¹ Davey’s practice as photographer¹² began in the early ’80s, when she started making intimate black and white portraits of herself and her siblings. In the “1979 Series,” for instance, her sisters can be seen wearing white tank tops and striped shirts, while posing against a white wall. Their skinny bodies and cool expressions make them look sexually ambiguous, existentially rebellious more than erotic—in a way that exposes the vulnerability of their bodies and young lives. From the mid-80s to the early 2000s, Davey slowly abandons the human figure, and during this

8 Ibid., p. 10.

9 Ibid., p. 25.

10 See Marta Segarra, *The Portable Cixous*, (2010) pp. 7–8.

11 Moyra Davey, “Notes on Photography & Accident” in *Long life Cool White: Photographs & Essays*, (Harvard: Harvard University Art Museums, 2008).

12 Davey was born in Toronto and in the early 1980s Davey moved to San Diego to the University of California, where she received an MFA in 1988. In 1989, she moved to New York to attend the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program. Between 2005–08, she was part of the collective of artists, which includes Andrea Fraser, Nicolás Guagnini, Jason Simon, Christian Philipp Müller, Rhea Anastas, who started *Orchard*, a commercial, for-profit gallery invested in re-appropriating the means and develop a critique of the economic relations and conditions of value in the art market.

time, the subjects of her photographs became domestic objects or technologies on the verge of obsolescence, until they became “little more than the dust on bookshelves.”¹³ The evacuation of human presence from her intimate photos is reflected in Davey’s writing, in way the artist tends to remove intimate and shameful details of her life from her texts, and imbued the material qualities of language and writing (the landscape, the tools of writing—pens, paper, notebooks, even language itself) with emotional and psychological qualities. Gregg Bordowitz has described Davey’s visual practice as one that pays attention to the “unlooked,”¹⁴ insignificant details of ordinary life, of space fully inhabited, populated by objects yet devoid of human presence: empty whiskey bottles, defaced currencies, old turntables and records, piles of things, stuffed bookshelves, old loud-speakers; the barely visible presence of dust, the passing of time which wears things out, leaving marks and traces of passages.

Davey’s refusal of the centrality of the authorial voice in her first-person writing is commensurate to her attention for what is not immediately given in experience; the invisible forces that produce the text, attending to the realities of insignificant details—the “low hanging fruit”—as she calls them, of her practice: the overlooked, the leftover, what is left outside the realm of the visible and immediately sensible and yet exists as a trace: dust captured by her photographs, emotional echoes of the urgency of writing or making art that takes hold of her.

However, if the apophatic language of photography allows Davey to remove the emotional and autobiographical elements from the field of vision, first-person writing that draws on biography and personal experience confronts her with what seems to be an inescapable condition of presence: the presence of an “I” that comes to be identified with the person of the author, producing a confessional effect that makes writing “feel” hyper-subjective, a trivial act of self-disclosure. It is not only that the artist writes as a reader, but that her writing, like her photographic practice, challenges the realm of appearance, in an attempt to find a balance between presence and the absence thereof; between the need to appear to others and the desire to disappear in the subjectlessness of a creative existence that refuses to be reduced to pure presence. That’s why Davey admires film-makers like Derek Jarman, whose film *Blue* speaks of Jarman’s illness and his imminent death which the artist poetically visualises as a fading away of the person that is, however, the possibility of another kind of existence, an empty space—that of the screen filled with sonic and material traces, the sound, the texture of light and film and Jarman’s voices—all pointing to an existence beyond the visible. And yet, the presence of the subject in autobiographical works seems impossible to avoid. In her attempt to find a new practice of photography rooted in first-person writing, Davey wonders if it is possible to resist the call to presence that writing promises. In her texts she inhabits the negative space of writing, that is that of reading as a writing practice that attends to the absences, the gaps, the unsaid, the unexpected, the accidents that occur in-between writing and reading, words and images.

In this chapter, I consider the ways in which Davey conceives of her work as a practice of attending to the invisible forces of relations; those forces—such as love, anxieties, passion, anger, desire—that “tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, implicate us in lives that are not our own.”¹⁵ By paying attention to the forms and material

13 Moyra Davey, *The Wet and the Dry* (Paris: Paraguay Press, 2011).

14 Gregg Bordowitz, Moyra Davey, “Conversations at the Edge: Moyra Davey” (video), 2011. Available through: <https://vimeo.com/32809133>. [Accessed February 2020].

15 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life. The Power of Mourning and Violence*, (London: Verso Books, 2004), p. 24–25.

qualities of her writing—Davey’s use of the fragment, the personal note, the technique of the montage—and by examining the ways in which her writing produces ruptures, anxiously moving between multiple subjects and necessities, in this chapter I investigate the ways in which Davey’s writing inhabits this space in-between writing and reading; photography and writing; “the wet” and “the dry,” in a way that challenges oppositions, categories, that splits and fractures the self, stressing the otherness within, the otherness that is always already inside the subject and not exterior to it.

Davey’s writing invokes the absent presences of other voices, of other possible inhabitations of the text as social space. She makes an invitation to the reader to inhabit the text with her, to improvise with the artist the process of rearranging the pieces of an existence that is as singular as it extends far beyond the individual. Davey’s aspiration to a form of giving an account of oneself in which the artist/the writer is always “outside oneself,” where the space of practice involves an ecstatic movement that transcends the limitations of the self and the individual perspectives, brings Davey close to Lonzi’s *scrittura autocoscienziale* and Cixous’ *écriture féminine* and their call to a “poethics,”¹⁶ which fuses poetics and ethics together. Their focus on processes of depersonalisation and self-undoing in art and writing pose the ethical question of the other, of the relation between self and other. Davey’s writing explores the possibilities of new paths related to fundamental questions about humans and, with Lonzi and Cixous, she shares her desire to find a form of depersonalisation in writing that would attend to the precariousness of life and creative work, exposing the vulnerability and precarious relations that bind individuals together. Her writing records the process of a woman seeking a form that can express the mutual dependencies and entanglements of the living, and sustain social bonds.

In the first part, I consider the economical methods of Davey’s writing—her elliptical, fragmented and direct address—focusing on her use of the personal note as a basic unit of her literary montages. Stored in notebooks or organised in folders on her desktop, the personal notes are reused multiple times. Notes are traces of a past moment whose force and urgency has the potential to be activated in the present. Personal notes in Davey’s writing are usually short and often grouped under generic headers such as “Wet,” “Death,” “Illness,” “Paris.” Very little is shared about the intimate details of her life, which are generally limited to generic comments. Descriptive passages are very frequent especially in texts such as “Index Card” and “Notes on Photography & Accident.” In this section, through a reading of “Index Cards” (2010), a work composed of annotations, notes, factual descriptions and self-reflections that blur the line between letter writing, fiction, memoirs and commentary, I consider the ways in which Davey’s writing performs its promiscuity through the personal note and the technique of the montage.

In the second part, by looking at the literary montage “The Wet and the Dry” I consider the ways in which the artist challenges mainstream confessional writing by experimenting with and conceptualising a form of writing that is both “wet” and “dry,” personal yet depersonalised. In “The Wet and the Dry,” Davey explores and enacts her urgency to make *Les Goddesses* (2016), a film about her family and siblings and her reticence to reveal shameful details about herself or her sisters’ lives. These two opposing necessities make themselves felt in this literary montage, in which Davey finally decides to read the story of

16 See Marta Segarra, *The Portable Cixous* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), p. 7; Hélène Cixous, Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints: Memory and life writing*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. (London-New York: Routledge, 1997). Published in French as *Photos de Racine* (Paris: Editions de femmes, 1993).

her family obliquely, through Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughter's lives and their life circumstances. In Wollstonecraft's writing, Davey reads her desire for a form of writing that can do without unnecessary sentimentalities, and instead amplifies and doubles the silences, the echoes and resonances, dissonances, and all those things that evade immediate meaning and presence.

Like Cixous' invocation of de-personalisation and Lonzi's self-objectification in the writing of the diary, Davey's reflections on the economies of personal writing emphasise her need to dislodge the self from the centre; to write in the key of the personal in a way that implies a process of displacement and abandonment; a derailment. Simone Weil, who Davey quotes in "Wedding Loops," refers to this as an act of "decreation"¹⁷ in terms of "undoing the creature in us"—an undoing of self, of prescriptive forms. In the last part of this chapter, I examine how Davey performs her reading of de-creation, of the process of "holding on" and "letting go" that is at the heart of making art and writing, but also, as Davey reflects, of our relations to others—lovers, friends, siblings, her son, but also other artists and writers. How to cling to the personal yet be able to let go of it without risking the emptiness of annihilation? In this last section titled "The Void of Subjectlessness," I discuss the void of subjectless,¹⁸ of not having a subject for a work; of decentralising the subject, deconstructing its position and undoing the oppositions between singular/plural; self/other; void/fullness. Invoked by Davey and performed by her writing, this void hints to the fullness of the person and the multiplicity of voices that inhabit writing and an artistic practice. The words of Simone Weil resonate with Davey's own who quotes Weil on the subject of de-creation: "We participate in the creation of the world by decreating ourselves."¹⁹ And yet, as the writer wishes her own disappearance, this act of de-creation, as Davey observes, cannot be uncoupled from the creative endeavour and its social qualities.

In this chapter, I argue for a reading of Davey's writing that acknowledges the multiple and complex ways in which Davey inhabits the potential of a negative existence, where writing is also reading, and reading becomes the potential for more writing; where materials (like objects and language) become repositories of psychological depth; where the personal is conveyed in its impersonality; where meaning is never given, but always made in collaboration. Through her writing, Davey invokes the instability and precariousness of life where the immediately given is withheld to make room for the unexpected, the accident, for what cannot be fully grasped, where the familiar loses the familiarity it once had; where loss doesn't necessarily imply destruction, but becomes an instance of transformation. A transformation that, as Davey's writing shows, is possible in writing by producing spatial and temporal contiguity, by proximity and juxtapositions that continuously invoke the presence of an absence.

Davey's writing functions as an "enabler" of readings; a practice that can never be done alone, but one that always invokes and implies the presence of another, of the many others to whom Davey sends notes and letters of admiration and allegiance, attempting to use the sharpness of their hearing as a kind of code through which she then decodes other lives and trajectories of thinking.

17 Simone Weil, "Decreation" in *Gravity and Grace*. Trans. by Emma Crawford, Mario Von der Ruhr, (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 32.

18 Aweek Sen, "Low-Hanging Fruit" in *Les Goddesses and Hemlock Forest*, (Brooklyn, NY: Dancing Foxes Press, 2017), p. 12.

19 Simone Weil, "Decreation" in *Gravity and Grace*. Trans. by Emma Crawford, Mario Von der Ruhr, (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 33.

3.1. Index Cards

The personal note is the basic unit and the structuring principle of Moyra Davey's writing. As *aide memoire*, the note is a recording device. It is a way of preserving and transporting the memory of a moment into the future, in the same way that photography does. In "Notes on Photography & Accident" Moyra Davey observes that, "reading and thinking about note-taking gives me a form of security, a thrill even [...] I'm drawn to fragmentary forms, to lists, diaries, notebooks, and letters" for the promise they anticipate: "the concreteness of these forms, the clarity of their address."²⁰ Concreteness and clarity are two adjectives that could equally be applied to Davey's own writing and her aspiration for an impersonal form of personal accounting that collapses the distance between writing and reading. What attracts Davey to the personal note, however, is also the way it carries the traces of the person who wrote it, offering insights into her necessities and drives, the personal reasons and the state of mind of the note-taker at the time of writing, without, however, giving away juicy details about her life.

In this section, I focus on the way the personal note conceptually structures Davey's montage, allowing her to experiment with a form of writing that is personal and yet depersonalised. At the same time, I show how the technique of the montage allows the artist to inhabit the in-betweenness, the break, the gap between fragments, and between fragments and images, opening the text to the realities outside the text, and the possibilities of its transformation.

The note allows Davey's writing to escape the need for a linear narrative and to move freely between times, spaces, and subject matters. It is an economical way of writing: notes are left-overs, scraps, comments, aphoristic and marginal observations, they often form the preparatory materials for books. Notes are characterised by brevity, carry great meanings in a very concentrated form, implying more than what they say; leaving space for the unsaid, unknown and unrecognised. They are born out of the necessity to record and retain the memory of a significant yet fleeting moment, expressing the fundamentally incomplete and partial nature of any attempt at interpretation. They can be easily stored, and are used and recombined by the artist in new constellations. Davey has found in the personal note not only a source for writing, but, her compositional method, based on fragmentation, dissonances and resonances, and the physical proximity produced by the montage—where, for instance, images are placed next to text; descriptive notes next to personal meditations; where the "dryness" of the index card exists in the same space of the intimate tone of a diary entry.

In "Notes on Photography & Accident," Davey observes that Hannah Arendt describes Walter Benjamin's notes as precious "pearls and corals," that he kept in "little notebooks with black covers which he always carried with him."²¹ The recording of readings and matters of daily observation constitute the precious material of her writing; the incomplete bits and pieces of meaning, of a life, of work, in which meaning happens as a process of accretion which implies loss.

The technique of the montage that sets new relations and new meaning in motion makes this loss more tangible. In montages, the relationship between the images and the

20 Moyra Davey, "Index Cards" in *Speaker Receiver* Adam Szymczyk (ed.), (Basel/Berlin: Kunsthalle Basel and Sternberg Press, 2010), p. 30.

21 Moyra Davey, "Notes on Photography & Accident," p. 6.

text is not always clearly given. For instance, in “Index Cards,” sometimes the photo and the label of each section of the text match, as in the case of the section entitled “Newspapers” above which hovers a close-up image of a pile of clipped newspapers. At other times, the link between the image and text follows a more associative logic, for instance, in the close-up of an old ceiling lamp which accompanies the section entitled “Blindness, Illness, Sleep doc.” Meaning occurs in the gaps between images and words; between notes, when they are placed in close proximity; a proximity that does not annul differences, but places them in contiguity, as inseparable, in a way that opens the photographic discourse and personal writing to each other, and has them disturb each other’s narratives.

The montage is a bridge that has “lost” its function of transportation—since it does not merge but links different parts without continuity—meaning takes place in the gaps, in the breaks between fragments, past and new, allowing for the production of new relations between pre-existing fragments, ideas, images and narratives. The literary montage has a history that goes back to avant-garde movements such as Dadaism, Surrealism, Futurism and Cubism who often included non-verbal elements in their writing. Its characteristic is that it provokes clashes between genres, styles and concepts, contrasting with the classical character-driven narrative, playfully breaking down traditional languages and forms: favouring fragmentation, ambiguity and paradox, breaks and syntactic contradictions over unity. The montage undermines strict separations between two realms, for example, between fiction and documentation, found and made, personal and impersonal and opens an epistemological space for the experimentation of new forms.

Like Lonzi’s montage in *Autoritratto*, the montage allows Davey to render inoperative any simple opposition between photography and writing, personal and impersonal, “wet” and “dry,” or between singularity and totality.²² At the same time, it produces a generative contiguity that allows for the amplification and modulation of existential resonances (like the passion for romance, the precarious circumstances of her life and work, the preference for notes, lists, fragmentary forms; of a style of writing in which the personal is softly intimated) through the juxtaposition of images and texts; of styles, voices and readings.

As Black radical scholar Fred Moten notes, the montage exists as “a deconstruction of its singular elements that element’s intervalic relation to the set of which it is a member.” This deconstruction of pre-existing relations among the elements of the montage happens through a cut and a suture, allowing for the formation of new relations that are based on improvisation and affectivity: “an expressive procreativity improvising through opposition and relation of cut and suture, the image and the sound of love.”²³ Moten beautifully observes the relation of “cut” and “suture” that the montage renders operative, and which produces images and sounds of love—like those made by Davey, whose questioning of the givenness of forms of expressions and ways of accounting becomes an opportunity to express her admiration for artists and writers like Benjamin, Barthes, Wollstonecraft, Crimp and many others. With these writers, Davey shares her love for notes and fragmentary forms; and to them, she owes some of her reflections on the precariousness of a life, and on the relationship between photography and writing. Like the writers she admires,

22 Here my writing is indebted to Fred Moten’s observation that “montage renders inoperative any simple opposition of totality to singularity. It makes you linger in the cut between them, a generative space that fills and erases itself. That space is, is the site of, ensemble: the improvisation of singularity and totality and through their opposition. “*In the Break: The Aesthetic of the Radical Black Tradition* (Minneapolis /London: University Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 89.

23 Ibid., p. 122.

Davey's works suggest an understanding of art and writing as daily practices of collecting accruing, stacking and stitching together, with loving attention, thoughts, words, images, quotations and memories.

In 2010, Moyra Davey published the text "Index Cards." Its title spells out a crucial conceptual twist which characterises Davey's approach to personal writing. In conversation with curator Adam Szymczyk about the process of assembling "Index Cards," Davey comments that throughout the process of writing she had the "uneasy sensation that I was cannibalizing myself" and thus needed to find a way to counterbalance this effect. The text itself is exemplary in this manner: it is a combination of diary-entries, notes and photographs organised in the form of index cards, and chronologically ordered from December 20, 2008 to December 31, 2009. Each set of notes is arranged in a paragraph of variable length preceded by keywords like "Story, Structure," "Newspapers." While the notes occupy half of the page, the other half is occupied by a series of photographs from Davey's "Mailers Series" depicting details of things like newspapers, close-ups of interior décor as well as shots from the film.

The notes in "Index Cards" record and compose the material for her film-essay *My Necropolis* (2009), a film "about writers, and their graves," as the artist explains, and "rooted in travel, linked by three cemeteries in three cities—New York, New Orleans and Paris—in three moments in time."²⁴ The cross-temporality and spatiality of Davey's film is reflected in the form of the "Index Cards" as a non-linear assemblage organised in several independent and recombinable sections. In the diary we read entries such as "July 2006. In the hospital on steroids" or "October 10. First Interferon injection." Personal information about the artist is scattered, the cards don't record much about her hospitalisation or the way she felt or what she went through. They open onto the personal life of the writer, but are devoid of psychological interpretations. Instead, Davey recurs to the words of other writers, of Benjamin and Barthes, to speak of the necessities prompted by her illness and her desire to continue to make photography by using this economical means of writing. In an essay on the note published in *October* magazine, scholar Denis Hollier observes that the emergence of the index card in Barthes' text is simultaneous with his interest in the autobiographical.²⁵ Barthes believed, as Hollier points out, that the first-person pronoun could be detached from the sentimentalities and psychological implications of autobiographical writing, and produce a productive disidentification between author and writing. For Barthes, the index card "substitute[s] the semantic emptiness of the shifter [...] for the imaginary fullness of the person,"²⁶ in a way that, as Barthes believed, made it possible to write a personal account devoid of personal commentaries and entirely comprised of seemingly insignificant information that would frustrate the reader's expectations for juicy details of the writer's life.

In "Index Cards" Davey recalls that Barthes showed an interest in the impersonality of the index card²⁷ and of the personal notes, the fact that, unlike "insipid moral musings,"

24 Moyra Davey, "Index Cards" (2010), pp. 10–11.

25 Denis Hollier, "Notes (on the Index Card)" in *October* magazine n.112 (Spring 2005), p. 40.

26 Ibid.

27 Rowan Wilken, writes that Barthes considered the card index as a "co-author" of his text and argues that the way he used them go beyond a mere aid to memory, but it is instrumental to the organisation of Barthes' ideas and work method, the use of fragments as "non-totalisable" parts, where the text becomes a space of many voices and quotations drawn from many discourses. Rowan Wilken, "The Card Index as Creative Machine" in *Culture Machine* Vol. 11 (2010), p. 11. Available through: https://www.academia.edu/12476222/The_Card_Index_as_Creativity_Machine-. [Accessed January 2020].

notes “retain their immediacy and relevance to our lives,”²⁸ and open to the imaginary fullness of the person. Inspired by Barthes and moved by her necessity to find an impersonal-personal form of writing, Davey’s “Index Cards” record her life at the moment of writing the text (her illness, her inability to work and travel, her time spent in Paris, her visits to several cemeteries). Recorded in “an almost unconscious manner,” Davey writes, the note “allows us to insert our-selves into the scene, to feel interpolated by the text, perhaps a little in the way we are hooked by the punctum of a photograph).”²⁹ Here, Davey makes an analogy between the personal note and the photographic punctum—in terms of an unconscious detail, an accident that pricks the ear, “the detail that escaped the photographer’s notice but reaches out to the viewer.”³⁰ For Davey, the personal note holds the same potential as *punctum*, to become that ‘accident’ that pricks the ear. However, if the chance element easily finds its way in photography, can it really take place in writing?

In “Notes on Photography & Accident,” Davey gives an example to sustain her parallel. She comments on writer Janet Malcolm’s stylistic choice in her collected essay *Diana and Nikos: Essays on the Aesthetic of Photography* to insert personal notes in the book, pointing out it “break[s] ever so subtly with the decorum of journalistic worldliness to hint at something personal, painful even, about Malcolm herself.”³¹ The personal notes are small ruptures that break the rhythm of Malcolm’s scholarly prose in a way that gives “flesh and blood” to Malcolm’s words, creating a link between the psychological landscape of the writer and what concerns Malcolm’s work. The note becomes a “fragment” of consciousness that emerges as semi-conscious remark. How to keep a journal without egotism?³² Davey’s practice asks that question and in “Index Cards,” she attempts to recreate something similar, using the note as a way of opening the text up to the urgencies, motivations, and desires of the person to make contact, to connect and reproduce the possibility of relatability and more readings.

Finally, it should be observed here that, although Davey’s interest in the personal note as possibility to explore unsentimentality and impersonality in giving a personal account of herself is inspired, as we have seen, by the works of Benjamin and Barthes, Davey’s use of the note could also be read in the light of feminist writing practices, the reappropriation of the minor genres such as the diary, letter writing, and other forms of the personal account. The same interest that brought Lonzi, for instance, to adopt the minor genre of the diary as a political tool; an inexhaustible source of discoveries, a gift granted to the writer by language. Cixous too is an avid collector of notes, of “hoped-for promptings of writing itself,” when something is given to us by writing; those magical instances and alchemical moments “when the writer’s efforts are rewarded by the surprise appearance of an unexpected word or a phrase not consciously produced.”³³ The note functions “like magnets,” as it captures those signs that relate to the necessities of the work to be composed.³⁴ It is this quasi-unconscious way in which the note records the necessities of the writer, that Davey’s writing hints at and consciously adopts to an effect of impersonality; of distance.

28 Moyra Davey, “The Problem of Reading” (2003), p. 25.

29 Moyra Davey, “Index Cards.”

30 Moyra Davey, “Notes on Photography & Accidents” (2008), p. 13.

31 Ibid., p. 2.

32 Roland Barthes, “Deliberation” in *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Random House, 1993), p. 360.

33 Susan Seller, Introduction to *Hélène Cixous, Writing Notebooks*, (London: Continuum, 2004), p. viii.

34 Hélène Cixous, Susan Sellers, *The Writing Notebooks* (2004), p. 120.

The unsentimentality of Davey's writing, her use of the montage as a device that produces cuts and sutures, can be seen as a strategic ethical choice, rather than the personality of the artist. A hardness that confronts the reader and the writer with an ethical dilemma, the dilemma of the violence of ripping a part of an address and the love involved in the process of suture by which the writer produces a new address; the question of how to attend to our responsibilities toward others in making art and writing, and of the responsibility of the intellectual to keep personal feelings out of political or aesthetic judgements.

The note, as an open-ended form, generates as it relinquishes meaning, recording inner necessities in the form of an accumulation outside of snippets of experience, observations, and knowledges that are available to the reader in their impersonal, matter-of-fact way. At the same time, the way in which Davey arranges them in the montage is personal, that is guided by personal motivations and necessities. Together, in their fragmentary and incomplete way, Davey's montages of personal notes form an incomplete portrait of an artistic practice-as-relation—always incomplete, fragmented, precarious, open and in-becoming. Davey's artistic practice refuses the givenness of forms, and her work calls for a revolt of forms.

3.2. "Wet" and "dry"

In the previous section, I have shown how the personal note constitutes the basic unit and conceptual method of Davey's writing. Apart from being an economical way of writing, the note allows Davey to experiment with giving an account of herself characterised by a fragmented, dialogical and non-linear type of narration, an expression of the self as a composed necessity; as the urgent gathering together of fragments, memories, desires, and imagination that form the work. I also showed how her use of the note and the technique of the montage is partly motivated by Davey's refusal of sentimentalities and the cheap tricks of identification and empathy demanded of the genres of women's autobiographical writing.

In this second section, through my reading of the "The Wet and the Dry," I examine Davey's necessity, and her struggle, to give an account of herself and her family that respects the pains and sufferings of others without taking from them and exposing their private lives. To avoid speaking in a confessional manner, in "The Wet and the Dry," Davey gives an account that is an oblique reading of her family's story through the literary figure of Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughters. Like Thérèse of Lisieux in Lonzi's accounts, Davey finds resonance in the figure of the British proto-feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, who becomes a channel of Davey's desire for a writing that softly intimates personal pain and traumas; where the "wet" of experience and the "dry" of reflection and expression are held in perfect balance. The wet and the dry disclose the impossibility of this perfect balance, and records Davey's attempt at keeping this precariousness of relations in balance; a balance that enables the artist to tell the story of her siblings' precarious life.

In the literary montage "The Wet and the Dry," Davey attempts writes from within this in-between space which, as the title evokes, nervously oscillates between the desire to tell and fictionalise intimate details of her sisters' life and the conscious attempt to reduce personal information to the minimum and leave rooms for reflections, for a questioning that opens personal experience to the larger social landscape.

When, unable to make a film about the story of her family, Davey decides to read and “channel the sometimes troubled, sometimes ecstatic histories of Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughters, as a means to talk about episodes from my own errant youth in the company of five sisters.”³⁵ Davey creates a series of analogies and loose associations between the circumstances of Wollstonecraft and her daughter’s life and work, and those of her family and siblings. For instance, in one passage she notes, “Mary Wollstonecraft’s parents, Edward and Elisabeth were married in 1756; their union produced seven children. Two hundred years later, my parents, James and Patricia, met in England and married in 1956.” In another passage, she makes a parallel between Wollstonecraft’s daughters and her siblings “a group of women bedevilled by similar genetic traits,” as Davey comments, “the melancholia etc., but also thankfully, some of the defiant non-conformism as well.”³⁶ Here the parallel is not meant to suggest identification. As she is quick to remark, “the Davey girls were not writing poetry, studying Greek and Latin, or procreating; we were listening to David Bowie, Roxy Music, and the Clash and ingesting too many drugs.”³⁷ Davey’s empathic reading with Wollstonecraft’s life and work activates what Lonzi called “resonance.” Or said otherwise, through the practice of resonance Davey reads with Wollstonecraft, paying attention to the details of the relations, and to the dissonances that make identification impossible, but that also produce moments of mutual recognition that allow the two figures to co-exist as two autonomous subjectivities in the space of writing, in the interplay of resonances and differences.

The juxtapositions between Davey’s and her sisters’ life and work and the lives of the Wollstonecraft-Shelley’s, thus enables the possibilities of telling one’s own story differently, by decentralising the self; by putting it in relation to another, in a dialogical manner. Among other things, “The Wet and the Dry” is a mediation on the genre of the autobiography. The necessity to make a film about her family, prompted Davey to question the urgency behind someone’s decision to expose the facts of one’s own life to public scrutiny, and the modalities of this accounting. At the time when the artist was writing the text, we are told that her sister Jane had been back home from rehab and decided to write an autobiography of her childhood and addiction. Davey quotes Jane comments an email, “I have set down once and for all a true record of what has happened (sorta, kinda).”³⁸ These bracketed words, suspended as if an afterthought of writing, disclose the open secret of the personal account, namely that there is no way of settling an account once and for all, because the truths and meanings of the author’s life are continuously shifting, and what the autobiography reveals is only one aspect of the author’s complexity. The hesitation in Jane’s voice reminds Davey of the fact that like Wollstonecraft, although being “a strong and caring woman, a nurturing mother of three daughters who also kept her distance from doctors and their drugs; [...] she is emotionally fragile in the way MW was at times, prone to depression and occasional rash behaviour.”³⁹ This parallel invites Davey’s comparison between the desire to give an account of oneself that “tells it all” and the hesitation and awareness that comes from paying attention to the fragility of life, in which we are never

35 Moyra Davey, “Caryatids and Promiscuity” in *I’m Your Fan*. Camilla Wills (ed.), (London: Camden Art Center, 2014), p. 27.

36 Moyra Davey, “The Wet and the Dry,” p. 25.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., p. 26.

39 Ibid., p. 24.

the same, and the truths of who we are are always incomplete—in the same way that our knowledge of ourselves is always partial.

“The Wet and the Dry” is an homage to the writing of Wollstonecraft. Although she is well-known for her writing of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), a book in which she appealed to egalitarian social ideas as the common ground for the creation of equal rights and opportunities for women, she also wrote beautiful personal accounts and intimate letters. Davey shares with the reader her admiration for Wollstonecraft, and in commenting on her *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796), the account of a journey through the Nordic countries, she writes:

Wollstonecraft wrote letters to Imlay chronicling her observations and emotional responses to the landscape and people of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. Her heartbreak is softly intimated in the letters, but mostly she reflects and reports with a journalist’s eye on the native costumes...⁴⁰

Davey admires Wollstonecraft’s dispassionate stance in her personal letter which is “softly intimated,” never openly addressed. Yet her break-up leaves its traces in her journalistic reports on weather patterns, in which the personal resounds and echoes in the writer’s description of the landscape, the shape of clouds, the colour of the sky. Wollstonecraft’s intimate descriptions of weather patterns become an inspiration for Davey’s own writing: a writing moved by and in search of a balance between the forces of the “wet” and that of the “dry.” A promiscuous writing that pays attention to temporal-spatial discontinuity. It lingers and inhabits the gaps produced by dissonances, as a practice in which differences exists as indivisible (in the living) and as duration (in writing).



Moyra Davey, *Rester Calme*, 2010 (detail). Courtesy the artist and Murray Guy, New York. All rights reserved.

3.3. In the void of subjectlessness

In the film *Les Goddesses*, Davey quotes Marguerite Duras who says that, “to be without a subject for a book, without any idea of a book, is to find yourself in front of a book. An immense void. An eventual book. In front of writing, live and naked, something terrible to surmount.”⁴¹ How are we to read Duras’ idea of writing as finding oneself in an immense void? What does it mean to find oneself in front of an immense void? Davey has often reflected on the conditions that make writing possible; expressing the anxieties connected the precariousness of living and working as an artist—the anxiety of not having a subject; of not being able to make works; of not being able to give an account because the subjects are overwhelming and intractable; the anxieties linked to the possibility of a derailment, of losing oneself in the process; the void produced by an unsettling experience or thought; the emptiness provoked by depression and death. However, as Duras points out in the quotes, the void is also the place of becoming, of the birth of the artwork or the book, the potential space for the manifestation of multiple subjects and forms.

Davey’s literary montages never address one subject at a time, but many simultaneously: photography, writing, illness, death, the necessities of work, the relations with her son and other artists and writers. The immense void is a metaphor for describing the state of mind and the process that inaugurates the gesture of art making and writing; the space of imagination in which things and subjects are not yet: they are suspended, in their unbecoming; in the space of imagination, of the inactual that enables the possibility of transformation, of an address to another. In this last section, and through an analysis of the materials composing *Hemlock Forest* (2016) and *Les Goddesses* I discuss the “subjectlessness” of Davey’s promiscuous writing as she conceptualises and performs it in her writing, as that negative space in which things are suspended in a state of potentiality that both induce anxieties and enables Davey to continue making works.

In *Hemlock Forest* (2016) Davey writes: “I am piecing together fragments because I don’t yet have a subject.”⁴² This absence of a subject makes Davey nervous. She considers how finding a subject involves a precarious balance between holding on to it, allowing it to appear, and at the same time also knowing how to let it go; how to be without a subject so that a subject might materialise as unexpected, as other than subject. Here again, the question of balance returns as Davey searches for a balance between “holding on” and “letting go,” in her life as much as in her practice.

Although distinct, *Les Goddesses* and *Hemlock Forest*⁴³ share material and references from Davey’s extensive archive of notes. Accompanying both texts are a series of images: intimate photo-portraits of Davey and her siblings; of the artist in her home; footage of the forest and of the New York skyline; of her son and his friends; of someone in a busy metro wagon writing on a piece of paper; as well as a photos from the series “Spirits” by her partner, artist Jason Simon—in particular one which shows a young man at his desk surrounded by, immersed in, and playing with the whirlwind of smoke rising from a cigarette.⁴⁴ It is significant here to note that the image that precedes the text *Les Goddesses* is a close-up of

41 Moyra Davey, “Les Goddesses” in *Les Goddesses and Hemlock Forest* (2017), p. 31.

42 Moyra Davey, *Hemlock Forest* (2017), p. 98.

43 Both works comprise two videos and two texts, and photos of the ongoing series “mailers.”

44 There is more than one criterium for the way the images are treated in the book: some occupy a single page; some others are double-page; some images are large and printed on Mango Star 135gr; some images are small or very small and printed on the porous Olin Regular Natural White 120gr.

the cigarette smoke rising up, an invocation of a presence that cannot be fully grasped, but which continues to materialise and immediately disappear.

It is not that Davey does not have a subject for her work, but rather that her subject in this case is “raw and intractable.”⁴⁵ It is the intractable subject of motherhood, of the relationship between a mother and her son: “a part of me is leaving at the very moment he is becoming a person,” Davey softly intimates, “He rides me on his bicycle so that I can film the kudzu jungle in Riverside Park. I cling to his shoulder with one hand and hold the camera aloft with the other.”⁴⁶ Again, as is typical of Davey’s way of accounting, the artist decides to softly intimate the story of this “intractable subject,” of her relationship to her coming-of-age son—the sense of loss of him becoming his own person. Davey reads this relationship obliquely through Chantal Akerman’s relationship to her mum as it appears in *News from Home* (1977).

The triangulation of the action of “clinging,” “leaving” and “moving upward” in Davey’s comment gives us also the sense of Davey’s creative endeavour—this process of holding onto something, a potential subject for a work, but also of letting go, of risking something and assuming the challenge—the letting go that allows Davey to free one hand and hold the camera up to film the forest. This powerful image is a metaphor for the process of making art and writing, of becoming the subject as a movement that produces loss and desperation and derailment; two words that keep returning in *Les Goddesses*.

Davey’s anxiety reminds her of the desperate letters of a mother to her daughter in Chantal Akerman’s film. The film-maker, who was living in New York at the time, kept receiving her mother’s anxious letter and rather than answering them, she made them into a film. This first association produces more associations and resonances with Davey, as the artist reflects on the ways in which Akerman’s works oscillate between control and improvisation, between the personal and the political, between the emptiness of the absence of one individual subject, and the fullness of the subject as told through the details of everyday life. Davey feels challenged by the boldness of Akerman’s decision to take her camera out into the streets of NYC, of filming the ordinary lives of commuters on the subway traincars without asking for their consent.

Hemlock Forest begins with a memory of the sequence filmed inside the traincar: the camera is “uncannily still,” Davey recalls, “taking in the movements of the passengers, some curious, most indifferent, and one man dressed in lime green, apparently uneasy. Taken aback, he lurches, scowls at the camera, then turns on his heel and walks quickly away through the open doors into the next car.”⁴⁷ Davey lingers on a detail in this scene and “feels the urge to re-create” it. Yet, the hesitation and clear discomfort of the man attracts Davey’s attention, because this sense of discomfort resonates with her. The artist herself has often felt intimidated by “the unpredictable situations in public,”⁴⁸ by the possibility that someone might feel uncomfortable. Her hesitation to film in public situation and to improvise is commensurate to Davey’s predilection for filming the opposite style of scene, of “low-hanging fruit,”⁴⁹ that are often devoid of human presence. The image of the

45 Moyra Davey, *Hemlock Forest* (2017), p. 99.

46 Ibid.

47 Moyra Davey, *Hemlock Forest* (2017), p. 97.

48 Ibid., p. 98.

49 Davey’s approach to film-making has been described by the artist herself as a kind of “low-hanging fruit,” in that it “rarely adds up too much because so little is at stake.” It is the ordinary, the quotidian, the insignificant detail of daily life, the banal footage, the one that does not demand too much production and technical support.

opening sliding doors—letting the subject out at the same time as the camera takes in the outside, where many passengers are waiting or frantically walking on the platform—in Akerman’s film render tangible the idea of a void of subjectlessness in which action and Davey’s writing takes place—where individual subjects continuously disappear, not in an empty void but in a place full of a multiplicity of different subjects, as the stranger in Akerman’s train. The sliding doors opening also invoke the space that Davey’s practice occupies, on the threshold between public and intimate, personal and impersonal, a space emptied of human presences and yet full of life.



Film still from Chantal Akerman, *News From Home*, 1976.
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This gap in which writing and making art take place as the practice of putting into relation that expresses an idea of art and writing as spaces of a new kind of sociality, as poet Aweek Sen has observed in relation to *Les Goddesses* and *Hemlock Forest*, is also one that corresponds to “a movement from one grammatical voice to another”—the way in which the writing voice shifts from first to third persons—from the first-person of *Les Goddesses* to the third person of *Hemlock Forest*. In this movement between “I” and “you” the text becomes a dialogue and a space of multiple address—a dedication to Akerman’s work, but also a love letter to her son.

Davey’s writing works at keeping this space for multiple readings open so that each text and each work become potential spaces for new readings and reflections, new ways of taking in and putting out. It is meaningful here to note that in several occasions Davey has referred to Simone Weil’s concept of de-creation, a concept points negatively to a paradox⁵⁰ of existence as a highly generative impossibility, and which Davey makes her own to describe the creative process as moment of undoing set forth by a practice of self-questioning that makes room for and opens to the generative potential of a subject that is “not-yet,” that delays its arrival, and that doesn’t materialises not as subject but as a set of relations, a form

50 To “decreate” is to cultivate within ourselves the capacity to refuse self-expansion. The death of the self qua ego gives birth to a more attentive and compassionate way of being in the world. See J.P. Little “Simone Weil’s concept of Decreation” in Richard H. Bell, Simone Weil’s *Philosophy of Culture: Readings Toward a Divine Humanity* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 25.

of sociality that continuously unmakes and remakes itself in collaboration. In *Hemlock Forest*, Davey quotes Akerman saying, “I am reliant on the words of others,” as if to explain her working method. While she is in the car with her son, the radio plays a Bryan Ferry’s cover of a Bob Dylan song, which reminds Davey, “that we all sample, we all do covers, and that it’s a way of expressing love and allegiance. Taking in but also giving back.”⁵¹ Davey’s promiscuous writing is a practice of sampling and remixing her own and the words of other artists and writers, whom she often hosts in her practice; making room, in her tiny quarters, for a multiplicity of voices and subjects that improvise together a song of love and allegiance.

Conclusion

In this chapter I’ve discussed how, in her attempt to find a form for giving an account of herself, Davey has experimented with a “promiscuous” writing that draws on different materials of lived experience and forms and styles of writing, rejecting false oppositions and producing an effect of proximity that disrupts separations, enacting a revolt of forms. At the same time, I’ve examined the ways in which in this promiscuity produces a multiplication of subjects of writing and a void of “subjectlessness” that produces a necessity to write and make art.

Drawing on Crimp’s definition of promiscuous writing—as a type of narrative style that refuses the omniscient point of view and disrupts the moralising discourses that produce dichotomies such as good/bad; promiscuous/monogamous and disturbs disciplinary boundaries—Davey’s writing challenges normative narratives of the self, rejecting, for instance, the idea of the omniscient viewpoint; the separations of genres; the opposition between writing and reading, between said and unsaid, personal and impersonal. Far from revealing intimate information, in this chapter, I’ve shown that Davey’s writing discloses the process of her practice: the compositional and the existential necessities of writing and art making, her method of putting-in-relation: by cutting and pasting and creating links and making and unmaking associations, by asking questions and giving partial answers.

Writing becomes the space of this doing, but also of an undoing of established norms and forms of expression. Davey’s writing happens in this in-betweenness, as it attempts to conceptualise the space where things start glowing with a strange light; mobilising the negative space of reading and imagination, where relations and juxtapositions, the practice of putting-in-relation, takes place. Thus, in this chapter I have shown how Davey’s writing happens in contiguity with reading; a reading done with “pen & notebooks” and the diffuse attentiveness of the artist whose mind is continuously set on the path of a new project, a new trajectory of thinking.

Davey’s writing is also promiscuous in the sense that it happens in the close vicinities of and in relation to her photographic practice. Her writing is influenced by her intimate photographic practice—photographs which often show interior spaces devoid of human presence yet full of life and animated by objects, and materials such as dust or light. Yet, personal writing faces Davey with a greater challenge, that of the insistent presence of a first-person and the confessional effects it produces. Photography and writing continuously disturb each other, challenging each other’s limitations: literary models offer Davey new

51 Moyra Davey, *Hemlock Forest* (2017), video, 41:53 mins.

takes on photography, a kind of photography which would take seed in words,⁵² while the impersonal qualities of her intimate photographic practice influence her impersonal personal accounts. Thus, she seeks a voice in writing that could resonate with her photography, in which objects become repositories of interiority, of the writer's existential and material necessities. These necessities are expressed by the artist in an unsentimental way, in detailed descriptions and detached observations⁵³ of insignificant details of events and encounters.

Davey is a writer who pays attention to the ordinary, the unrecognised and the "unlooked;" to what is lost and has lost meaning in the routine of daily life; to the unsaid and unspoken, the forces that move her practice. In this respect, her practice resonates with the reflective stance of Cixous' *écriture féminine* and Lonzi's writing, with their attention to the body, to the language of "things that vibrate," their interests in the diaries, notes; for the fragmented and dialogical form of their writing. In this chapter, I've shown how Davey's personal accounts are dialogical forms of address to the many "subjects" of her writings. This form of address is formulated as what Davey calls an "oblique reading," but, I argue, could also be described in the Lonzian's terms of a practice of resonance (see my discussion of resonance in Chapter 1). Through this form of "oblique address," Davey tells the story of her family *through* and in relation to that of, for instance, the Wollstonecraft-Shelley's; or by reflecting on Akerman's relationship to her mother disclosed in *News From Home*, and finds a way to speak of the "untractable subject" of her writing in *Hemlock Forest*, that is her fears and anxieties about her son's coming of age.

Similarly to Lonzi's writings, Davey's personal accounts often become occasions to be in dialogue with others to whom the artist pays homage and expresses her admiration and allegiance: families and friends but also literary figures such as Wollstonecraft, Akerman, Benjamin, Barthes, among many other writers and artists who share Davey's interests and inclinations. Davey finds resonance in the works and life of those writers. It is a resonance that, as I have attempted to show in this chapter, is not the same as identification, but it is a form of Lonzian recognition that acknowledges the fundamental relational nature of existence and subjectivity.

Davey's works thus are not about something. They summon a multiplicity of subjects to speak. Subjects who experience anxieties about their works and lives; who reflect on survival, necessity, pain, vulnerability, death, and the intoxicating power of making art and writing. These subjects, however, remain elusive, opaque, fragmentary; they appear to quickly disappear beyond the horizon, remaining incomplete, as the artist makes detours, jumping between times and spaces; and a new comment sparks more reflection and reading. Promiscuity implies a certain licentiousness, a dissoluteness; the possibility of losing oneself or something. Davey's promiscuous practice invokes and insists on the possibility of inhabiting the void opened by this loss; a loss of certainties and control; the loss of the centrality of the "I"—to make rooms for the manifestation of multiple others expressions of consciousness. This loss of self, the decentralisation of the "I" that gives the account, however, does not silence the "I," does not destroy the possibility of making art and writing. This void of subjectlessness, as Davey's work insists, is full of the many voices that influence and inhabit the text.

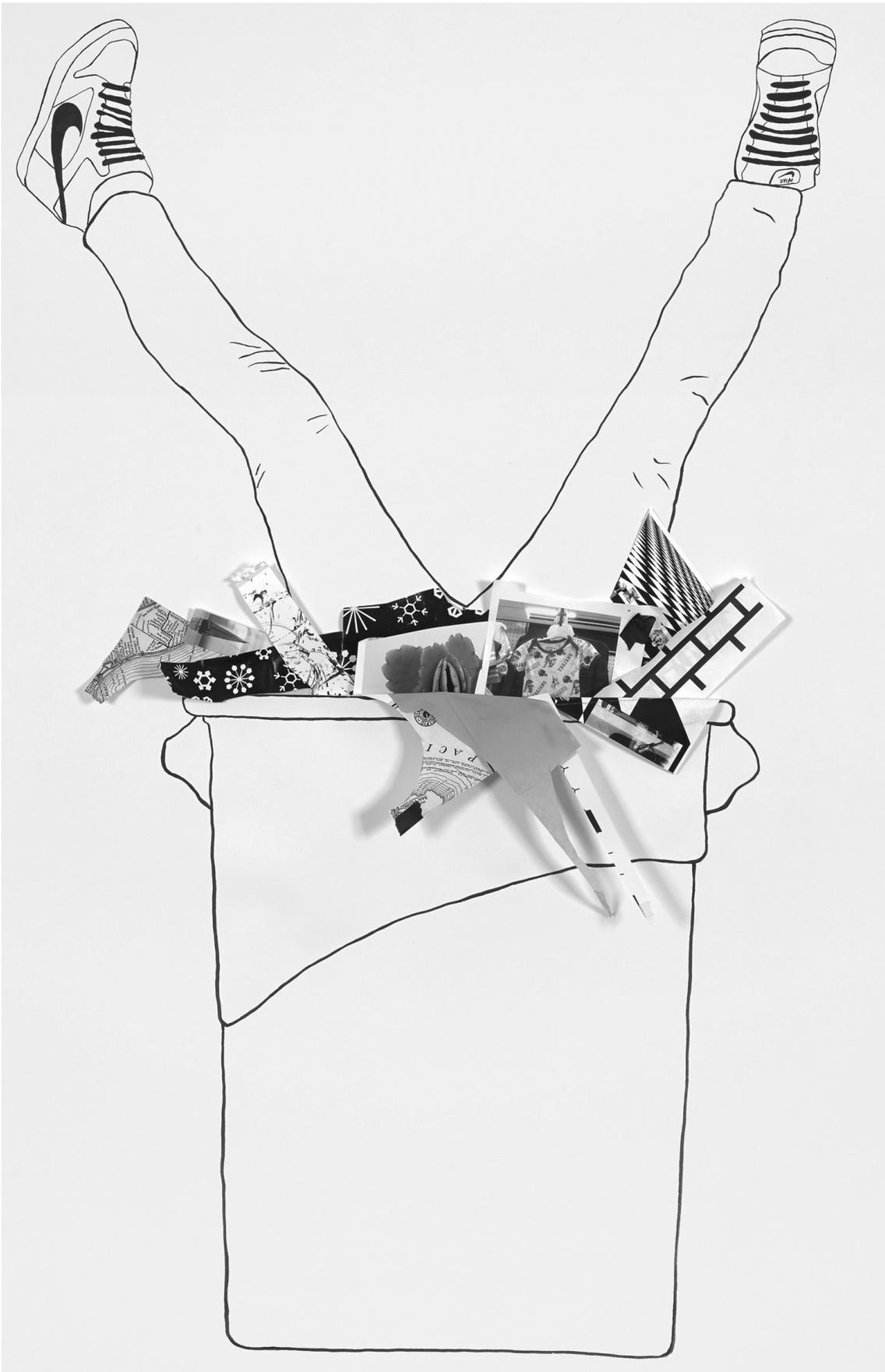
52 Moyra Davey, "Notes on Photography & Accident."

53 Chris Kraus, 'Description Over Plot' in Adam Szymczyk (ed.), *Speaker Receiver*, (Basel/Berlin: Kunsthalle Basel and Sternberg Press, 2010), pp. 37–52.

Davey's use of the technique of the montage allows for this "void" to manifest as a gap, as space in-between the notes; the juxtapositions of words and images; of voices and styles. In her videos, this gap is rendered through the doubling of pre-recorded voice and Davey's live speech. This terrifying and ecstatic loss of certainty in realising that the artist might or might not have a subject of writing; the realisation that these subjects multiply and are out of control, becomes the opportunity for the emergence of a new dialogical subjectivity that consents not to be reduced to one.

There is a short clip on Vimeo of Davey on a boat by the river bank in New York City. She wears a grey hoodie, eye glasses, and holds some papers in her hand while standing in front of an orange metal structure from which microphones are hanging. She leans forward, making sure to keep her body in balance and reads out loud this passage from a text of Frances Stark which says, "I am not afraid to compete... I'm afraid I will compete! I am so horribly conditioned to accept everybody else's values. I am ashamed of it. I am sick of it. I am sick of not having the courage to be an absolute nobody. I am sick of myself and of everybody else who wants to make some kind of Splash." It's a quote from J.D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*, a story about a young woman who goes to study at the university only to be disappointed by the "phoney" behaviours of her professors and the competitiveness of her colleagues and career-obsessed boyfriend. Franny is beside herself in rage, sick and tired of the values of others, "those who want to make a Splash." Her anger and eagerness to challenge the accepted values is suggested by her words. Franny's voice becomes a medium for Davey's dissent. The rage that tears her apart from herself and undoes her—that makes her sick and stops her from seeking to embody someone else's values—is also what makes her, as her quotation by Stark demonstrates, part of a political community, of those who live beside themselves, whether in emotional grief or in political rage. A community of creative refusalists who write accounts of dissent that are promiscuous, open, opaque, and enable the possibility of a revolt of forms that is also a revolt of forms of socialities. Davey shouts the words an "absolute nobody" through the microphone and out to the river and the people crossing it, before the camera moves to a group of people on a little tourist motor-boat drifting away. She disappears too.

The doubling of voices of Davey and Stark is a reminder, that it is when we are beside ourselves that we are with one another.



Frances Stark, *Trojan Bin*, 2014, sumi ink on arches paper with collage, vacuum sealed on aluminum and wood. 147,5 × 96,7 cm. Courtesy the artist. All rights reserved.

CHAPTER 4

Pathologically open: Frances Stark's "sandwiches"

*And my I says to itself:
Would thou mercy—murder me
Send me going verily
To a place hot with heaven
Cold with hellish hubris even
(Frances Stark, *Just me me me*)*

I concluded Chapter 3 with an image of Moyra Davey reading from a Frances Stark text which quotes a passage from J.D. Salinger's short novel *Franny and Zooey* (1955), in which Franny, an undergraduate at a small liberal arts college, complains about the phoney behaviour of her schoolmates and the egotism of the faculty. Franny is on a date with her boyfriend at a fancy lunch room, where she becomes increasingly irritated by her boyfriend who seems busy with details of his academic career. Franny is enraged, beside herself—she can't really eat, starts feeling faint, and becomes more and more uncomfortable until she goes to the restroom and bursts into tears. In this moment of rage, Franny utters the words Stark quotes in her text:

I am not afraid to compete... I'm afraid I will compete! I am so horribly conditioned to accept everybody's else values. I am ashamed of it. I am sick of it. I am sick of not having the courage to be an absolute nobody. I am sick of myself and of everybody else who wants to make some kind of Splash.¹

Of this passage, Stark comments that Franny "is starting to see the world differently and her boyfriend's attitude toward learning is starting to seriously get on her nerves."² How are we not to hear Stark's own dissent in the words pronounced by Franny? Palpable are the artist's frustration with the social economies of the art world and the many ways in which artists are encouraged to compete, rather than to collaborate. But there is more to it; what Franny's rage shows is the way in which relations with others take hold of us, in

1 Frances Stark, "Knowledge Evanescent" in *Frances Stark: Collected Writing: 1993–2003* (London: Book Works, 2003).
2 Ibid.

ways that it is not always possible to explain, in ways that interrupt the self-conscious and coherent account of oneself. Through Franny, by invoking the power of her negative feelings, Stark calls for a transformation and reorganisation of artistic production and the social economies that influence it. Interrupted and broken by this moment of rage, torn apart by the sense of impossibility and inability, Franny's coming undone shows the ways in which we are undone by each other—whether in love and desire or anger and sorrow. It is this fundamental interdependency that Stark's practice insists on, in her attempt to envision an art community brought together by a shared politics of dedication.

Working in a variety of media (from collages, to painting, to video, multimedia installation, and performance), Stark is the writer of numerous essays, articles and various artist books, including *The Architect & the Housewife* (1999), and *This Could Become a Gimmick [sic] or An Honest Articulation of the Workings of the Mind* (2011), produced on the occasion of her exhibition at MIT List Visual Art Centre; and a collection of writings entitled *Frances Stark Collected Writing: 1993–2003*, published by Book Works in 2003. Between 1999 and 2001, she ran a column titled “Type” for the L.A.-based magazine *art | text*, and it is from the pages of this magazine that Stark reflected on art and pedagogy; carrying out a humorous and pointed critiques of the social economies of artistic production with its cult of the personality and the commodification of artistic practices.³

Stark's practice attends to and reflects on the social economies of art. Her texts often read like letters addressed to the art community: to colleagues, friends, artists and musicians she admires. In a note about her collected writing, Stark explains that in putting together the book she was trying to reach out to a specific audience:

I was really trying to think about the immediate, receptive audience for my work; dealers, curators, other artists that I interact with. Sometimes you don't even know whether your closest friends are in your audience or not. That is what has always bugged me about this so-called art world. Unless you're a Type-A omnivore and/or a high energy sycophant, the 'art world' (probably a bad habit word to begin with) can easily be stripped of your most sympathetic patrons and morph into a hate-able panel of semi-anonymous pseudo experts against whom you feel forced to rebel. I would much rather get to know, understand and communicate with the audience I have built as these are the meaningful relationships which shape my world.⁴

In this passage, Stark makes clear that in her texts she addresses an “art community” that is specific and part of the artist's universe of relations, rather than invoking an abstract idea of the “art world” discussed in panels and conferences about artistic practices by what Stark calls “pseudo experts,” against whom the artist feels she has to rebel. The immediate

3 Boltanski & Chiapello (2007) identify commodification as capitalism's means of recuperating and silencing critique: “Commodification is the simplest process through which capitalism can acknowledge the validity of a critique and make it its own, by incorporating it into its own specific mechanisms: hearing the demands expressed by the critique, entrepreneurs seek to create products and services which will satisfy it, and which they will be able to sell.” (pp. 441–42). See Luc Boltansky and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, (London: Verso Books, 2007); Gerald Rauning, Gene Ray and Ulf Wuggenig (eds.), *Critique of Creativity: Precarity, Subjectivity and Resistance in the “Creative Industries”* (Mayflybooks.org, 2011). Available through: <https://libros.metabiblioteca.org/bitstream/001/226/8/978-1-906948-14-6.pdf>. [Accessed February 2020].

4 Frances Stark, “The Unspeakable Compromise of the Portable Work of Art: #16 in a series of 16, THIS WHOLE THING, Or A Bird's Eye View (2002), reproduced in Frances Stark, *Collected Writing 1993–2003* (London: Book Works, 2003), p. 130.

addressees of Stark's works are the closest people, friends and colleagues who the artist calls to partake in her artistic practice, and with whom Stark engages in questioning and reflection. In a way that recalls Carla Lonzi's own understanding of art as a space for "meaningful encounters," Stark's work insists on the relational and collaborative nature of artistic production—the ways in which it always happens as an encounter. This chapter considers the ways in which Stark's writing rejects the idea of art as commodity and the commodification of social relations in the art world by invoking the relational dimension of making art and giving an account of oneself in writing—the ways in which negative feelings like the sense of alienation, exhaustion, insecurities, anxieties, of breaking down bind us together and constitute the possibility for more empathic ways of being together.

Refusing and rewriting the avant-garde myth of the artist as an idiosyncratic genius, the evocation of Franny's words by the artist partly discloses the ways in which Stark portrays a self that is, more often than not, beside herself—torn apart by opposite desires, and undone by contradictions, by joy and bliss and the agonies of making art; overwhelmed by confusion and overcome by a sense of loss that renders the text desperately and anxiously, "pathologically" open—to multiple readings, associations, connections, influences, relations, emotions.

The representation of the self as dialogical, porous, and open is a common feature of the feminist feminine works of this group of women writers, who, as I have shown in the works of Lonzi, Cixous, and Davey throughout the previous chapters, reject the dichotomy self/other, suggesting a multiplicity of subject positions that entertain dialogical relationships with each other. Such ideas of the self-as-collaboration refuse the pseudo-objective, authoritative model of the self-knowing self. Like Franny's being undone by rage, Stark's writing too is continuously undone by the urgency, anxieties and overwhelming joy of sharing the moment of the address in a way that renders the process of constructing a self and the text collaborative and always incomplete. Stark's refusal is one that Cixous' *écriture féminine* engenders in its exuberant refusal of categories, and that the women of *Rivolta Femminile* practice as "deculturalisation" against "the blackmail exercised in the world by the hegemony of efficiency,"⁵ in a patriarchal society that values competitiveness, efficiency, and individualism. In this chapter, I argue for a reading that acknowledges what moves Stark's writing, and her call for a revolt of forms, which is also a call to imagine a different way of being together through mutual admiration.

Stark's work is concerned with and pays attention to the social economies and professional networks that support artistic production. Stark, who became a key figure of the Los Angeles art scene in the late 1990s and 2000s,⁶ is aware of her privileged position as an artist with a successful career, and thus as someone directly implicated in the reproduction of the economies of the art world, Stark does not hesitate to use the insights offered by her

5 In the manifesto, the women of *Rivolta Femminile* write that, "we detest the mechanisms of competitiveness and the blackmail exercised in the world by the hegemony of efficiency. We want to put our working capacity at the disposal of a society that is immune to this. War has always been the specific activity of the male and his model for virile behaviour." *Rivolta Femminile*, Manifesto (1970). Available through: <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/architecture/ockman/pdfs/feminism/manifesto.pdf>. [Accessed February 2020].

6 It is in this period that debates around the question of what is participatory or socially engaged art emerged. While it is not the aim of this study to examine the debate concerning socially engaged art, I here would like to draw attention to what art historian Claire Bishop has called a 'return to the social' which characterised the '90s and early '00s, with a renewed focus on collaboration, project-based practice and participation; and the attempts to rethink art collectively. Bishop defines key debates about contemporary participatory practice as situated in the "tensions between quality and equality, singular and collective authorship, and the ongoing struggle to find artistic equivalents for political positions; preferring to value what is invisible: a group dynamic, a social situation, a change of energy, a raised consciousness." See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books, 2012).

experience and practice to take a polemical stance against the exploitative economies of contemporary art. If, at the time of Lonzi's *Autoritratto*, the art world was dominated by grand narratives of modernity, the myth of genius and the belief in the autonomy of the art work,⁷ the context of the US in which Stark's practice emerged is strongly dominated by a consumer culture obsessed with the self, with ideas of originality, creativity, and individual freedom⁸ that translates into self-exploitation, as art critic Jan Verwoert argues. In his essay *Exhaustion and Exuberance* (2008) Verwoert identifies the context in which creative types invent "jobs for ourselves by exploring and exploiting our talents to perform small artistic and intellectual miracles on a daily basis,"⁹ while artists have increasingly become "customers who consume the communication and sociability that we produce."¹⁰ However, where Lonzi refused to work within and so abandons the art world, for Verwoert and Stark this does not seem to be a materially viable option and thus they ask themselves if there exist practices of making art and writing that resist the culture of self-exploitation and high performance.

Torn between the almost impulsive desire to say "yes" to any invitation and occasion and the necessity to say "no" and "put up resistance against [the] social order,"¹¹ that exploits and commodifies artistic subjectivities, Stark's work proposes a form of uncooperativeness that, as Verwoert observes, generates an "an untradeable surplus," an excess of presence (the thousands of little pieces of paper and mails that cover over her body in her collages; or the insistence of the presence of a anxious and exuberant "I"), behind which Stark hides, while disclosing her deep indebtedness to others who have enabled Stark to make works.

Drawing on Lonzi's writing and *écriture féminine's* economies of loss and excess, on Verwoert's insights on the artist's politics of dedication,¹² and on scholar Sianne Ngai's take on negative feelings (what she calls "ugly feelings" such as anxieties, paranoia, sense of inadequacy), in this chapter I suggest to read and think with Stark's writing as a practice of dedication that refuses the language of mastery and legitimacy offered by art theory, and rejects the reduction of art making and writing to commodities, the hyper-alienation of the contemporary artist, mobilising negative feelings to both express her disappointment and at the same time envision an alternative type of sociality based on mutual appreciation and collaboration, in art.

In the twenty-five minute self-running power-point presentation titled **STRUCTURE THAT FIT MY OPENING AND OTHER PARTS CONSIDERED IN RELATION TO THE WHOLE** (2006) Stark refers to her writing as "feminine... in the sense that it is neither phallically aimed, nor referentially anchored, but scattered like cinders...

7 For a feminist critique of the gendered role in the art world see Linda Nochlin's founding text, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" published in 1971, where the American art historian starts a feminist critique of the categories reigning over artistic creation. In *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*, (Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1988), pp 147–158. See also Griselda Pollock, "Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum. Time, Space, and the Archive," (London, Routledge, 2007), pp. 9–25; Elisabeth Lebovici and Giovanna Zapperi, "Découvertes excitantes. Emplois et contre-emplois du féminisme dans les expositions," *Multitudes*, n. 31, (2008), pp. 191–200.

8 See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford University Press, 2005).

9 Jan Verwoert, "Exhaustion and Exuberance. Yes, No, and Other Options" in *Tell Me What You Want, What You Really Really Want*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), p. 13.

10 Jan Verwoert observed the ways in which in Western societies, the current form of capitalism "purposefully sustain a sense of crisis to increase the urgency of production" has changed the landscape of cultural production, generating a sense of exhaustion which results in a diminished the ability to feel and be in touch with what we do as artists, writers, and cultural producers. See, "Exhaustion and Exuberance. Yes, No, and Other Options" (2010), pp. 13–73.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

like miscellany across my dresser....”¹³ Stark’s own writing and her artistic practice in general, questions the need to explain, clarify, and give a coherent account of her practice. For instance, she refuses the interpretative framework offered by critical theory—“phallically aimed” and “referentially anchored” as she says—and proposes an erotic of writing, making and teaching art which abandons the “open aggressiveness, and over contempt for appearances” of interpretative discourse, and pays more attention to the sensual and formal qualities of art and language—“learn[ing] to see more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more,”¹⁴ as Susan Sontag once said. Stark’s refusal of the legitimacy language of the “art expert” which she identifies with those who speak and write about art from a position of the omniscient narrators, whose words are meant to impress, is apparent from the very first pages of the artist book *Agonizing Yet Blissful Little Orgies of Soul Probing* in which, with crystalline clarity the artist writes:

The recurring idea with which I struggle have never necessitated a specific order, because one thing doesn’t automatically lead to the next, and the way I want to join them is not precisely clear in order to secure positions within what might masquerade as an unfolding argument.¹⁵

Stark’s critique of the mechanisms of validation and legitimation recalls Hélène Cixous’ critique of theory as subordinated to the “philosophical domination” and “confounded with the history of reason... self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallocentrism,”¹⁶ which, as I have shown in Chapter 2, *écriture féminine* rises up against. Significantly, in one of her literary assemblages, entitled “Knowledge Evanescent,” in commenting on a student’s comment on Adorno and Horkheimer’s cultural industry, Stark rejects artistic education understood as “the will to art as the private attribute of the individual artist” or as a professional field of knowledge production in which teachers “fill the heads of their students with the drivel of Derrida and Foucault,”¹⁷ in a way that makes practice less and less central to art. Drawing on her sense of inadequacy in front of these two options, she suggests to consider the possibility of an erotic of pedagogy that pays attention to feeling, to what and how something has grabbed the artist and student’s attention (whether a sentence from Derrida or a person in the street), the forces of this “something” and how it affects art making and writing. By emphasising the erotic power of art—to move, touch and provoke thinking—Stark places the problem of art education outside the institutionalised framework within which such debates often take place (such as the expert’s panel) and moves it into the sphere of affects and social relations, where making and being are undone and remade in collaboration. For Stark, the erotic¹⁸ of pedagogy, like the joy and anxieties of making art, must be mobilised in order to examine and “unravel the tangled net of pro-

13 Frances Stark, “Structures That Fit My Opening” in *Agonizing Yet Blissful Little Orgies of Soul Probing* (London: Book Works, 2003), p. 119.

14 In her essay, “Against Interpretation,” Susan Sontag writes that, “Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. (...) And it is in the light of the condition of our senses, our capacities, that the task of the critic must be assessed. What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to See more, to Hear more, to Feel more.” Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), p. 14.

15 Frances Stark, *Agonizing Yet Blissful Little Orgies of Soul Probing*, (London: Book Works, 2003), p. 42.

16 Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” in *Signs* (Summer 1976), p. 879.

17 Frances Stark, “Knowledge Evanescent” in *Frances Stark: Collected Writing: 1993–2003*, (London: Book Works, 2003), p. 54.

fessional associations which obscure the fundamental enthusiasm for and in artworks.”¹⁹ Stark insists on being critical of the way the professionalisation of the artist obscures the potential of art to be a space of subversion of the status quo of culture.

In an attempt to find an erotic form for her writing, Stark employs a dialogical mode of writing, which asks questions and invokes the space of relations which inform an artistic practice. So, if Stark’s texts are like self-portraits, in fact they are portraits of the many relations and multiple expressions of subjective positions that inform her practice. Stark’s writing has been liquidated as self-indulgent, narcissistic, “self-deprecating, yet exhibitionist.”²⁰ Although the intimate tone of her writing might invite such readings, in this chapter I argue that the artist’s experimentations with first-person writing challenge narratives that promote competitive behaviours and portray artistic subjectivity as individualist and self-centred, disclosing an artistic practice and self as relational, made and unmade in collaboration.

Her writing in this respect belongs to a tradition of feminist writing which, like Lonzi’s, refuses the patriarchal capitalist myth of creativity and like Cixous’ *écriture féminine* scatters the subject into a myriad of fragments of consciousness. Like Lonzi, Cixous, and Davey, Stark’s writing pays attention to the urges and necessities, the insignificant moments and events of their life and work; the forces of desire and anger, the exuberant joy of making art and writing as a practice of listening to: art is “A faith in paying attention,” Stark writes, “And that is free, period.”²¹ Stark’s writing is more than a confessional outburst. It suggests the possibility that, by being touched and moved by each other, we can undo normative behaviours and learn to build alternative social economies of artistic production together.

Stark’s texts are assemblages made of fragments that borrow as much from personal experience as from the language of theory, of psychoanalysis, philosophy and literature. She has described them in terms of “Frances’ sandwiches,” in a way that invokes the material, sensorial and affective qualities of her texts; their layered and fragmentary form, where, like in a sandwich, the taste is given by the relation, by layering the different ingredients together, like the singularities of an un-totalizing totality. Stark describes her way of composing her text in the poem “Rhymes,” of which I reproduce in an excerpt below:

...To spread upon my bread
I’m forced to poke this knife
Into my hungry head
I bet inside there is mayonnaise
And something like smoked ham
My eyes can serve as olives
To garnish the sandwich I am²²

18 Stark’s emphasis on the joy of reading and making art recalls the way feminist writers have elaborated on the political implications and transformative qualities of pleasure, desire, care and compassion in the struggle for re-constituting new collective practices. A case in point here is Audre Lorde’s discussion of the erotic as a way of “reassessing the quality of all the aspects of our lives and of our work, and of how we move toward and through them.” See Audre Lorde, “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” in *Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches*, (New York: Crossing Press—Feminist Series, 2007).

19 Frances Stark, “Notes Towards the Eroticism of Pedagogy” in *Hey Hey Glossolalia (After)* (New York: Creative Time, 2008), p. 136.

20 Trevis Diehl, “Bomb with Frances stark and Nancy Spero” in *X-TRA* journal online (Review). Available through: <http://x-traonline.org/article/bomb-with-stark-and-spero/>. [Accessed April 2018].

21 Jonathan Griffin, “Frances Stark” in *Modern Painters* (2013), available through: <https://jonathangriffin.org/2013/11/11/frances-stark/>. [Accessed February 2020].

22 Frances Stark, “Rhymes” in *Frances Stark. Collected Writing: 1993–2003*, (London: Book Works, 2003), p. 92.

Bread, smoked ham, mayonnaise, olives: these are the fragments composing Stark's texts. The metaphor of the sandwich suggests the derivative nature of the self and of these "nutritious" texts which borrow and quote, and transform what they borrow and quote. The same way that her visual collages are made of materials like linen, rice paper, words, and images taken from magazines or the Internet, so her texts are made of materials borrowed from her daily life and work—fragments of invitations, correspondence and conversations with other artists, friends, family, her students; reflections on her reading and her conversations with colleagues—the basic "nutrients" of her work, what it takes to feed and care for herself and for others.

In this chapter, I show how Stark's practice emphasises the derivative and collaborative nature of both making art and writing. For instance, through the many emails and invitations to collaborate addressed to her by curators, galleries and fans which she gives back in her work as they appear in drawings and collages and in the way she welcomes and hosts many voices in her texts. Stark herself often disappears behind the many subjects of her writing; or rather she is traversed by them and her singularity transformed, into the common materials of words and art.

Davey conceives of writing as a space of conviviality, calling on many voices and ghosts to convene in the space of art and writing, in a way that undoes the old hierarchy between master and disciple and the "masculine" economy of return. The artist considers the possibility of "liberating oneself from a cycle of disengaged production motivated by a craving for legitimizing praise," and instead, envisions "a mutual admiration society—that ecstatic reciprocal attention-paying of lovers—as an alternative model for understanding how and why intellectuals might freely collaborate."²³ Stark's writing becomes this proposition for an "admiration society" in which one is always beside oneself—in a way that acknowledges the mutual influence, the reciprocities and interdependencies, the vulnerabilities, the anxieties, the hesitations, the emotions that incapacitate the artist and make her more vulnerable, and call on the presence of others to help her articulate the space of her artistic practice.

In her textual assemblage, homage to Bas Jan Ader, titled "A Craft too Small" (2000), Stark observes that there is a difference between writing as a form of self-expression and "writing to excuse oneself," as a friend had observed of her work. By reflecting on the famous work by Bas Jan Ader, *I'm too sad to tell you*, in which the artist cries in front of the camera, Stark reads her practice obliquely through it, and with the help of Bas Jan Ader's words, observes that, "to utter 'I'm too sad to tell you' is to excuse oneself from not telling whatever it is one could tell if only one weren't so incapacitated by the emotion accompanying the temporality of the untellable..."²⁴ As Stark suggests in her statement, there are conditions that make the possibility of telling a story impossible—whether they are material and economic, such as the near impossibility of making a living by writing, or existential, such as the incapacitating feeling of sadness or grief or the sense of exhaustion that seems so unspeakable.

But the incapacity to tell a story, the refusal to recount, the temporality of the untellable, as Paul Ricoeur reminds us, is a question of our response to vulnerabilities

23 Frances Stark, "Structures that fit my opening and other parts considered in the whole" (2006) in *Agonizing Yet Blissful Little Orgies of Soul Probing* (Cologne: Walther König, 2007).

24 Frances Stark, "A Craft too Small. On Bas Jan Ader" in *Frances Stark: Collected Writing: 1993–2003*. (London: Book Works, 2003), p. 28.

which determine our ability to speak, act, recount, and impute actions.²⁵ The incapacity to tell is not only and simply a paralysing condition. It is also, and very much so in the case of Stark, the refusal to tell a story in a certain way, and thus seeking an alternative way to speak, recount, act.²⁶

Stark's refusal in writing takes the form of interruptions, suspensions, turns of subject, frequent shifts in perspective; ellipsis and dashes that produce breaks and moments of silence; and the sense of incompleteness, inconclusiveness, and lack of solid argumentation (as Katherine Satorius argues, "as if too anxious or reverential to put an arrow in its heart"²⁷) that characterises her writing. In this chapter, I read the hesitations and negative feelings in Stark's writing as a conscious decision of the artist to begin from a place of "I can't" "I don't know how;" to acknowledge the space of impossibility and not-knowing from which art and writing begins as a common endeavour at articulating the shared space of relations. While, as she writes, "kunst star media-life coerces our practices,"²⁸ the artist offers herself as material for this ritual of "dismembering," of questioning of the social economies of artistic production.

In an interview with Emily McDermott, Stark says that the fact that the work is personal or "taken from life," does not mean that she is telling her personal story: "I'm making art and making decisions and editing things. I don't live my life to broadcast it into the art world; I don't see it as my life on the stage."²⁹ Similarly to Davey, Stark writes as an artist, and while informed by her life, Stark's writing records and reflects on her process of making art and writing as social practices. Even when, for instance, she seems to be writing a fan letter to her favourite musician, Stark's attention focuses on those details that make her question the confessional anxieties that animate American political culture,³⁰ and explores how they translate in pop-culture and contemporary art.

In the next part of this essay, I consider the way Stark reads the gendered economies of art making in her famous essay "The Architect & the Housewife." In this "triple decker" sandwich, Stark mulls over the problematic ways in which art and its discourse are gender-biased and through a re-reading of the traditional roles of "the architect" and "the housewife," and the kind of dichotomies between public and private, work and reproduction (care) that they reproduce, she considers the possibility of subverting the power relations that reproduce the art world and its social economies, and imagine art as a space of mutual recognition that acknowledges the value of different forms and types of (art)work.

In the second section of this chapter, through a reading of the texts collected in the anthology *Frances Stark Collected Writing: 1993–2003*, I attend to the ways in which Stark

25 Ricoeur offers an analysis of personal identity as something concrete, material and which implies otherness to an unacknowledged degree. Ricoeur asks us to understand the self as another, and the other as ourselves, in a way that involves treating the other with empathy and respect, in a way that provoke ethical awareness. See Scott Davidson (ed.), *Ricoeur Across the Disciplines* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

26 "Unlearning" according to Spivak, allows for the emergence of the collective subject which "unlearns" the "authoritarian fictions" of herself. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson, Lawrence Grossberg, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (University Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–313.

27 Katherine Satorius, "Portrait of a Bird: The Work of Frances Stark." in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, (January 9 2006). Available through: <https://v2.lareviewofbooks.org/article/portrait-of-a-bird-the-work-of-frances-stark/>, [Accessed April 2018].

28 Frances Stark, "Notes Towards the Eroticism of Pedagogy," in *Hey Hey Glossolalia (After)* (New York: Creative Time, 2008), p. 131.

29 Emily McDermott, Frances Stark, "Mozart for the Modern Age" in *Interviews* magazine (April 2015). Available through: <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/frances-stark-absolut-art-award> [Accessed February 2020].

30 Corey D. B. Walker, "Confessional Crises and Cultural Politics in Twentieth-Century America" in *Journal of American History*, Volume 100, Issue 3, 1 December 2013, Pages 897–898. Available through: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jat533> [Accessed: March 2018].

conceives and represents her artistic practice as much as the “I” of her writing as multiple and composed in collaboration. I examine the artist’s practice of cutting, remixing, and gluing together of fragments, and the plurality of voices that the artist invokes and that hints at a field of social relations in which the “I” forms itself. I pay attention to Stark’s practice of paying homage to other artists and writers; to what haunts her and how this “politics of dedication” as “the debt of inspiration that [she] owe[s] to other artists, friends, lovers, and histories,”³¹ informs her writing. I contend that the relevance of Stark’s writing lies in the way the artist challenges hegemonic narratives that promote individual creativity and competition and propose, in a way that strongly resonates with Lonzi’s and Cixous’ feminist propositions, collaborative modes of artistic production grounded on a sense of responsibility for each other and the collective joy of sharing the space of practice with others.

In the final part of this chapter, I pay attention to the instances of refusal that emerge in the many “I can’t” “I am not able,” “I won’t” and “not,” in Stark’s writing as expressions of negative feelings such as paranoia, anxiety and obsession which, for instance, make it impossible for Stark to write. This affliction and sense of inability, as I show, enables Stark’s writing to exist as a refusal to comply with the forms and modes of speaking and giving an account of oneself in contemporary art. Stark’s writing also poses another important question. When exhaustion is the horizon of collective experience, can we imagine a new sense of connection, and sharing in the joy of making art and writing that can become the blueprint for forms and modes of collaboration and solidarity? And what kind of sociality do Stark’s texts open and imagine?

4.1 “The Architect & the Housewife.” Or, the gendered economies of artistic production

Prompted by a friend’s request for a catalogue essay,³² in triple decker sandwich, “The Architect & the Housewife” (1999), Stark unpacks gendered notions of creative work. Through a series of personal anecdotes, critical readings and observations, in this text, while questioning the reproduction of a value system based on the assumptions produced by the fundamentally gendered division of labour, Stark insists on the complementarity of differences, and the need to reassess how artistic practices are attributed value, imagining a scenario in which “the architect” and “the house” collaborate toward the making of history.

For instance, the text challenges Daniel Buren’s reading of the distinction between studio and post-studio practices, showing the gender bias behind his assumptions. In his essay “*The Function of the Studio*” (1971), Buren praises post-studio practices for their social dimension as artists, he argues, engage in public activities, whereas the artist’s studio has a “simultaneously idealising and ossifying function,”³³ it is the place where “the work originates, private, almost an ivory tower.” For Buren, the studio puts art in a state of “purgatory” that grants artists limited agency in the production and dissemination of their

31 Jan Verwoert, *Exhaustion and Exuberance* (2010), p. 50.

32 Originally commissioned by artist Michael Lin.

33 Daniel Buren, *The Function of the Studio*, October, Vol. 10 (Autumn, 1979), pp. 51–58. Available through: http://www.kim-cohen.com/Assets/CourseAssets/Texts/Buren_Function%20of%20the%20Studio.pdf. [Accessed February 2020].

work, and culture at large. Stark wholeheartedly disagrees with Buren, and considers how, with the increasingly blurry boundaries between life and work, the studio becomes a space that collapses the distinction between work and life, rendering inoperative any distinction between private-public, interior-exterior, personal and political. The neat and clear division Buren's writing draws is for Stark inconceivable, and Buren's assumption, as she observes, discloses the gendered bias that lurks behind the artist's denial of the studio, or (for that matter) the artist's living room, as a social and political space.

The text opens with the description of a couch bisecting the artist's living room and overlooking the city. Despite the attractiveness of the location and the furniture, Stark observes, visitors do not like to sit on it because, "directly behind the couch" is the artist's desk covered by piles of books and pieces of paper, that "can and do easily stray from the boundary of the table-desk toward the head and shoulder of the seated guest."³⁴ The living room of the artist, far from being a safe space, is a space of work, a public place, and a space full of the artist's anxieties linked, as Stark argues, to social and professional relations.

The writing of the essay was prompted by an invitation from a male artist friend, Michael Lin, who also happened to be a post-studio artist, whose work investigates the relation of private-public through large-scale installations in public spaces. Stark observed that in her surroundings, women artists often have a studio practice while the male counterparts, artists such as Lin and Jorge Pardo or Liam Gillick, make huge public sculptures that involve many collaborators and are thus considered more socially engaged than artists who, like Stark herself, have a more intimate and autobiographical practice. Although this might simply be a coincidence, Stark observes that the devaluation of the labour of reproduction, like the devaluation of the social function of artistic practices which are intimate and autobiographical, is still very much the norm in society as it is in art circles. Thus, she takes the occasion of writing an essay as an opportunity for a dialogue between Lin and Stark's, the architect and the housewife's practices. Stark draws a parallel between herself and a housewife, writing:

Was I not like a housewife, toiling within the confines of my home and serving as both hostess and docent of my tiny quarters? Were these men not like architects in that they were constantly carrying out plans—giving instructions, making constructions?³⁵

While comparing herself to a housewife in her typically sardonic yet jovial tone, she compares the post-studio artist to the architect who relies heavily on public settings and large quantities of financial and institutional support "to bring the final product, object, and/or site into being."³⁶ But while those artists are supported by the reproductive labour of institutions, Stark notes that for many of her female friends who make works that necessitate the intimacy of the studio in an expensive and rapidly gentrifying city like Los Angeles, home becomes "a site of a series of simultaneous productions which bear no evidence of productivity—save for the fact that the house isn't falling apart."³⁷ Home, Stark argues

34 Frances Stark, "The Architect & the Housewife" in *Frances Stark. Collected Writing: 1993–2003*, (London: Book Works, 2003), p. 30.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

37 *Ibid.*

against Buren, thus is no less a political space for social intervention than the public sphere is. Stark's comments point the reader's attention to different types of production which are equally important and thus should be equally valued: the production of public spaces, but also and more importantly, the labour of reproduction, of the caretaking and maintenance often performed by women³⁸ who take on the task to make sure that "nothing is falling apart," that is the work of life maintenance.

"The Architect & the Housewife" could be read in relation to Mierle Laderman Ukeles' "Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!" in which Ukeles explains the distinction between what she calls "two basic systems: Development and Maintenance." The former, associated with the avant-garde and implicitly male, is concerned with "pure individual creation; the new; change; progress, advance, excitement, flight or fleeing." The latter includes tasks generally associated—at least in the private sphere—with women and domestic work: "keep the dust off the pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement; repeat the flight." The problem, as Ukeles notes, is that our culture values development, while it is maintenance that "takes all the fucking time."³⁹ It is the devaluation of care and the work of maintenance that Buren and her male colleagues tacitly assume and that Stark's text challenges.

Stark asks why society is affording low status to various forms of care, and why men like Buren cultivate such a repulsion for the studio, for interior space and for life's maintenance in general. "The Architect and the Housewife" is more than a polemical text. Stark questions the gendered division of labour in the art world, which reproduces biased discourses and devalues women's ways of working and their contribution to art and literature by calling them intimate and considering them a-political unless they appear on the public scene. She compares care work to the work of the artist, and considers the possibility of thinking art not as a war of positions (as Buren seems to address it), but as a gesture—where the architect and the housewife collaborate to make history. She suggests a non-binary reading of those roles and modes of work which value both the moments of working in the studio and those spent in negotiations with other agents; the making as well as the maintaining gives equal dignity to different modes of artistic production, suggesting that art making is not only and all about exposure and market value, but first and foremost an act of caring, of listening to, a paying attention that is free and can be done in collaboration.⁴⁰

38 Mariarosa Dalla Costa argued that women's unpaid domestic labour was central to the development of capitalist accumulation and for the modern conception of work, and concluded that under capitalism, unpaid work is the basis of sexual discrimination and the unequal sexual division of labour. See Maria Rosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, "The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community" Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Telma James, "The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community" (1972). Available through: <https://libcom.org/files/Dalla%20Costa%20and%20James%20-%20Women%20and%20the%20Subversion%20of%20the%20Community.pdf>.

39 "Maintenance is a drag: It takes all the fucking time. The Mind boggles and chafes at the boredom. The culture confers lousy status on the maintenance jobs: minimum wages, housewife=no pay." Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Maintenance Art Manifesto" (1969). Available through: https://www.queensmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Ukeles_MANIFESTO.pdf. [Accessed February 2020].

40 These values, according to Nina Power, have been historically associated with and imposed on women. Nina Power, "Why don't women stop playing this rigged capitalist game?" in *The Guardian* comments, (August 2016). Available through: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/02/women-stop-playing-rigged-capitalist-game-saatchi-kevin-roberts>. [Accessed February 2020].



Book cover of Frances Stark's *Collected Works*, 2003.
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4.2 Sharing in the making (becoming modestly)

In the first part I have shown how Stark's writing attempts to navigate the multiple dimensions of, while asking questions about, the social relations that influence her artistic practice and its reception; for instance, the value that the art system (with its market and agents) attributes to spectacular and "visible" works, and the ways it can devalue practices that, like hers, are small, quiet, fragile, quotidian. In this second part, I examine how Stark's politics of dedication translate into the form of her writing.

Social relations constitute both the material and the subjects of Stark's practice. For Stark, art making and writing are always the result of some kind of collaboration—whether through direct exchanges that make the work possible; or by calling on, invoking the presence and the words of other artists and writers. The very intimate mode of address of her writing conveys a sense of "togetherness" that hints toward the relational nature of an artistic practice. The intimacy that Stark's writing performs is both disconcerting and comforting: the rumbling 'I' of the artist might be perceived as narcissistic, self-obsessed and overwhelmingly present. At the same time, however, the sharing of her joy, excitement, afflictions and anxieties related to her professional circle might produce identification. In her practice, the expression of this sense of being implicated in each other's lives and practices becomes an occasion for experimenting with forms of making art, teaching and writing that insists on art's social responsibility to challenge the status quo of culture which reproduces and maintains hierarchies and inequalities.

Stark's practice is a conduit for and a point of distortion of those relations within the specific microcosm of her art community. What might be regarded as the failure of the individual, for instance, for Stark becomes an enabler of the possibility of collective forms of action. A case in point here is an essay on the artist's work commissioned by an academic journal and which, as we are told by the artist, "failed to materialise." This failure prompts Stark to question the necessity of "asking a lot from one person," which, however didn't stop the artist from asking "a little from a lot of people."⁴¹ Instead of asking to produce more, the artist asked permission to sample, remix, and reproduce existing texts (reviews, essays, letters, emails, contributions to her previous books) but also interviews by

the artist, to make an assemblage composed in collaboration and titled *TEXTS CONIUNXIT*.⁴² As the title explains, the text links, joins, sticks, connects—from the latin *coniunxit* which means “to join, connect, juxtapose or associate”—different fragments and parts, ways of looking at Stark’s practice. Parts that form a totality that tells the story not only of Stark’s practice, but also of the forces that “magnetise” the work.

In her introduction to *TEXTS CONIUNXIT*, Stark writes that her reason for making art and publishing has never been to “acquire ‘followers’—but for that possibility of being touched remotely by another person’s mind, another person’s set of decisions, their story, their tone, their texture...”⁴³ The text discloses the ways in which the work has touched each of the people, in its own specific way, disclosing the multiple and complex ways in which her artistic practice exists as a relation; the different ways in which it affects and makes her a different subject in each specific relation.⁴⁴

The text assembles the voices of her colleagues, her therapist, her family, her collaborators, friends and their accounts of their relations to Stark’s practice—including her friend, painter Laura Owens, to whom the artist asks what she thinks about her new paintings; to artist and art historian Richard Hawkins, whose ideas Stark engages in various texts; to art critic Jan Verwoert, who she has collaborated with and who has written extensively about her practice; but also MOCA assistant curator Lanka Tattersall, who worked with Stark on an exhibition; her dad to explain the function of the IBM card which Stark has used in her work; or the gallery assistant who is asked what she likes about Stark’s collages. The fragments are personal because they are specific to the conversations the artist has been having with those individuals, and are part of the universe of Stark’s practice. By assembling them together, the artist composes a multivocal text in which the space of writing becomes a moment of conviviality, a “great classroom... surrounded by souls or spirits.”⁴⁵

Stark’s writing enacts the possibility of a society of “mutual admiration,” where no part, no subjects, or topics, no self takes the priority over all the others. In this society of mutual admiration imagined by Stark, fragments are bound together by joy, desperation, love, anxieties and the shared faith in art as a form of paying attention. Writing becomes a way of scripting the self in real time. Stark discloses the processual and collaborative nature of making art/writing as well as of the self as an evolving multiplicity.⁴⁶ In her work, Stark practices what art critic Jan Verwoert called a “politics of dedication” which recognises her indebtedness to others who have empowered the artist to make works. In both her visual and written work, Stark borrows and quotes other artists and writers, constructing her texts like “sandwiches”—where borrowing involves the transformation of what she borrows.

41 Frances Stark, “All things to all people—On Frances Stark” in *Frances Stark: Collected Writing: 1993–2003*, (London: Book Works, 2003), p. 16.

42 The text is included in monographic catalogue accompanying Stark’s retrospective, *UH-OH: Frances Stark 1991–2015*, at the Hammer Museum, L.A. (2015).

43 Frances Stark “TEXTS CONIUNXIT” in *UH-OH: Frances Stark 1991–2015*, Frances Stark and Ali Subotnick (eds.); (Los Angeles, Munich, London, New York: Hammer Museum and DelMonico Books •Prestel, 2015), p. 112.

44 Eret Talviste, “Philosophizing in Plato’s Cave: Hélène Cixous’ Affective Writing” in *Capacious—Journal for Emerging Affective Inquiry*, 1 (4). Available through: <http://capaciousjournal.com/article/philosophizing-in-platos-cave/>. [Accessed February 2020].

45 Hélène Cixous, “Volleys of Humanity” in *Volleys of Humanity. Essays 1972–2009*. Ed. by Eric Prenowitz, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 266.

46 See Isobel Harbison, *Performing Image* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2019), p. 120.

Stark's style of appropriation, Verwoert argues, communicates a sense of appreciation that "reflects the conversion of a debt into a dedication,"⁴⁷ in an exchange that is not stuck, as Cixous would say, into the "commercial deal" when the other always loses. Stark's practice is motivated by anti-economical motivations; not by the desire to have a professional career and be successful, but by love and passion, "an ecstatic reciprocal attention-paying of lovers" as an alternative model for understanding how and why people in the arts might freely collaborate. Her writing hints at an admiration society in which making art becomes a way of harnessing failures, hesitations, paranoia, anger with the power for social transformation. Although this might sound all a bit utopian, Stark's practice shows how transformation might start from small gestures of paying loving attention to each other's words, ways of feeling, lives and works.

In the literary assemblage, "For nobody knows himself, if he is only himself and not also another one at the same time" (2005), Stark addresses the problem of how to navigate one's own influences.⁴⁸ The occasion to write this text was offered by an editor who asked her to write about the practice of conceptual artist Al Ruppertsberg. In an attempt to "convert" this economic transaction into an "internal necessity," Stark decides that rather than writing about Ruppertsberg, as has been requested, she would instead write about being moved and touched by her encounter with Ruppertsberg. Stark explains her decision as follows:

To dedicate myself to writing something that stemmed from my own requirements, not something that was somebody else's idea. Perhaps what lies at the bottom of such selfishness—and, incidentally, at the forefront of any discussion of AI I have the luxury of initiating—is the assumption that the aim of life is self-development. To come under the influence of someone else is to become an actor in a part that has not been written for him.⁴⁹

In this passage, Stark shares her method with the reader, and suggests to convert the debt of having to write a text about Ruppertsberg as an "external necessity" into an internal need, which prompts the artist to read with Ruppertsberg, that is in relation to him—that is by considering the many ways in which his practice "moves" and "touches" Stark's life and work; but also the ways in which artistic practices contribute to ongoing conversations about art across times, spaces and generations. In this text, Stark converts the debt (of writing about Ruppertsberg) into a dedication to the work of the conceptual artist. In the text, Stark recounts an anecdote about her first encounter with the work of the conceptual artist Ruppertsberg, who was introduced to her by an art school adviser who had observed that Stark's project of hand-copying Henry Miller's *Sexus*⁵⁰ (1949) was strikingly similar to Ruppertsberg's own project of hand-copying Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Stark explains how her casual encounter

47 About this politics of dedication, Verwoert writes, "To practice a politics of dedication and recognise an indebtedness to the other as the condition of your own ability to perform means to acknowledge the importance of care. You perform because you care for someone or some- thing. This care gives you the strength to act, not least because to not act is out of the question when someone or something you really care for or about requires that you should act." See Jan Verwoert, *Exhaustion and Exuberance*, (2010). Available through: <http://whyiseverybodybeingsonice.deappel.nl/concrete/index.php/chapters/exhaustion-exuberance/ways-defy-pressure-perform>. [Accessed February 2020].

48 Frances Stark, "For nobody knows himself, if he is only himself and not also another one at the same time. On Allen Ruppertsberg" in *Collected Writing: 1993-2003*, (London: Book Works, 2003), p. 12.

49 Ibid.

with the work of Ruppertsberg, via the comment of the art tutor, rather than plunging her into the despair of not being original enough, gave Stark another opportunity to reflect on the derivative nature of her work, and of art in general where we continuously borrow from each other: this fact, for Stark, “doesn’t necessarily imply you are hopelessly delusional regarding your own potential for originality.” Stark pays attention to Ruppertsberg’s gesture of transcribing, which Stark reads as “a direct engagement with every single thought and idea Thoreau put into that particular work.”⁵¹ This common gesture of “paying attention” is the “original” gesture of art, which is free and available, and is not owned by anyone.

In her texts, Stark asks herself what is the best way to share her interests, readings and experiences with the reader; to approach the experience of reading/encountering something— an idea, a book, a text, a person—in a way that can communicate the feeling and the experience of that particular encounter; and how it had influenced her. Lingering on a thought, ecstatically contemplating the small and insignificant details of experience, Stark relates existentially to the many subjects and voices that inhabit her texts, which offer insights and show the artist in the process of making and unmaking herself out of the materials of art and writing.

However, if Stark seems to be interested in figuring herself out, she also knows that the self can never be fully known or figured out or possessed, but it exists in a permanent state of dissonance and emotional vulnerability, traversed by many contradictions. It is a self which the artist attempts to gather together and present publicly in a coherent form, only to fail to do so over and again. It is a self on the verge of breaking down, falling apart, incapacitated by overwhelming emotions and feelings; by the need to work and the anxieties linked to artistic production.

In the last section of this chapter, I read the apologetic tone of Stark’s writing, its constant appeal to a paralysing sense of impossibility and inability, in its generative potential, as a necessity and an engine form of sociality in writing and art. I show how, by conveying the sense of helplessness and exposing the afflictions of her creative process, Stark acknowledges the many ways in the market and social relations and expectations put pressure on artistic practices, at the same time as she hints to the potential for alternative forms of working together in the arts. Here negative feelings are not only a paralysing condition, but, as I will show, what enables her practice.

50 The evocative title is a reference to Henry Miller’s *Sexus*, the first volume of a trilogy *The Rosy Crucifixion*, consisting of *Sexus*, *Plexus*, and *Nexus* and which documents the six years of Miller’s life in Brooklyn as he struggled to become a writer and breaks up with his wife. In the passage quoted by Stark, Miller asks if the writer can hold up a mirror to her or himself in the act of writing. If writing always reflect a separate subject who is not the same self that is present in the mirror, that is because, Miller argues, the self is always bound to externalities. See Henry Miller, *The Rosy Crucifixion. Book One: Sexus*, (New York: Grove Press, 1994), reprint. See also, Hannah Tennant-Moore, “A Rosier Crucifixion: The Erotic World of Henry Miller” in *The Paris Review* (July 2012). Available through: <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2012/07/26/a-rosier-crucifixion-the-erotic-world-of-henry-miller/>. [Accessed February 2020]. Inez Hollander, *Henry Miller and the Politics of Repulsion and Desire*, (June 2017) Available through. <https://spendingtimewithhenrymiller.wordpress.com/2017/06/03/henry-miller-and-the-politics-of-repulsion-and-desire/>. [Accessed February 2018].

51 According to Foucault, by writing and reading and rereading, taking notes, the writer would literally “incorporate” the true discourse heard coming from the mouth of another. Foucault writes: “These hupomnena are of use to oneself, but you can see that writing is an important activity in this flexible exchange of favors and benefits, in this flexible exchange of soul’s services in which we try to be of service to the other in his journey towards the good and towards himself.” (Foucault, 2001 p. 360). The notes, according to Foucault, are important because while recalling one’s own thoughts and readings, become available to others. Foucault insists that it is only with the advent of Christianity, when the relation between subject and truth moves from an interests in “how to become a subject of veridiction” (Foucault 2001 p. 365) to an obsession with the truth about oneself—in confession, for instance—that the autobiographical elements as telling the truth about oneself, became central, and the personal writing came to be identified with a mode of revealing an inner truth about oneself.

4.3 Why Should You Not Be Able to Assemble Yourself and Write?⁵²

The question that constitutes the title and the subject of my reading in this section first appeared in a drawing of Stark's from 2008, which depicts a woman, presumably the artist, holding a piece of paper on which the question, *Why should you not be able to assemble yourself and write?* is handwritten. The seated figure's feet drift upward and her head anchors the drawing's lower half. The viewer sees the scene from above in a way that obscures the artist's face, while the body looks like a mass of colour from within which the question emerges. Why is Stark not able to assemble herself? What does prevent the artist from writing? Why is Stark not able to pull herself together and write? The questions originated in an email sent to her by an editor friend: "I have watched, and heard reports of your strategic manoeuvres on slowly withdrawing from writing on focusing on making work."⁵³ The force of the address puts pressure on Stark, who feels the urge to address the question to her audience—opening the possibility for endless speculations about the conditions that might not allow the artist to write: material conditions that make writing impossible—for instance, the anxieties related to work, or the necessities of work, and the work of taking care of her apartment, and feeding and clothing her child and herself.

In this section, I read this expression of anxieties and negative feelings as both the expression of a shared condition of afflictions that bind an artistic community together (the anxieties associated with making art; the precarity of work and life under capitalism; the paralysing sense of alienation⁵⁴).

Stark insists on the commons of suffering: the sense of inadequacy expressed in writing or the artist's anxieties of not being able to make a work or assemble herself in writing; the paralysing sense of impossibility motivated by the total commodification of life and work under neoliberalism; the flexibility demanded of an individual; the emotional investment and the scant economic rewards; the need to produce more and perform more; the self-exploitative economies of artistic production; the anxieties of the possibility of failure, of not being able to satisfy someone else's expectations and desires; of not being good enough; smart enough, successful enough. The paralysing emotional distress and the anxieties of work and having to play different roles to any number of different people: mother, teacher, lover, artist, student, and citizen. A sense of exhaustion and the discomfort with the working conditions in the arts, but also the unsettling and joyful process of making art—these states are conveyed by negative statements such as "I can't," and "I am not able to assemble and write," or "not being able to read;" or phrases like "this i knows no thing;" or "I couldn't think clearly;" "I don't want not to talk, I don't want to sit on a chair on a stage."

Negative feelings seep into the words and forms of her writing: the pain of unformed forms, undeveloped thoughts; the torment of imitation and follies of aspiration, one of which is the aspiration to lose herself, to exceed her own strength and which only results

52 The title of this section is borrowed from the title of Frances Stark's paper work, *Why should you not be able to assemble yourself and write?* (2008). Rice paper, paper, and ink on gessoed canvas panel. 55×34 in. (139.7×86.4 cm)

53 As quoted in Katherine Satorius, "Portrait of a Bird: The Work of Frances Stark" in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, (January 9, 2016). Available through: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/portrait-of-a-bird-the-work-of-frances-stark/> [Accessed August 2017].

54 For political philosopher Paolo Virno, "sentiments of disenchantment," that once marked positions of radical alienation from the system of wage labour—such as anxiety, distraction, and cynicism—are now perversely integrated, from the factory to the office, into contemporary capitalist production itself. See Paolo Virno, "The Ambivalence of Disenchantment" in Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, (eds.), *Radical Thought in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 17.

in the torment of impotence. Or again, the torment of psychological impasses. The unhappiness of acting a part. The need to say the same thing over and over again. Stark's writing expresses the anxieties provoked by the inadequacy of the artist to close the gap between the desire and joy of making art and the negative realities of those aspirations and economies that surround art making.

At the same time, these negative statements which express the artist's sense of inadequacy are not just an admission of the artist's inability. They are, as I want to argue, the expression of a refusal that challenges the assumption, that Stark could "assemble herself" in the demanded way. I read Stark's apologetic tone not only as a justification for her failure to write, but more importantly as a refusal.

This refusal of expressing happiness and satisfaction with things as they are is expressed in the logic of Stark's text. Stark does not pretend to be mastering the many subjects of her texts; she unsettles meanings and refuses linear narratives without attempting to stake a claim on a subject, not even when the subject of knowledge is herself. Her writing mobilises what scholar Sianne Ngai calls, "ugly feelings," such as anxiety, envy, distress, pain, paranoia—feelings associated with situations in which action is suspended.⁵⁵ They are negative in the sense that they evoke pain or an inability to act, producing a sense of unsettledness and confusion: the feeling of not being focused or gathered, tied to a loss of control explicitly thematised in each moment of stalled or suspended action;⁵⁶ in the moments of transition between one thought and another; one reading and another; in the passages between euphoria and paranoia. Stark turns to "ugly feelings" as a site for interrogating her own suspended agency, as an artist, in the affirmative culture of a market-oriented society, in which artistic practices as commodities have become less threatening to the cultural establishment and its economic order.

In her writing, Stark invokes the revolt's power of art as a practice of paying attention; a gesture that, as Stark suggests, very often emerges in moments of vulnerability, from the feeling of impossibility and the necessity to overcome it. In the literary assemblage entitled "Scared to Death" (2001), for instance, Stark recounts an anecdote about the time when, looking for job, she had painted a "faux-painting" in Mel Gibson's home and the kind of associations that came to her mind while "working with a large variety of media on a window pane in the closet of the guardhouse," she writes, "I got to thinking that someone could have a nervous breakdown in there some day. Such a breakdown could prompt the afflicted individual to spend a lot of time staring at some small insignificant portion of paint, eyes glued to a random set of details."⁵⁷ The experience of the "afflicted individual," a condition that Stark as an artist recognises as her own, seems to contradict the idea that, "to sustain its effect," a faux-painting must be just be glanced off. For Stark, art is precisely this quasi-obsessive quotidian practice of paying attention to details. That's why she concludes the text with a wish, "I like to believe someone could inevitably break out of the glance mode and start to pay attention, at which point all could very well break loose."⁵⁸ It is in moments like this that Stark gives us a key to reading her understanding

55 In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai explores how envy, disgust, depression, or inability, unlike more cathartic feelings such as anger, are often considered non-cathartic and are often associated with situations in which action is suspended or blocked and how they help us rethink socio-political forms of agency. See, Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, (Harvard University Press, 2005).

56 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

57 Frances Stark, "Scared to Death" in *Frances Stark. Collected Writing: 1993–2003* (London: Book Works, 2003), p. 98.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

of art making and writing as ways of paying attention as a radical social practice that challenge established categories and value systems that promote individuality and normative forms of sociality. A way of paying attention to neglected emotions and to the insignificant details of everyday experience that grant us insights and knowledge into the way we live and work—so that instead of just “glancing off” each other, intellectuals might start risking paying attention to the details of a practice and its toxic social economies.

The gesture of paying attention is one that has become increasingly difficult, as Stark notes, in the era attention deficit disorder has become the norm, and the desire to consume (even feelings and emotions) have become pathological. In the assemblage “Just me me me,” the artist thematises the self as schizophrenic multiple, composed by many subjective positions, and all somehow afflicted by some kind of pathology: there is the lower-case “i” who suffers from attention deficit disorder and is unable to read or grasp the meaning of things, “consuming and not learning anything new;” a little “f” who is going through a nervous breakdown; and finally, the capitalised, egotistic “I”—whose existence revolves around the desire to succeed by being exposed. A dangerous “I” which, as the artist observes, little “i has to stay away from,”⁵⁹ since it is too fragile and makes the “I” tremble with insecurities. This “i” often also risks “crashing” and “derails its own train,”⁶⁰ creating a “spiralling mess,” that leaves the little “i” desperate and afflicted by a feeling of inadequacy, of never doing enough or being enough of what the system demands. Thus, to pay attention acquires the features of a revolutionary act; a way of saying “no” to the commodification and institutionalisation of artistic practices and saying “yes” to a sense of mutual responsibility. Paying attention is a gesture that heightens our awareness of the enormous corpus of human experiences that are difficult to express, either because they are considered “subjective” (as opposed to the “objectivity” of logic and rationality) or because at times they are difficult to objectively prove.

Stark’s work gravitates toward the material that is difficult to express; toward the unknowable centre of subjectivity—unknowable because, as Stark suggests, it is a movement, a transfer of things to awareness that moves in the direction of a collaborative meaning-making process. For Stark, feelings are not only individual and subjective, but they are fundamentally social as institutions and practices.⁶¹ The pathologically open “I” of Stark’s writing is not only then afflicted by various negative feelings and a sense of powerlessness and impossibility, but also affected by those emotions in a way that, as Stark’s practice suggests, might be recuperated for critical praxis.

This pathological openness makes the ‘I’ of the artist particularly vulnerable to these contradictory forces that animate life in contemporary capitalism: the sense of alienation, self-obsession, exhaustion, and the obsessions and necessities of creative work, the desire for social recognition. Her practice exposes both how those forces afflict her but also how they can become a possible question and envision new forms of socialities through making art and writing.

Stark’s work hints at the exuberance of a practice that cannot be reduced to one thing or marketable identity and continuously shatters the illusion of limitless potency of

59 Frances Star, “Just me me me” in *Frances Stark. Collected Writing: 1993–2003* (London: Book Works, 2003), p. 85.

60 Ibid. p. 87.

61 Sianne Ngai observes that the “environmentality” of feelings often indicate more than the observation that our surroundings shape our mood. She observes how affective qualities seem often more appropriate to describe the complexity of the situation, the total relation. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (2005).

the individual by acknowledging, as Carla Lonzi did before her, the way things “grab” her from her shoulders, taking hold of her attention; the common feelings and emotions, the relations, and the ways in which friends, families and lovers influence and are implicated in an artistic practice. At the same time, by insisting on the commons of suffering, Stark imagines a society in which affliction might become a reason to collaborate to transform a society that thrives on competitiveness and exhaustion into a society bounded together by reciprocity and mutual admiration.



Frances Stark, *My Best Thing*, 2011.
Courtesy the artist. All rights reserved.

Conclusion

It could be tempting to label Frances Stark as a confessional writer, and for good reason. Her first-person narrations might strike us as narcissistic and self-obsessed, as the artist mines her experience, digging into her “closet,” often exposing her feelings and emotions; sharing her artistic process. Yet, in this chapter I have tried to demonstrate that Stark’s careful and orchestrated use of the personal and of the first-person pronoun is dictated by different motivations than the simple fact of sharing intimate details about her life with her readers (as for instance, one shares information on social media). What interests Stark is not necessarily the act of sharing per se, but the potential for a transformative kind of joy (and not the pornographic culture of happiness) that comes from this sharing of passions and afflictions; of the place of one’s own practice with others.

For Stark, the sharing of this capacity for joy seems less linked to the ability of the individual to deliver the performance, than to the collaborative modalities of this sharing. We have seen how Stark’s work enacts what Verwoert calls a “politics of dedication,” by paying homage to those who have enabled Stark to make works by inspiring her, whether directly or indirectly—⁶² for instance Bas Jan Ader, Allen Ruppersberg, Laura Owen, among others. For Verwoert, Stark’s gesture of “borrowing and quoting” opens a space where hierarchies are dismantled and displaced by a form of conviviality and commonality “of those whose presence might be felt through a work”⁶³ and in her texts. Stark’s writing

⁶² Jan Verwoert, *Exhaustion and Exuberance* (2010), pp. 49–51.

⁶³ Ibid.

is “affective” in the sense that it foregrounds the centrality of affects and materiality in the formation of meaning and subjecthood as embodied experiences.⁶⁴

What Stark really shares with the reader is the joy of “being under the influence” of something; the joy of an artistic identity built in collaboration; and the realisation that other people in other times and geographies might have felt addressed by similar questions in their practices. Against the narrative of individual success and a hyper-alienated artistic subjectivity, Stark’s writing points to a different kind of presence, one exuberant, uncontrollable—both enthusiastic and desperate, always tainted by negative feeling: her motto is to be “agonizing yet blissful,” as the title of one of her collages from 2001 announces.⁶⁵

A sense of inadequacy, despair, wretchedness, confusion and unhappiness permeates her texts. Yet, as I’ve shown, her lack of happiness doesn’t prevent her from making art or writing. On the contrary, it often motivates her. If there is something that makes the artist unhappy it is the way things are. Amplifying the power of negative feelings allows the artist to diagnose the situation in which action is blocked and agency reduced in a way that have ramifications beyond the domain of the aesthetic proper, since the situation of restricted agency, as Nai observes, “... is one that describes art’s own position in a highly differentiated and totally commodified society.”⁶⁶ As an artist and writer with an international career in art, Stark has shown herself to be critical of the cult of personality and the commodification of creativity and artistic education due to neoliberal policies and new training programs that treat artists as both producers and consumers of art in a way that, however, leaves space both for the acknowledgement of her own partaking in these economies of social reproduction and for imagining alternative forms of communing in the field of visual art, starting from the way artists are educated and socialised in art schools and professionally.

With her emphasis on negative states, those, for instance, expressed in the feeling of not being focused (Just me me me) or not being able to be “gathered” (Why shall you not be able to assemble yourself together and write?), Stark’s writing addresses affective disorientation—the sense of being lost in one’s own “cognitive map” of affects⁶⁷—as a pathological condition of contemporary society and at the same time as a possibility that intellectuals might find alternative ways of freely collaborating and transforming the power relations that underpin artistic practices. She formalises this loss of loss through a spatial and temporal confusion obtained by using unstable narrative techniques such as subjective or first-person narration and the use of the assemblage as a heterogeneous and unstable constellation of voices and thoughts.

Variations of this oscillation between subjective viewpoint and objective knowledge, between first-person narration and scholarly criticism, produces the feeling of “feeling uncertain” about what one is feeling. These moments abound in Stark’s writing. The instability of feelings, produced by negative statements, reflects the self’s unstable construction and the impossibility of possessing it and owning the subject of her writing. Instead, the artist presents a self that is “pathologically open”—a paralysing condition of helplessness

64 About the nature of affect, sensation, and experience, in *Rootprints*, in conversation with Mireille Calle-Gruber, Cixous comments that, Writing begins in the same place as affect, with the same sensation in the body; it comes, “from the heart where passions rise to the finger tips that hear the body thinking: this is where the book springs from.” See Hélène Cixous, Calle-Gruber (1994); and Cixous *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, (1990).

65 The complete title of the collage is “Agonizing yet Blissful Little Orgies of Soul Probing” (2001) ink, collage on paper; 14 × 11 in; 35.6 × 27.9 cm.

66 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (2005), p. 14.

67 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (2005), p. 14.

and indeterminacy, but also a form of resistance against the closures of meaning; the need to clarify, specify, legitimise one's own experience through rational and objective forms of discourse, that does not compromise, however, the artist's social responsibility toward herself and her audiences in giving an account of herself that is embodied and attuned to the powerful forces of experience, emotions, feelings, influences and social relations that move and shape an artistic practice.

Stark's way of assembling her texts/the self is "feminine" in Cixousian's sense of a writing practice of dismantling the hierarchies that produce difference as a series of oppositions (for instance, the opposition, as we have seen, between private and public; studio and post-studio artists; or the distinction between high and low in culture; between individual and collective). It's a writing that defies traditional literary categories and genre boundaries, combining theory, poetry, personal experience and philosophy to create alternatives to mainstream art theory and criticism. And similarly to *écriture féminine*, the economy of Stark's practice is characterised by loss—through the process of fragmentation, scattering, dispersing, losing herself in the process of making sense; the dispersion of the self and becoming a no-one—and excess—the miscellaneous nature of Stark's texts. This form of anti-economical work is one in which loss becomes excess and debt is reconverted into a dedication. While her writing addresses the artist's struggle to make compromises to keep making art, she also insists on the unquantifiable qualitative and imaginative dimension of artistic work, the one which is performed in collaboration, and always exceeds economic gains and the capitalist logic of possession.

The perceived sense of alienation and powerlessness is reconverted into a gesture of attention; of paying attention not as a state, but as an inner gesture. An inner gesture in which the "I" relinquishes its control and allows an inner space to open up; altering our perception, so that "I" can be simultaneously inside and outside, observer and observed.⁶⁸ This gesture involves an alteration of perception, of the way the "I" relates to things: "I attends to the world," poet Dominique Hecq observes, "not so much in thinking mode, the sharp-pointed focusing with the mind, but in feeling mode," which she describes as "the broad, hovering attention with the body."⁶⁹ This attentive gesture produces a change in perception. It shakes up subjective knowledge and preformatted ways of knowing the world and oneself, producing a loss—of certainties, of equilibrium, of the self, of the already thought and known.

In this chapter, I have shown how for Stark, paying attention is a way of reflecting on how and what we attend to when we make art or write. It is, as I've argued, an act of refusal and resistance against the pathologies of neoliberalism, in which attention deficit disorder, as writer Mark Fisher once observed, has become a pathology—a consequence of being wired into the entertainment-control circuits of hypermediated consumer culture.⁷⁰ Fisher argues that in the highly-mediatised culture, addiction and attention deficit as systems of control constitute the central pathologies of capitalism. Data in the form of images are processed and circulated without need for reading, or for reflection, but "slogan-recognition" is sufficient to navigate the information-based culture, in which things demand just to be glanced off, without paying too much attention to what is being said or shown or shared.

68 Dominique Hecq, *Towards a Poetics of Creative Writing* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2015), p. 139.

69 Ibid.

70 Mark Fisher, *Capitalism Realism. Is There No Alternative?* (London: O Books, 2009), p. 25.

While it's important to recognise and analyse these incapacitating pathologies and their accompanying negative feelings as expressions of a social malaise rather than individual problems, similarly to Fisher, Stark believes in the possibility of harnessing their negative effects for social transformation. This is perhaps the exuberance of Stark's practice, a certain optimism and perhaps naïve belief and faith in the possibility of art and writing to open space beyond the constituted social order, rather than simply be a mirror of it. It is the exuberance of someone who is capable of being in uncertainty, mysteries and doubts while remaining attentive. For Stark, this form of attentiveness, as the agony of laboriously searching for just the right words, using the subtlest precision,⁷¹ is the social role that art can engender.

71 Andrew Berardini, *The Letter Writer* in *Mousse Magazine* n.26 (2010). Available through: <http://moussemagazine.it/frances-stark-andrew-berardini-2010/>. [Accessed February 2019].



Ya tienen asiento.

Francisco Goya, *Los Caprichos*, ca. 1797–99, etching, aquatint and drypoint printed in black ink on wove paper.
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CHAPTER 5

What is it to reside without settling?¹ Anne Boyer's poetics of refusal

Poetry's no can protect a potential yes—or more precisely, poetry's no is the one that can protect the hell yeah, or every hell yeah's multiple variations.
(Anne Boyer, "No," 2017)

In this chapter, I discuss Boyer's poetics of refusal by examining the collection of prose-poems *Garments Against Women* published by Ashahta Press in 2015; the collection of essays and criticism *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate* published by Ugly Duckling Presse in 2018 and the more recent memoir entitled *The Undying. A Meditation on Modern Illness* published by Allen Lane in 2019. The two collections and the memoir all contain meditations on the use of poetry and personal writing; on illness as a personal and social condition; on how relations of class, race, and gender define women's life and work; the toxicity of the neoliberal rhetoric of happiness and individual responsibility; the poet's refusal of social reproduction which, as Boyer argues, has to do with the question of form; of finding a form to speak of those "unspeakable" realities of being a woman under neoliberal survival. Boyer's works give voice to the contradictions that characterise a woman's life under neoliberalism, and to the ways in which this system makes everyone sick. As I will show in what follows, in an attempt to give an account of her experience of breast cancer, Boyer theorises modern illness as a social condition—an economic, political, existential, environmental state of perennial crisis that exhausts and produces crisis and instability that exhaust the individual's ability to respond. Boyer addresses these urgent questions in a way that is personal, but more importantly it is a call addressed to the social, to other writers, aspiring poets, revolutionaries and refusalists to use poetry and writing as tools of subversions, a possible gesture of refusal and questioning of the existing forms of social reproduction that diminish women's lives.

Boyer's lyrical poems mix found material from the Internet with more traditional literary forms to capture an "electronic vernacular: colloquial, popular, unrefined, inelegant, ungrammatical, unfinished, unwarranted, unprofessional, cringy, straightforwardly bad writing, yet alive and alarming, connected with life and the times we live in. Boyer writes as a white-American woman who struggles to make a living as a poet and take care of her child

1 The title is borrowed from Fred Moten's poem 'sun and shade' in *all that beauty* (Seattle: Letter Machine Editions, 2019).

and household as a single mother. In an interview with poet Amy King, she explains that when writing her third-book, *Garments Against Women* (2015), she was struggling with personal precarity, “my daughter and I were struggling, then, in the kind of poverty in which you are always getting sick from stress, overwork and shitty food then having no insurance or money or time to treat the problems caused by having no insurance or money or time.”² At the heart of Boyer’s poetics is the performance and analysis of work, and in specific creative work, and the forms that this refusal of work might take in poetry and creative writing. Boyer’s writing and poetry in particular are a form of social struggle carried out through poetic means, in response to political crisis,³ and to the sense of alienation that, as Boyer argues, is “distributed unevenly but pervasively across the material realities of almost all forms of contemporary life and labour.” For instance, in 2007 in a short text entitled “Poetic Nonaction” Boyer calls for a form of “poetic in-action” which as she explains, is “—not more, and not more’s shabby cousin ‘less,’ but indeed nothing at all.”⁴ The poet suggests a kind of diet that would enable the writer to write poetry and “breed a race of small rodents whose feet are shaped like letters or use rodent-foot-binding to fashion letter shapes.”⁵ Boyer’s work insists on the necessity to abandon poetry as a literary activity, and embrace forms of poetic inaction that are not the same as not writing poetry, but instead of writing it differently, refusing to reproduce the cultural and social structures that underpins it. Boyer’s refusal of reproduction is one that strongly resonates with the aim of *Autonomia*’s refusal to work, which I have briefly touched upon in the general introduction to this study. The refusal to work in the experience of the Autonomist movement in Italy was founded on the belief in the power of subversion of forms of creative actions and disobedience. Post-autonomist thinkers such as Maurizio Lazzarato⁶ and Paolo Virno have described how flexible and non-hierarchical forms of organising and creative ways of working eventually defined the transition, in Western societies, to neoliberal forms of work that extract value from creativity and people’s desires and preferences; demanding flexibility and autonomy and requiring of the workforce that it performs work more “creatively.”⁷ Creative labour, as writer and critic Marina Vishmidt observed, is presented as a “speculative investment in one’s human capital, with its hallmarks of affective excess, self-management,

2 Anne Boyer, Amy King, “‘Literature is against us:’ In Conversation with Anne Boyer” in *Harriet the Blog: The Poetry Foundation*. Available through: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/08/literature-is-against-us-in-conversation-with-anne-boyer/>. [Accessed May 2018].

3 See Anthony Iles, “Anguish Language: Crisis Literature, Speculation and Critique” in *Anguish Language. Writing and Crisis*. Edited by John Cunningham, Anthony Iles, Mira Mattar, Marina Vishmidt. (Berlin: Archive Book, 2015).

4 Anne Boyer, “Poetic Nonaction” in *ActionYes*, Issue 5 (Spring 2007) Available through: <http://actionyes.org/issue5/excess/boyer/boyerl.html>. [Accessed May 2018].

5 Ibid.

6 Although I do agree with Silvia Federici and who argues that to speak of social reproduction is more accurate than the post-Operaist definition of immaterial labour, which remains rather Eurocentric, I find useful here to recall Maurizio Lazzarato definition of immaterial labour. He writes, “immaterial labour involves a series of activities that are not normally recognised as ‘work’—in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion.” In “Immaterial Labor,” Saree Makdisi, Cesare Casarino, and Rebecca E. Karl (eds), *Marxism beyond Marxism*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 133.

7 This incorporation of creativity into capitalist production, as Virno observes, could only have been carried out by creating a certain degree of autonomy or freedom of the worker: “the work needs to some extent to be established through self-organisation... So, I need to be granted a certain degree of autonomy in order to be exploited. See Sonja Lavaert, Pascal Gilen, “The Dismasure of Art. An Interview with Paolo Virno” in *Open! 17: A Precarious Existence. Vulnerability in the Public Domain*. Amsterdam SKOR (Foundation Art and Public Space), (November, 2009). Available through: <https://pdfslide.net/documents/the-dismasure-of-art-an-interview-with-paolo-virno-the-dismasure-of-art.html>. [Accessed February 2019].

and submissive auto-valorisation,”⁸ which relies on the mental energies of the autonomous worker and produces more flexible and existentially precarious subjectivities.

If capitalist production has colonised every aspect of life, and everything has become work, then there would seem to be very little space for a refusal to work in the way *Autonomia* had imagined it. However, while acknowledging the impossibility of thinking life outside the current regime of work, Boyer’s work expresses the poet’s desperate refusal of the oppressive and unjust conditions of existence that alienate and render life disposable, especially when it is a woman’s life and especially if this woman happens to be working class and Black and of colour. For Boyer, similarly to Lonzi, what is at stake in refusal is the possibility to think against herself and against work, against the culture and toxic behaviours women themselves reproduce; and at the same time as conceptualising poetry and art as the space where it is possible to imagine different modes and forms of work that call a community of refusalist poets to work together and make poetry of nonaction, write poems in which the order of the world is subverted.

Yet, the nonaction does not prevent Boyer from writing about it. Writing, Boyer argues, “has nothing to do with the page, it has to do with what we can’t even imagine, except in how we can’t imagine it.”⁹

For Boyer, poetry and art are ways to bridge the gap between what is and what it could be through the work of imagination. What is the literary form that Boyer’s “no” takes? How does the personal figure in the space of negation opened up by Boyer’s poetics of refusal? What kind of literary forms can be taken in this refusal of the precarity and the daily subjectifying processes that reproduce the alienation of contemporary life? In this chapter, I attend to Boyer’s uses of negation as a rhetorical device in the mode of “not-writing;” as an invocation of the negative space of action, of non-action, that is of contemplation, observation, and imagination—thus a different form of action. Negation allows Boyer to foreground the similarities between different forms of work—creative, productive and reproductive—the ways in which there is no life outside work, yet without erasing their differences (for instance, between writing a poem or working in a household or in a factory). Negation, in this respect, maintains a qualitative difference (and a distance) between “writing” and “not-writing.”

In this chapter, I analyse the contemporary poet Anne Boyer’s use of negation and apophasis as a discursive strategy in her literary work. By drawing on the insights offered by Lonzi’s and Cixous’ feminist writing practices and on scholar and poet Lindsay Turner’s analysis of Boyer’s use of the rhetorical figure of the paralipsis—by which she means the work of not-saying or not writing¹⁰—essay entitled “Writing/Not writing: Anne Boyer, Paralipsis and Literary Work,”¹¹ and by examining Boyer’s work and conceptualisation of refusal, in this chapter I discuss the ways in which Boyer experiments with refusalist poems and forms of personal accounts.

According to Turner, paralipsis “is a mode of both doing work and critiquing the work done,” thus expressing the tension that characterises life and creative work today,

8 Marina Vishmidt, *The Aesthetic Subject and the Politics of Speculative Labour*. In Randy Martin (ed.), (London: The Routledge Companion to Art and Politics. Routledge, 2015), p. 12. Available through: https://research.gold.ac.uk/23403/3/Vishmidt_Aesthetic%20Subject%20and%20the%20Politics%20of%20Speculative%20Labor.pdf.

9 Anne Boyer, Amy King, “‘Literature is against us:’ In Conversation with Anne Boyer” in *Harriet the Blog: The Poetry Foundation*. Available through: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/08/literature-is-against-us-in-conversation-with-anne-boyer/>. [Accessed May 2018].

10 Lindsay Turner, ‘Writing/Not Writing: Anne Boyer, Paralipsis, and Literary Work’ in *ASAP Journal* 3:1, (January 2018), p. 122.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 121–42.

that is the simultaneous necessity and “near-impossibility of living in and working through this inequality and shared precarity.”¹² When the entire sphere of life has been saturated by capital, Boyer insists on the necessity to invent critical and poetic tools to keep fighting against the inequalities and forms of oppression that individuals and society reproduce. In this chapter, I examine how Boyer seeks a way that does not reproduce neoliberal narratives that portray women as victims or as objects; refusing what, as we have seen in the introduction, she describes as a “pornography of particularisation” that is the desire to give away intimate details about her life, and instead calls on women to be attentive and to question the desire and modalities of their visibility and self-exposure.

Boyer’s work challenges contemporary forms of personal account which have become a “highly demanded commodity on the literary market.”¹³ In the prose-poem “The Open Book,” for instance, the poet questions how personal accounts have become “a performance, for the order of the business,”¹⁴ in which women are happy to give away all their information to a system that exploits and objectifies them. Against what she describes as “the transparency” of the personal account, in the prose-poem, Boyer insists on a kind of account that remains “opaque, muddled, confused, shadowy,” in order, as Boyer suggests, to protect the multiplicity of what we are. Making things a little bit harder to see, as writer Jess Cotton notes, “is itself an implicit refusal of the kinds of transparency on which the contemporary political economy rests.”¹⁵ Cotton argues that if the aesthetic of late capitalism is one characterised by a call for more transparency—a longing for immediacy, pseudo-objective knowledge and a trust which falsely promises “the abolition of unequal flows of information at the basis of relations of power and exploitation,” and that instead, “simultaneously sustains a regime of hyper-visibility based on asymmetrical mechanisms of accountability for the sake of profit,”¹⁶—by refusing the transparency of accounting Boyer embraces the opaqueness of poetic language as a form of creative resistance against the alienating effects of capital on life. In this chapter, I examine the multiple ways in which Boyer’s work enacts her refusal, a feminist refusal that, I want to argue, is not the heroic gesture of withdrawal nor is it a call to remain silent; it takes the form of acts of micro-subversion, the quotidian practice of paying attention to forms: to the multiple and interconnecting forms of oppression and the possibility of resisting their reproduction by interrogating and experimenting with forms—forms of life, literary forms, poetic forms, economic and social forms, forms of protest, political formations, aesthetic forms, form-ideas.

In the first part, I discuss Anne Boyer’s “not-writing” as a discursive strategy that allows Boyer to speak of work and the refusal to work and explore the contradictions of contemporary life in a capitalist society. If capital has saturated all aspects of life, what kind of personal poetry can emerge that can speak of and refuse contemporary alienation? In this section, I consider the conceptual framework which informs Anne Boyer’s “not-writing” as form of work that encompasses the whole of life (including work and nonwork). By

12 Ibid., pp. 123–24.

13 Rafia Zakaria, “A Vogue for Self-exposure has reduced Feminism to naked navel-gazing” in *The Guardian* online (July 2016). Available through: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/12/a-vogue-for-self-exposure-has-reduced-feminism-to-naked-navel-gazing>. [Accessed May 2018].

14 Anne Boyer “The Open Book” in *Garments Against Women*, (Boise, Idaho: Ahsahta Press, Boise State University, 2015), p. 34.

15 Jess Cotton, “Black Transparency/Radical Opacity: Anne Boyer, Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr” (conference paper), (2015).

16 Jorge I. Valdovinos, “Transparency as Ideology, Ideology as Transparency: Towards a Critique of the Meta-aesthetics of Neoliberal Hegemony” in *Open Cultural Studies*. 2(1): pp. 654–67. [Accessed January 2020].

drawing on Turner's analysis of Boyer's use of the rhetorical figure of the paralipsis as "a mode of doing work and critiquing the work done," I examine the way in which negation is used by Boyer in her writing to express both the impossibility and the precarity of a contemporary life that negates life by reducing it to a commodity. Boyer's refusal is the refusal of a system that negates life, and is at the same time a refusal to remain silent; a generative condition of negation in which writing and speaking is performed differently. By insisting on not-writing as an "anxious site of literary difference,"¹⁷ Boyer foregrounds the double character of performance and resistance of her writing.

In the second section entitled "Terrible Forms," I examine Boyer's conceptualisation of "terrible forms" in her lyrical writing and in relation to her poetics of refusal; how Boyer adopts the literary technique of "turning the world upside down" to write epic poems that, instead of telling the old tale of courtesan love, speak of the ways in which love can become violence.

And while economic precarity produces its precarious poetic forms, Boyer argues that those precarious forms, such as the prose-poem, can become models for a different sort of flexibility; forms of resistant creativity that are perceived as "terrible," monstrous, unnameable and undefinable as they operate at the threshold of economic incorporation and creative refusal.

In the third and last section, I examine Boyer's poetics of refusal in relation to the forms of modalities of women's personal accounts. In an essay entitled "Sororal Death" published in 2016 in *The New Enquiry*, Boyer notes that, "writing about a disease suffered almost exclusively by women presents the disordering question of form."¹⁸ For Boyer, since women's voices have been relegated by patriarchal culture into the realm of the private, the intimate, the emotional and highly subjective, women have been seeking forms to expose and express their pain and illness as a structural condition that invests the social. In acknowledging what seems an escapable desire to give an account of oneself in the era of social media, Boyer observes that visibility is not always desirable, because, as she writes in her breast cancer memoir, "visibility does not reliably change the relations of power to who or what is visible, except insofar as visible prayers are easier to hurt."¹⁹ If neoliberalism makes everyone vulnerable and sick, how does one a woman speak from the heart of it? In this section, by examining Boyer's recent breast cancer memoir, *The Undying*, I discuss the "promise of the negative" in Boyer's call for an opaque form of personal accounting that involves unsaying, negation, evasion, and conspiracy.

5.1. Not-writing

In the collection *Garments Against Women* (2015), Boyer addresses the all-encompassing character of work which, "extends to the entire sphere of the biopolitical insofar as it accounts for the saturation of all human life by capital, included work and nonwork"²⁰— from wage

17 Lindsay Turner, "Writing/Not Writing: Anne Boyer, Paralipsis, and Literary Work" in *ASAP Journal*, 3:1 (January 2018), p. 124.

18 Anne Boyer, "The Sororal Death" in *The New Inquiry*, (December 8, 2014). Available through: <https://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-sororal-death/>. [Accessed November 2017].

19 Anne Boyer, *The Undying. A Meditation of Modern Illness* (New York: Allen Lane—Random House, 2019), p. 159.

20 Lindsay Turner, "Writing/Not Writing: Anne Boyer, Paralipsis, and Literary Work" in *ASAP Journal*, 3:1 (January 2018), p. 122.

work to care and reproductive work to creative work to nonwork or leisure time. *Garments Against Women* weaves together a poetic discourse that discloses its continuity with and as a form of work, articulating the complex relationships between different types and problems of labour, in so far as they tend to remain unspoken under conditions of late capitalism.”²¹ The double register of her writing is sharply analytical and playfully poetic. It begins to formalise “not” as a rhetorical strategy in articulating a refusal of what it is; of the present conditions of alienation, in which “to be a poet and a poor person who is a single mother created a negative economy. It hurt everyone. It took food from our mouths.”²² Her work searches for a language that can expose the “unliveable” and “unspeakable” conditions of neoliberal survival. Is it possible to conceive of a creative refusal to work and produce for capital, when alienation has permeated all aspects of contemporary life? How does the writer speak of the necessary labour required to write a poem, which, however, is not the same as the poem itself, yet defines its form and existence? How to account for all the time spent in the production of what Boyer calls “not writing?” In the collection of prose-poems Boyer offers a description of not-writing as work:

Not writing is working, and when not working at paid work working at unpaid work like caring for others, and when not at unpaid work like caring, caring also for a human body, and when not caring for a human body many hours, weeks, years, and other measures of time spent caring for the mind in a way like reading or learning and when not reading and learning also making things (like garments, food, plants, artworks, decorative items)... There is illness and injury which has produced a great deal of not writing. There is cynicism, disappointment, political outrage, heartbreak, resentment... there is reproduction... there is being anxious or depressed... there is trauma... there are some hours, though not very many, on aeroplanes, and time with friends spent in the production of not-writing... there is talking... there is sleep... there are photos one takes, of oneself and of other people... there is dressing, and undressing....²³

In “What is ‘Not Writing?’” Boyer makes a five paragraph-long text as a long list of what “not writing” is; of the multiple manifestations of women’s work which, as the poet suggests, includes each and every quotidian gesture—from dressing to going shopping. But if the current system of exploitation, as Boyer observes, produces a lot of not-writing, and if there is no way outside not-writing, which is already the entire sphere of life outside the poem, then how does the poet perform the impossible gesture of writing from the position of not-writing? In another yet related prose-poem entitled “Not Writing,” Boyer performs not-writing. The prose-poem is a litany of “no” in which “not” becomes a refusal to completely subsume writing under forms of neoliberal productivity. It reads:

I am not writing a book about shopping, which is a woman shopping. I am not writing accounts of dreams, not my own or anyone else’s. I am not writing historical re-enactments of any durational literature. I am not

21 Ibid.

22 Anne Boyer, *The society for the Destruction of Unwritten Literature* (2013), p. 7.

23 Anne Boyer “What is ‘Not Writing?’” in *Garments Against Women* (Boise, Idaho: Ahsakta Press, Boise State University, 2015), p. 44.

writing anything that anyone has requested of me or is waiting on, not a poetics essay or any other sort of essay, not a roundtable response, not interview responses, not writing prompts for younger writers, not my thoughts about critical theory or popular songs [...] I am not writing science fiction novels about the problem of the idea of the autonomy of art and science fiction novels about the problem of a society with only one law which is consent.²⁴

Boyer dramatises all the things she has not written or she that could have written had she not been forced by life and others circumstances to interrupt writing; or all the things she is not writing because writing is also done by the time spent doing other things than are not necessarily writing; or again the things she won't write about because she refuses to do so. It is this mode of omission, that of paralipsis, which, as Turner observes, "is a mode of both doing work and critiquing the work done."²⁵ In this way, through a series of "not" or utterances of inaction, Boyer articulates creativity in negative terms, as a form of productive self-awareness which acknowledges the poet's complicity with the mechanisms of self-exploitation, and at the same time it expresses the possibility of a refusal to work for neoliberalism, by performing work differently. In *Garments Against Women*, the formulation "I am not writing" becomes a refrain:

When I am not writing a memoir, I am also not writing any kind of poetry, not prose poems contemporary or otherwise, not poems made of fragments, not tightened and compressed poems, not loosened and conversational poems, not conceptual poems, not virtuosic poems employing many different types of euphonious devices, not poems with epiphanies and not poems without, not documentary poems about recent political moments, not poems heavy with allusions to critical theory and popular song.²⁶

Not writing exists as a paradox, as Boyer performs writing even while she expresses her resistance against the performance of writing. It is through the enactment of "not-writing" that Boyer can talk about all the forms of work that are contiguous to, yet not the same as writing. Thus, writing necessitates being addressed via negation—where negation becomes a site of differentiation, it marks a difference; the possibility of differentiation that allows Boyer to conceptualise not-writing as an alienated form of labour and as the site of a different kind of alienation that produces a revolt of forms, as both a performance of neoliberal work and its resistance.

Thus, by using the rhetorical figure of the paralipsis, Boyer both invokes the precarious form of contemporary life, by using linguistic negation to destabilising meaning, but it also invokes the possibility that the poem might become, to paraphrase Black lesbian feminist poet Audre Lorde, "a spawning ground for the most radical and daring ideas... so necessary to change and the conceptualisation of any meaningful action."²⁷ In the spirit of

24 Anne Boyer, "Not Writing" in Anne Boyer, *Garments Against Women* (Boise: Ahsahta Press, 2015), p. 41.

25 Lindsay Turner, p. 124.

26 Anne Boyer "Not Writing" in *Garments Against Women*, (Boise, Idaho: Ahsahta Press, 2015), p. 43.

27 Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" in *Sister Outsider*, (New York: Ten Speed Press/Random House, 2007 [1984]), p. 37.

a feminist writing which conceives of poetry as a ground of women's refusal, Anne Boyer's not-writing is an attempt to engender the possibility of saying "no" to the landscape of oppression and the horizon of the destruction of life outside of the poem. In bringing poetry closer again to the realm of alienated work, Boyer expresses an idea of poetry as a vital necessity; as a not-entirely commodifiable commodity. The site of a qualitative difference.

The power of linguistic negation, as Paolo Virno argues, relies on the fact that, while retaining what it negates, negation suspends meaning and produces ambiguity, reversibility, allowing us to think the unthinkable. Instead of forging a new meaning, "no" refers to an incommensurable difference that remains ambiguous and open, a mode of the possible. In *Essay on Negation* (2018),²⁸ Virno writes that, "our ability of saying how things are not, which is what creates a detachment from the environment, and guarantees, allows for, a hiatus, an empty space, in relation not only to environmental factors, but also psychological stimuli: a sort of distance" that makes negation a manifestation of what is not present and "a vehicle and condition of the possibility of the inactual."²⁹ In an interview with Amy King, Boyer evokes Keats' idea of "negative capability," that is the poet's ability to pursue a vision of artistic beauty even when this leads to uncertainty and intellectual confusion, rather than accepting the truths of philosophical enquiry. Boyer describes negative capability as "a kind of rigorous not-needing-to-know know, like how by its very nature freedom is almost entirely unknowable from the condition of being unfree, and yet those who are unfree struggle for what they can't-yet-know."³⁰ It is this invocation to the power of imagination, the negative power of the not-yet that Boyer's work make. To say "no" thus does not turn negation into a nihilist gesture, but into an act of faith into the possibility of transformation, of things to be otherwise. The challenge that Boyer's work poses is one of fully inhabiting the space of uncertainty which forces the poet to have to improvise the tools and techniques that allow the poet to imagine freedom from the position of alienation. In the text "No," published on the blog of The Poetry Foundation and included in the collection essay in *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate*, Anne Boyer insists that the "no" of the poet is:

rarely a *no* to a poem itself, but more usually a *no* to all dismal aggregations and landscapes outside of the poem. It's a *no* to chemical banalities and wars, a *no* to employment and legalisms, a *no* to the wretched arrangements of history and the tattered and Bannon-laminated earth.³¹

The "no" of the Boyer is inscribed in the form and style of her writing. The "no" of the poet is a refusal of the conditions that diminish life and what enables the poet to use the power of imagination and experiment, for instance, with the technique of "turning the world upside-down," that is by disorganising the order of things and the way meaning is commonly organised. In the essay, Boyer describes this technique as follows:

28 See Paolo Virno, *Essay on Negation: For a Linguistic Anthropology*. Trans. by Lorenzo Chiesa, (Seagull Books, 2018).

29 Ibid.

30 Anne Boyer, Amy King, "'Literature is against us:' In Conversation with Anne Boyer" in *Harriet The Blog: The Poetry Foundation*. Available through: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/08/literature-is-against-us-in-conversation-with-anne-boyer/>. [Accessed March 2017].

31 Anne Boyer, "No" in *Harriet The Blog: The Poetry Foundation*, (April, 2017). Available through: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2017/04/no/>. [Accessed April 2017].

Take what is, and turn it upside down. Or take what is and make it what isn't. Or take what isn't and make it what is. Or take what is and shake it till change falls out of its pockets. Or take any hierarchy and plug the constituents of its bottom into the categories of its top. Or take any number of hierarchies and mix up their parts...³²

To give an example, Boyer describes Walt Whitman's poem *Transpositions*,³³ which, as the Boyer observes, "depends entirely upon reversal as an enacted refusal." In his poem, Whitman imagines a world where, as Boyer writes, "prison keepers be put in prison" and those in prison "take the keys." He moves around social classes, so that "the structure that enforces the existence of those social classes is exposed as unworkable..."³⁴ In his essay on negation, Virno insists on the relation between linguistic negation and praxis as a modality of the possible, and considers the creative action of jokes that hinge upon distortion, or other creative ways of overturning stereotypes and conventional formulas an innovative and inventive substitution of the rule and of the instinctive reaction to a given situation. This reversal or overturning of social, formal and aesthetic categories is what Boyer is calling the possibility of poetry and art to enact a form of poetic nonaction. In the next section, I will discuss the "terrible" forms of Boyer's poetic nonaction.

5.2 Terrible forms

What is this terrible form? people ask, who want language to celebrate kingship or show off mastery or erudition. It is a terrible form in that it is a thing made of almost nothing, existing in memory or experience, barely mediated by the language in which it's written, and also for how it interferes with the news and other banalities, how it interferes with cities and suburbs and towns and landscapes, how it barely requires a framing, how it fucks with pride, how it can interfere with art and in that also interfere with poetry.³⁵

In the passage above, Boyer articulates her poetry as that characterised by what she calls "terrible forms." The use of the adjective "terrible" is ambiguous here, as it both points to something that could cause terror and absolute fear; and simultaneously something that is incredible, extraordinary or difficult to believe (such as the fact of freedom). In the economy of Boyer's writing, terrible forms are characterised by anxiety—in the sense that they emerge in the context of and are expressions of the precarity of living under

32 Anne Boyer, Amy King, "'Literature is against us:' In Conversation with Anne Boyer" in *Harriet the Blog: The Poetry Foundation*. Available through: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/08/literature-is-against-us-in-conversation-with-anne-boyer/>. [Accessed May 2018].

33 "Transpositions" by Walt Whitman:
 Let the reformers descend from the stands where they are
 forever bawling—let an idiot or insane person appear on
 each of the stands;
 Let the judges and criminals be transposed—let the prison
 Keepers be put in prison—let those that were prisoners
 Take the keys;
 Let them that distrust birth and death lead the rest.

34 Anne Boyer, "No" in *Harriet: The Blog: The Poetry Foundation*, (April 2017). Available through: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2017/04/no/>. [Accessed April 2017].

35 Anne Boyer, "Poetics" in *Elective Affinities: Cooperative Anthology of Contemporary U.S. Poetry*. Available online: <http://electiveaffinitiesusa.blogspot.com/2013/04/anne-boyer.html>. [Accessed February 2019].

neoliberalism as what author Japhy Wilson describes “an anxious form of crisis management that is constantly attempting to cover over the gaps and ruptures in its own ideological fabric caused by the contradictions that it is structured to conceal”³⁶—and at the same time they are terrible because unruly, disobedient, resisting incorporation. Those forms, as Boyer argues in the passage above, do not celebrate kingship or show mastery or erudition, but are born of the necessity of the poet to “abandon a set of professional directives we were issued at birth.” Terrible forms refuse to adapt to normative forms of life; they rebel against system injustices and inequalities; against the status quo of culture.

Terrible forms are, for instance, forms of revolt, protest, uprisings, which have emerged in the last ten or so years from the Occupy movement, to the British riots, to the Arab spring to recent protests in Hong Kong and Beirut, to mention a few. They are terrible because they are angry and joyful and confused, and uncertain. They are terrible because they are determined to end the order of the world as it is. In *The Society for the Destruction of Unwritten Literature* (2013), Boyer writes:

I thought I would record the vision that came from pain, and this would be the history of the future in advance of itself in which all things were accounted for then I could quit. I was watching some British riots on YouTube, and I was thinking of the meltdown to come, and I was not thinking of my own pain, and I was trying to work poetry out of me to prepare for how we would end.³⁷

Through the poetics of terrible forms, Boyer conceptualises a kind of lyrical poetry that expresses and gives form to ugly feelings: pain, anxieties, depression, injury, illness, heart-breaks, resentment, cynicism and disappointment with a neoliberal economy that, as Boyer states, “gives the wrong form to desire,”³⁸ functioning to regulate bodies and things in the service of the already wealthy and powerful. Terrible forms then are expression of Boyer’s refusal of the status quo of literature and culture; a way of ending poetry: “I knew my project was not,” Boyer writes “to continue the 20th century but to find its exit door, though I liked to say, while being dramatic, “destroy it.”³⁹

The kind of destruction invoked by Boyer here is not the same as the total annihilation of literature and culture; it is not embedded in the capitalist rhetoric of crisis that suggests apocalyptic scenarios and endless cycles of destruction. She writes, “I had already, through the process of being alive, been bewitched by the possible common that was the idea, some of us thought, that would end that terrible century most of us were born into.”⁴⁰ The kind of destruction Boyer invokes thus is closer to an undoing and a questioning that requires, as Black feminist scholar Denise Ferreira da Silva aptly describes as, a release of

36 Scholar Japhy Wilson conceptualises neoliberalism as an “anxious social fantasy structured against the Real of Capital... a form of obsessional neurosis, in which the neoliberal subject engages in frenetic activity to prevent anything Real from happening. [...]But the Real of Capital is excluded from this symbolic order. The source of profit in exploitation is concealed by the understanding of economic value as an expression of subjective preferences, rather than as a measure of labour time.” In Japhy Wilson, “The economics of anxiety: neoliberalism as obsessional neurosis” in *Open Democracy* (6 June, 2014). Available through: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/openeconomy/economics-of-anxiety-neoliberalism-as-obsessional-neurosis/>. [Access: January 2020].

37 Anne Boyer, *The Society for the Destruction of Unwritten Literature*, (2013), p. 6.

38 Anne Boyer, “The Open Book” in *Garments Against Women*, (Boise, Idaho: Ahsahta Press, 2015), p. 34.

39 Anne Boyer, *The Society for the Destruction of Unwritten Literature* (2013), p. 8.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

thinking “from the grip of certainty and embrace the imagination’s power to create with unclear and confused, or uncertain impressions,”⁴¹ inventing new poetic practices and forms of sociality.

Drawing on a feminist critiques of literary, artistic, and poetic forms as the expression of oppressive capitalist and patriarchal ideologies, Anne Boyer refuses literature as an institution historically and ideologically determined to reproduce bourgeois class values; a mirror of the interests of a class of people—“the rich and powerful and those who serve or have served them.”⁴² Boyer reminds women that literature is fundamentally “against us,”⁴³ against women’s life and work in a way that echoes a passage in Hélène Cixous’ *The Laugh of the Medusa* in which the author notes that, “publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs”⁴⁴—for, Boyer writes, literature “contains violent sentiments toward us, is full of painful exclusions.”⁴⁵ If modern literature is a space of exclusivity and exclusion, for Boyer, to abolish literature is to open up an intellectual and political space for imagining a new kind of poetry from which a new sociality can emerge. A poetry that, as Anne Boyer writes, “would come from future women and felt fortunate to be alive at the time when we could all be that future woman and write that future poetry of strange and unfathomable and repellent things,”⁴⁶ in forms that are terrible, insubordinate and dangerous because they refuse both the alternative of being what is deemed as “good” poetry in the most traditional sense, or to succumb to the commodification of language⁴⁷ in digital culture.

Boyer’s poetics of refusal through terrible forms works with the idea of “erasing importance,” working against the conventions of literature and poetry, and normative ways of giving a personal account. In the poem “Twilight Revery,” Boyer describes how the love for disappearance, for erasing that which is important—very much like Lonzi’s self-undoing and Cixous’ depersonalisation—is a “controlling impulse also called ‘self-abolition.’”⁴⁸ The abolition of the self, Boyer argues, enables the emergence of the poem as “a condition,” that is not a set of personal choices, or tastes, but as the circumstances or factors which affect the way in which people live, and work, and that reproduces authorities and an economy of importance that largely relies on exclusion: “I think of all those things conferring authority and excluding them one by one, an experiment in erasing importance.”⁴⁹ To think of the poem as a series of circumstances which affect the way one lives, enables the writer to think of the poem as a “movement upward rather than the settling.” The poem solicits the reader’s imagination to think of the poem of nonaction as a state of “civic liminality,” where an action is also nonaction: “to do, or almost do, to begin to do but refuse, to

41 Denise Ferreira da Silva, “On Difference Without Separability” in *Incerteza Viva: 32a Bienal de São Paulo*, exhibition catalogue, eds. Jochen Volz and Julia Rebouças. (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2016), pp. 57–66

42 Anne Boyer, Amy King, “‘Literature is against us.’ In Conversation with Anne Boyer,” (2017).

43 Ibid.

44 Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” in *Signs* trans. By Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, (Summer 1976), p. 877.

45 Anne Boyer, Amy King, “‘Literature is against us.’ In Conversation with Anne Boyer,” (2017).

46 Anne Boyer, *The Society for the Destruction of Unwritten Literature*, (2013), pp. 10–11.

47 Language commodification is a term used in sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropology to describes how language has become reconfigured for market purposes and treated as an economic resource. See Paolo Virno, *The Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. Trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson. (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004).

48 Anne Boyer, “Twilight Revery” in *Garments Against Women*, (Boise, Idaho: Ahsahta Press, Boise State University, 2015), p. 52.

49 Anne Boyer, “The Innocent Question” in *Garments Against Women*, (Boise, Idaho: Ahsahta Press, Boise State University, 2015), p. 4.

rehearse some doing but never act, to appear to do but actually do another thing entirely—what is done also undo by that.”⁵⁰

Boyer is concerned with what to do with the information that is feeling and with the problem of vulnerability; how to give form to the formlessness of emotions such as anguish and anger and how to refuse when one has no choice but to write from within the condition set by capital, where emotions and vulnerability are capitalised upon. If vulnerability is fundamentally inescapable, she asks whether poetry could be innocent and in what ways poetry could become a source from which action could spring. On her tumblr, she writes, “But one of the weariest things about the world as it is, is how it makes so many of us do so many things we don’t want to [...] We do things we don’t want to do so much that eventually, to just survive it, we can mistake what we must do for what we desire.”⁵¹ Boyer struggles to keep her language and writing at a distance from reproducing dominant forms of expression, of poetry and literature. Yet, her work is an exercise in learning to never settle; a rehearsal of a social upheaval with the common materials of language, words, and grammar. It is an exercise of turning the world upside-down, of changing the order of the classes; of paying attention to what is concealed, overshadowed by power. For instance, the ways in which in mainstream culture love is represented as heterosexual fantasy of the happy couple that fundamentally obscures the violence in love.

In the lyric poem “And What is Not the Nature of my Love?” (2013), for instance, Boyer plays with the genre of epic poetry to write about the double “nature” of love. The poem draws on the European medieval and early modern tradition of *chanson d’amour* and *chansons de geste*, a type of prose and verse narrative about adventures, love, heroic gestures, and courtly manners. While Boyer maintains its structure almost completely intact—five or six stanzas plus a paragraph which functions as a dedication—she refuses the affirmative speech meant to reaffirm the motif of the courtesan love and instead turn it into a series of question that challenge the fantasy of love in which the woman “desperately” long for romantic love, and hints at its tragic dimensions: the suffering, violence, submission and failure that often accompany women’s experience of love. Boyer questions the reader asking, as the title of the poem says, the nature of her love and writes:

What is the nature of my love? Is it lucky, rude, or tragic? Is it not like
Dido’s, love fed by blood? [...] have I not wanted to hear him tell stories
at parties? / have I not hung upon his words and lips? / have I not grieved
when he left the apartment?,” to address lovers and the city: “and have
not the towers of my city ceased to rise?/ and have not the harbours of my
city emptied of ships?/ lovers of my city stopped loving?/.”

Then the poem addresses a ‘you’, likely the reader:

have you not seen the walls that will never be buildings? / have you not
seen the skein that will never be sweaters?/ have you not seen the flour
that will never be bread? [...] has this love not brought about the ruin of
my city? / has this love not caused the opening of the earth?⁵²

50 Ibid., p. 53.

51 Anne Boyer, “on poetry#2: how poetry can remind us to ask for everything from” in Anne Boyer’s Tumblr. Online source: <https://anneboyer.tumblr.com>. [Accessed April 2017].

Instead of following the narrative structure of the *chanson*, which as Boyer notes is reproduced in today's Western societies as a heroic pursuit of happiness, and success, the poem speaks from the place of tragic love, and from what love is not. Furthermore, the shift from first to second person expresses the dialogical nature of the account, in the form of a series of questions to herself and to the reader on the nature of love in a society that diminishes women's bodies and lives. Boyer twists the logic of the *chanson* from a celebration of cavalry, and courtesan love, to a something closer to mourning, more painful, angry, and non-heroic, in a way that "lifts the real from its carefully constructed frame,"⁵³ to unmask what lies behind the image of happy love that patriarchal societies, through centuries of art and culture, have reproduced and continue to promote.

In an interview for the online magazine *Mythos* with Sophia Richards, Boyer observes how love can be healing and give women happiness, but it easily becomes a prison, and "causes women to spend thirty years doing the dishes after work instead of writing a great symphony, and this thing that feels so good can also lead to the deaths of women at the hands of their partners." Love thus is terrible: "it's the most beautiful thing, is also the most potentially terrible thing." The poet's devotion to terrible forms is thus a form of love, the kind of love that will finally arrive at its real possibility,⁵⁴ by undoing what the system has made of women. In this respect, the "no" of Boyer's poetry is a "no" to "the ordinary daily violence of love, illness, labour, birth, rape, fractured by structural contradictions, and the imposition of beauty as a condition for social acceptability."⁵⁵ The terrible forms of Boyer's writing enact this refusal of the conditions of women's survival—that is, as Boyer writes, "the struggle to have a voice, to have a way of keeping yourself and your dependents housed and fed and clothed in this neoliberal, end-stage capitalist economy."⁵⁶ Boyer describes this as a condition that makes everyone sick. Illness as neoliberal condition is one addressed by Boyer in her breast cancer memoir, *The Undying*. In the next section, I discuss the way in which, in the double register of her writing, which is sharply analytical and playfully poetic, Boyer reflects on the ways in which women have been consenting to the commodification of their bodies, lives and work, and experiments with a form of personal account that refuses a "transparent" form of accounting.

5.3 Against a transparent personal account

How does Boyer perform "evasive manoeuvres" and write about love, illness and death in a way that does not reproduce the capitalist's desire for a pseudo-empowering personal "accounting," and omit the nature of its relations? How to avoid telling a personal story of neoliberal survival? Or, how to tell stories that "flee like fugitive tracks seen from the window

52 Anne Boyer, "And What is Not the Nature of my Love?" (2013). Available through: <http://electiveaffinitiesusa.blogspot.com/2013/04/anne-boyer.html>. [Accessed September 2018].

53 Madame Tlank, "Nervous Costume" in *Mute* (October 7, 2015). Available through: <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/nervous-costume>. [Accessed April 2017].

54 In Sophia Richards, Interview with Anne Boyer in *Mythos* magazine (March, 2018). Available through: <https://mythosmag.com/interviewhome/42-anne-boyer>. [Accessed January 2020].

55 Anne Boyer, "Stephanie Young, From Ursula or University" in Anne Boyer Tumblr. Available through: <https://anneboyer.tumblr.com>. [Accessed April 2017].

56 Anne Boyer, "Ma Vie En Bling: Memoir" in *Garments Against Women*, (Boise, Idaho: Ahsahta Press, Boise State University, 2015), p. 55.

of the train”⁵⁷? In *Garments Against Women*, a prose-poem entitled *Ma Vie En Bling: A Memoir*, as the title suggests, consists of a series of paragraphs of various length that compose the poet’s poetic memoir: “I left on the ninth day of September of that year. My name was Anne Boyer. I was unfolding under the pale of vermin. I was afraid of dying. I went into many hopeless loves.”⁵⁸ In this unconventional memoir, instead of repeating the traditional coming-of-age tale, the text improvises a transformation, by which Boyer becomes the many things and people and forms and conditions that form her life: “I was anonymous, or trying to be,” she writes, “I lost my head. I fell in love with everyone. Love was a figure of speech.” Boyer insists on the fact that her autobiography is given to her by others: the muscles of the legs and abdomen; her daughter; the country “forcing language to speak straight;” her neighbours, a horde of crows, the philosophers, survival, the elements. In her poetic memoir, Boyer does not celebrate or offer the reader a redemptive image of herself and her life, nor does she write a heroic tale of her experience of cancer treatment. Instead, she describes language as “a symptom of disease;” and that there are two rules: “1. To Speak. 2. To not speak. Also 3. To almost speak. 4. To stand ready to speak, but with shut lips. 5. To refuse all terms.”⁵⁹ In this prose poem and in these terms, Boyer’s writing poses the ethical dilemma prompted by the desire to give an account of oneself in writing. If self-exposure in art and writing have become the privileged place of reproduction of the lies of neoliberalism, then Boyer considers the available options and terms of engagement with forms of accounting (speak; not speak; almost speak; stand ready to speak), and the possibility to refuse all of the given options, and speak in the manner of unsaying.

Significant here is the prose-poem ‘The Open Book’, also included in the collection *Garments Against Women*, which plays with the multiple meanings of women’s “accounting.” On the one hand, “accounting,” the poet observes, is restricted to its economic meaning, or the idea that a woman will tell a *profitable* story because “her heart is naturally a heart desiring profit, a heart that reflects (in miniature) the fundamental desire of the larger body, too,”⁶⁰ to extract economic value from every aspect of a woman’s life. Boyer refers to this type of accounting in terms of “a book-keeperly, transparent account” where transparency, in the Foucaultian’s terms of his critique of Enlightenment, becomes a technology of power and mass-surveillance. According to Foucault, all institutions of what he calls the “disciplinary society” are potentially “the instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible,”⁶¹ in a way that discloses the fundamental inequalities and asymmetries of a system in which one looks and the other is being looked at. The difference is that, if in Foucault’s the truth of the subject was coerced, in a neoliberal society the truth is freely given, by the individual’s consent to self-exploitative behaviours. The exercise of power through transparency makes everyone, including the writer, an “open book,”—as the title of the prose-poem suggests—where open is hinting both at the sense of inescapability of the system’s gaze and contemporary modes of surveillance, and at the possibility that by remaining open, by writing a confused and muddled account, one might refuse capture.

57 Clarice Lispector, *The Stream of Life* [Água Viva]. Trans. Elizabeth Lowe and Earl Fitz. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

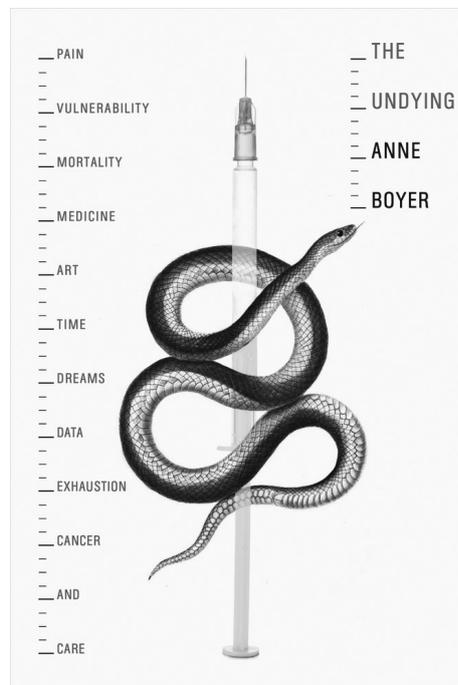
58 Anne Boyer, “Ma Vie En Bling: Memoir” in *Garments Against Women*, (Boise, Idaho: Ahsahta Press, Boise State University, 2015), p. 55.

59 Ibid., p. 63.

60 Anne Boyer, ‘The Open Book’ in *Garments Against Women*, (Boise, Idaho: Ahsahta Press, Boise State University, 2015), p. 34.

61 See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), p. 214.

“Visibility,” Boyer observes, “does not reliably change the relations of power to who or what is visible except insofar as visible prey are easier to hunt. People die visibly, worry visibly, suffer visibly, the whole world opened up to the surveillance of the whole world.”⁶² Showing, Boyer argues, is a disabling process where we become prey to the gaze of those who make profit out of looking: “the drone pilots kill their visible victims. The corporations data-mine our visible correspondence and count our visible clicks. We post our agonies on our visible support groups.”⁶³ This openness and the desire for showing and exposing and looking and sharing is a pathology of contemporary capitalism, Boyer argues, “what being a writer does to a person is to make her a servant to sensory details,” Boyer writes, making her “obedient to the world of appearance and issuing forth book after book compliant with deceptive and unforgivable showing, full of cruel and unnecessary showing.”⁶⁴ For Boyer, the obsession with visibility and exposure is ultimately a personal and social disease which only profits those in power, exhausting the reservoir of revolt’s power of individuals and their ability to collaborate and collectively organise.



Book cover of Anne Boyer’s *The Undying*.
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Against this regime of visibility, Boyer asks whether it is possible to imagine a different form of testimony that “includes conspiracy, corners, shadows, slantwise, evasion, unsayingness, negation, and under-the-beds”⁶⁵ that is “muddled, confused, lost, damaged, inconsistent, or otherwise opaque.”⁶⁶ The poem’s title plays with the double meaning of “open book” as

62 Anne Boyer, *The Undying* (2019), p. 159.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., p. 113.

65 Ibid.

an idiomatic expression to mean someone easy to understand, or something easy to decipher; but also as the possibility to remain open, confused, opaque. “An opaque account,” Boyer argues, can leave literature open, “overstating everything or also understating it, saying they won’t say something as they are saying it, leaving things out, including too much, and other ways of being right at being wrong.”⁶⁷ Again, here Boyer plays with the possibility of reversal and subversion, where openness becomes a way of remaining opaque, indefinite, mysterious—of refusing closure and the idea that we exist “most of the time as just one person.” For Boyer, to refuse transparency is a necessity to preserve life and the multiplicity of what we are, of what is not immediately visible and given, of what very often remains in the shadow, unexposed, obscured, silenced, and attend to what remains untranslatable into profit.

In the essay “The Sororal Death,” (2014) in reflecting about the ways in which women have been telling stories about their experience with breast cancer, Boyer observes that, “writing about a disease suffered almost exclusively by women presents the disordering question of form.”⁶⁸ Boyer looks at examples of women writers who have been struggling to speak about their experiences as social and political problems—in a way that highlights the interconnections between health promotion policy and practice and the larger social, cultural, and political systems of governance in which health discourses are embedded. How can a personal account explain the “unbearable power that existing forms exert onto feminised experience,” without reproducing its disempowering ideology in turn? How to write a testimony of the disordering experience of undergoing breast cancer treatment without giving in to the “seemingly endless production of low-paid, high-click writing of lurid confessions of victimisation in which a gloss of ‘empowered telling’ decorates the stubborn operations of someone else’s profit?” What would it mean to refuse these “lurid confessions of victimisation?” In her breast cancer memoir *The Undying* Boyer writes in a prophetic tone, “the fate of the world,” she explains, “relies on the promise of the negative, just as we can rely that sight is not the only sense.”⁶⁹ What is the “promise of the negative” that Boyer hints at?

Here I would like to suggest a link between what Boyer’s calls the “promise of the negative” and Derrida’s extensive discussion or enactment of it in his famous lecture “How to Avoid Speaking,” a meditation on the “haunting presence” of negative theology in his project of deconstruction and the movement of *différance*. The essay enacts a refusal to speak of and to assimilate “the thinking of the trace or of *différance* to some negative theology”⁷⁰ in order to avoid simplistic interpretations and preserve the “heterogeneous, voluminous and nebulous multiplicity of potentials to which the single expression “negative theology” remains inadequate,” writes Derrida. In this text, by performing deconstruction, Derrida neither denies nor agrees with the debate around deconstruction as negative theology. Instead, he deviates the course of the debate and asks how “to avoid this or that discursive,

66 Anne Boyer, “The Open Book” in *Garments Against Women*, (Boise, Idaho: Ahsahta Press, Boise State University, 2015).

67 Anne Boyer, “On Poetry#2: How Poetry Can Remind Us To Ask For Everything” in Anne Boyer Tumblr. Available through: <https://anneboyer.tumblr.com>. [Accessed April 2017].

68 Anne Boyer, “The Sororal Death” in *The New Inquiry*, (December 8, 2014). Available through: <https://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-sororal-death/>. [Accessed May 2018].

69 Anne Boyer, *The Undying* (2019), p. 160.

70 Jacques Derrida, “How To Avoid Speaking: Denials” in *Derrida and Negative Theology*. eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), p. 82.

logical, rhetorical mode”⁷¹ around deconstruction, since as he argues it is a doing and the promise of this doing, but not a definite concept. Derrida takes as an example the fact that he was asked to speak about deconstruction’s relation to negative theology and without yet knowing what he will talk about, he commits to give the organisers a title for his talk, thus making a promise to speak of deconstruction and negative theory. Yet, Derrida argues that this is an unfulfillable promise, as any attempt to speak of negative theology itself will inevitably be subsumed under its own discourse. This dilemma can only be addressed as promise, as Derrida promises, “to position himself in relation to a discourse that positions itself as nonplace, ‘beyond being,’ attempting to exceed the very language of its expression.”⁷² For Derrida, “the experience of negative theology perhaps holds to a promise, that of the other, which I must keep because it commits me to speak where negativity ought to absolutely rarefy discourse.”⁷³ Derrida asks, “why should I speak *with an eye* to explaining, teaching, leading toward silence, toward union with the ineffable, mute vision? Why can’t I avoid speaking, unless it is because a promise has committed me even before I begin the briefest speech?” Derrida continues by arguing that from the very moment “I open my mouth I have already promised;” but he also adds that this promise “will have always escaped this demand of presence. It is older than I am or than we are. In fact, it renders possible every present discourse on presence.”⁷⁴

For Derrida, the promise remains impossible, in the sense that it can never be fully present to us. He uses the example of the title of his lecture, how to avoid speaking, that can mean both “how to remain silent, how not to speak,” but also “how to avoid speaking incorrectly, how to speak well,” where both the impossibility and the necessity are implied. If one cannot not speak, then how to avoid betraying the reality of which one speaks? Derrida asks, “how to [...] commit oneself by giving a title even before writing one’s text? But also, in the economy of the same gesture: how to speak, how to do this *as is necessary, comme il faut*, assuming the responsibility for a promise?”⁷⁵ The promise of the negative way, for Derrida, is the possibility of evading the language structures of phallogocentric discourse, which risks the loss of self-identity or appropriation into a mirror of the world as it is given to be consumed.

How to speak and yet avoid speaking? Instead of speaking in the mode of negative theology, Derrida introduces the mode of “*dénégation*” which, as scholar Mark Taylor suggests, is “a negation that is an affirmation and an affirmation that is a negation.”⁷⁶ *Dénégation* translates the Freudian *Verneinung*, which implies that a patient denies in a way that functions as a disguised confirmation of the patient’s unconscious desires or wishes. Derrida is interested in the way both psychoanalysis has isolated negation as an affirmation and explains *dénégation* through the motif of the “secret,” writing: “there is a secret of denial [*dénégation*] and a denial [*dénégation*] of the secret. Derrida speaks of the secret as such as something that must not be spoken (first negation): “I promise *not* to give the secret away.” And yet, for a secret to exist as such, Derrida argues, I must tell it to myself (second negation). The secret *as such*, as secret, separates and already institutes a negativity; it is a negation that

71 Ibid., p. 85.

72 Ibid., p. 6.

73 Ibid., p. 84.

74 Ibid., pp. 84–85.

75 Ibid., pp. 86–87.

76 Harold G. Coward, Toby Foshay, Jacques Derrida, *Derrida and Negative Theology* (New York: SUNY press, 1992), p. 7.

denies itself. It de-negates itself.”⁷⁷ Keeping a secret involves a moment of auto-affection and an oscillation between saying and unsaying: I must speak to myself of the secret; but I must tell it to myself as if I was someone else. It is at this point that a trace of the secret is formed, in language, in a way that the secret becomes shared—in this way, the secret is at the same time singular and common.

Boyer shares with Derrida the dilemma of how to develop a language and a vocabulary to speak the unspeakable that does not reduce or simplify the complexity of the world and the multiple questions at stake. Boyer’s memoir is an attempt at keeping the promise of the negative, and speaking about women’s experience in apophatic terms, in an attempt to evade the language structures of patriarchal culture in its contemporary versions, and seek out a form and a manner of speaking of, in this case, illness and of the multiple existential, social, economic, political dimensions of a disease such as breast cancer, by unspeaking its rhetoric and the survivor’s narrative.

Boyer argues, “‘cancer’ is a historically specific, socially constructed imprecision, and not an empirically established monolith.” That is, cancer doesn’t exist as one unified thing, because it is entangled and exists in a sphere that she calls “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’s ruinous carcinogenosphere.”⁷⁸ So, how to avoid speaking in the manner of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy? How to avoid speaking of cancer in a way that reduces suffering to an individual problem, or an abstract disembodied discourse? If “suffering doesn’t meet language,” Boyer argues, it doesn’t mean suffering and pain cannot be spoken about and thus must remain in silence. On the contrary, the promise of the negative is also one in which, as Anne Boyer writes, “those who endure that suffering must come together to invent it”—invent a language for what is difficult to speak; invent a code and come together in a conspiratorial, secretive, opaque manner. Boyer’s memoir is both an examination of how to write (or not) about breast cancer, and an example that enacts the promise of the negative, as the possibility to tell her story differently. In *The Undying*, about writing her memoir, Boyer observes:

The way I have been taught to tell the story is a person would be diagnosed, treated, either live or die. If she lives, she will be heroic. If she dies, she will be a plot point. If she lives, she will say something fierce, her fierceness applauded, or perform the absolutions of gratitude, her gratitude then praised. If she lives, she will be the angel of epiphany. If she dies, she will be the angel of epiphany. Or if she is allowed a voice, she can complain in fractured and enigmatic drips or corral situational cliché and/or made-for-TV sentimentality and/or patho-pornography into a good story. Literature sails along on every existing prejudice.⁷⁹

Boyer refuses to write in this cheery, pink-ribbon style, which praises the medical establishment for its advances in treatment,⁸⁰ and turns “women’s suffering into literary opportu-

77 Sanford Budick, Wolfgang Iser, *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 25.

78 Anne Boyer, *The Undying* (2019), p. 78.

79 Anne Boyer, *The Undying* (2019), p. 115.

80 Sarah Resnick, “I’m Ill Here” in *Book Forum* (Sept–Nov. 2019). Available through: <https://www.bookforum.com/print/2603/anne-boyer-s-memoir-of-living-with-breast-cancer-23626>. [Accessed January 2020].

nity.”⁸¹ The “promise” of speaking while not-speaking has a political significance, for Boyer is aware that when she decides to write “I was diagnosed with breast cancer” she risks reproducing a sentimental narrative that recounts a hero’s journey, thus prescribing what a woman can or cannot say and the array of emotions she can or cannot express. Her promise to herself and others is of writing in a manner that can “resist both disease and cure,” resisting the narrative of the victim and survivor to tell a different tale.

Boyer writes in the first person and in the key of negation and refusal, avoiding details, and as she notes, “record[ing] the minor motions of what a person does when she is anxious for a reason she refuses to specify,”⁸² avoiding to tell it all—as the literary market would have it. The memoir evolves as a series of cumulative, intense episodes that, as Lauren Berlant observes, “are both physical and affective.”⁸³ Boyer consults the writing of Susan Sontag, Audre Lorde, S. Lochlann Jain, Kathy Acker, Rachel Carson and Funny Burney who suffered from the disease, and observes whether or not they have used the first person address. She notes Susan Sontag or Rachel Carson refused to write “yet one more story in the first person of how someone learned that she or he had cancer.”⁸⁴ On the other hand, Audre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* (1980), used a first person account as “a feminist call to arms,” to continue and deepen her analyses of the structural inequalities and discriminations of the U.S. health system that make the pain of breast cancer a social problem.

She tells us that the A in AC is for Adriamycin, a liquid so corrosive “it is rumored, if spilled, to melt the linoleum on a clinic floor;” that the C is for cyclophosphamide, a “medicalised form” of the same mustard gas “outlawed as a weapon in 1925;” or that as the infusion begins, her brain’s mitochondria will begin to die, a damage often sustained for years. Boyer does, however, write the story of her survival: “I do not mourn my own loss of breasts,” she writes, “because the condition of the shared world seems exponentially more grievable.”⁸⁵ Boyer doesn’t think of herself as survivor, but as “undying;” a reanimated corpse, a zombie. Being a zombie in the United States in the twenty-first century is not a fantasy, but a common condition.

In seeking a language to speak of personal pain as a shared condition, Boyer discloses the realities of breast cancer as both personal and socio-political. The book is as much about herself as it is about the millions of women who die of breast cancer every year and about illness and disease as common conditions of life under capitalism: the sense of exhaustion and being overworked, alienated, lonely and not being able “to form the bonds necessary to end our loneliness.”⁸⁶ In making a space “for the physical expression of both singular and common sorrow, a place that both comfortably exposed suffering as what is shared” she also “guaranteed some protection against anti-sadness reactionaries,”⁸⁷ who would like to take the writer’s courage, but leave the truths spelt out by her unhappiness outside of the picture.

The project of unsaying and unmaking of the personal narratives of illness, death, and survival thus becomes necessary in order to refuse the reduction of breast cancer to an individual problem and in order to address the complexity of the questions at stake;

81 Anne Boyer, *The Undying* (2019), p. 119.

82 Anne Boyer, *The Undying* (2019), p. 26.

83 Lauren Berlant, “The Undying. A Review” in *4columns*, (June 2019). Available through: <https://4columns.org/berlant-lauren/the-undying>. [Accessed January 2020].

84 Anne Boyer, *The Undying* (2019).

85 *Ibid.*, p. 157.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

questions that are of the order of the common, because pain and illness are shared condition as it is the violence of the logic of profit, of “the breast cancer’s industrial etiology, its misogynist and racist medical history, capitalist medicine’s incredible machine of profit, and the unequal distribution by class of suffering and death,”⁸⁸ which are too often omitted from breast cancer’s common narrative forms.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I’ve argued that Boyer’s poetics offer conceptual and poetical tools for imagining a community that comes together to rehearse and improvise a new language and a mode of speaking that refuses the transparency of neoliberal forms of personal accounting. Among the group of contemporary writers discussed in this study, Boyer is the one who addresses more directly the relation between capitalism and modern forms of life or the ways in which the neoliberal economy produces illness, inequalities and suffering. It is also the contemporary writer who more openly conceptualises poetry as a space of a creative refusal. In this chapter, I have discussed the writing of Anne Boyer in order to think through the possibility of conceptualising a feminist poetics of refusal. I have examined the forms that her refusal takes by attending to “terrible forms” of her writing, her use of negation and the negative, “not-writing,” the opaque, muddled and the promise of the negative in the personal account. Can Anne Boyer’s poetry of refusal provide us with a resonating body that can allow us to consider, from the perspective of today, the economies and politics of the personal in writing? What does a personal voice of refusal sound like? I have first looked at the theoretical backbone of Boyer’s project of not writing as a counter-theory of writing that attempts to disentangle writing from the cycle of production and consumption in a neoliberal economy. Boyer’s poetic of refusal emerges against the political and cultural backdrop of the contemporary commodification of every aspect of life in Western neoliberal societies. I’ve shown how Boyer’s “no” is a refusal of the existing conditions of alienated existence as much as a resistance against the ideological reproduction of these oppressive conditions of precarity in literature, art and poetry; refusal as what enables writing and poetry to imagine the “not yet” or to inhabit the space of the “what if,” of the possible. In her essay “No” (2017), Boyer writes that, “there is a lot of meaning-space inside a ‘no’ spoken in the tremendous logic of a refused order of the world. Poetry can protect a potential *yes*.”⁸⁹ The “yes” that Boyer envisions takes the form of a resilient writing, one that says yes to a form of accounting that remains opaque, shadowy, open, and faithful to writing’s promise of the negative.

Boyer’s breast cancer memoir, *The Undying* is an examination of how to (not) write about illness, death, and the literary economies surrounding the production of personal testimonies. For Boyer, who was diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer, survived it and decided to write about her experience of an illness, writing about an illness suffered almost exclusively by women posed a troubling question of form; a question that only adds up to the many agonies of the breast cancer patient: “we are supposed to keep our unhappiness to ourselves,” Boyer writes, “but donate our courage to everyone.” How to avoid

88 Ibid., p. 9.

89 Anne Boyer “No” in *Harriet: A Poetry Blog*, Poetry Foundation, April 2017. Available through: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2017/04/no/>. [Accessed May 2018].

writing just another transparent account of heroic survival, full of sentimentalities and obscene details? How to refuse the narrative of “the atomised individual done right... The external world is taken as a given, a backdrop against which the personal drama is played out.”⁹⁰ I have shown in this chapter how Boyer refuses to write a memoir of survival that is either an heroic tale of personal drama or a pseudo-objective report of her illness and its social implications in the language of critical theory, because, as Boyer admits, “we do not often know the source of the things of the world,” and because the language of theory has often proven itself to be of little use when it comes to transforming or inventing a language to speak of the “unspeakable” conditions of oppression and suffering of people. But, as Boyer observes, since breast cancer is not a singular monolith but takes a plural form as the product of politics, social and economic relations and history, and so when writing a personal account of breast cancer one must be ready for the task of presenting sickness not simply as an individual condition, but as a complex subject, a conditions of social existence. It is this common condition that characterises the history of 20th and 21st century Western industrial and capital, carcinogenic manufacturing and big business; a history that is structurally classist, racist, misogynist, and fundamentally blind to the suffering it produces. *The Undying*, like cancer (Boyer’s and other’s), is multiple, plural, polyphonic; it speaks in multiple tongues and through multiple voices. It is a collective memoir. There is no one story or trajectory or idea or cause or remedy or message or moral. She writes: “Everyone who is not sick now has been sick once or will be sick soon. I dream in elaborately missed positions, of lakes and ladders I cannot climb, of a book with the title *You Never Know and Probably Never Will*. It has as its content the worth of each life.”⁹¹ Indeed, the book makes clear it is life, anyone’s life—not only Boyer’s, that is at stake. Cancer is presented not as Boyer’s experience, but as a symptom (more than a metaphor) of everything—of the way the world makes everyone sick. But not everyone equally—some suffer more and more visibly, like women; and more so single poor women; and single poor black women suffer the most. For Boyer, writing about breast cancer thus becomes a way of attending to and accounting for the power relations and structural inequalities that are deeply rooted in the all-encompassing misery of global capital; and thus also for “the commons of suffering,”⁹² that is the commonality of human suffering and its causes.

The questions of what writing is for and how it can be refused or embraced have concerned Boyer throughout her work, including her collections of essays, poetry, memoir, *Garments Against Women* (2015) and *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate* (2018). In this chapter, I have shown how Boyer’s work is a refusal of the culture of confession that profits from women’s sufferings and an invitation to come together in enduring suffering to invent a language that “resists both disease and cure” offered by neoliberal survival. This new language in Boyer’s poetics takes the form of an apophatic form, a way of unsaying what has been said and undoing what has been done to women under neoliberal exploitation. I have examined the ways in which negation as a literary strategy and political refusal are crucial to an understanding of Boyer’s writing and the ways in which her writing moves undecidedly and anxiously between affirmation and negation. As I have shown in this chapter, in her work negation takes the form of paralipsis, of linguistic negation, of de-négation; of a formal

90 Anne Boyer, “The Sororal Death” in *The New Inquiry*, (December 8, 2014). Available through: <https://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-sororal-death/>. [Accessed November 2017].

91 Anne Boyer, *The Undying* (2019), p. 179.

92 Lauren Berlant, ‘The Undying. A Review’ in *4columns*, (June 2019). Available through: <https://4columns.org/berlant-lauren/the-undying>. [Accessed January 2020].

undoing that both performs a poetic critique of work—work which Boyer understands not as an external necessity only, but as a condition of existence in a capitalist society. This condition of alienation brings Boyer to conceptualise a poetic of refusal that insists on the power of negative, of imagination that unsettles and improvises new imaginaries and forms of sociality. Negation opens a space of possibility in language as well as in the extra-linguistic space of existence, where “the undying” person exists in their liminality. Negation as *dénégation*, as a “no” that is also a “yes,” that destabilises meaning and language allows Boyer to bring the precarity of life into the space and the form of the sentence, the text, the book. It gives a precarious form to her life’s writing: it both makes it possible to write about certain things like vulnerability, pain, misery and hunger that are almost impossible to speak of, and it gives a different form to writing, enabling the possibility to speak and speak differently.

Anne Boyer’s poetry makes a demand on herself and on others to inhabit this condition of precarity more consciously, resisting the pressure to perform by performing differently; by inventing yet-to-be-named forms of writing and working: “there is a lot of meaning-space inside a ‘no’ spoken in the tremendous logic of a refused order of the world. Poetry can protect a potential *yes*.”⁹³ Ultimately, as I have shown in this chapter, Boyer’s negation envisions a “no” a poetics of reversal and opaque terrible forms as enablers of the possibility of thinking writing as a poetic act of disobedience against the order of the world as it is.

93 Anne Boyer “No” in *Harriet: A Poetry Blog*, Poetry Foundation, April 2017. Available through: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2017/04/no/>. [Accessed May 2018].

CONCLUSION

In this study, I have brought together a transgenerational group of women writers, artists, and poets whose practices occupy an “improper” space—located at the crossroad of art, poetry, writing, and social criticism; opening-up at the intersection of the poetic, the ethical, the existential. They refuse the idea of mastery of knowledge as the measure of legitimacy for an intellectual practice, suggesting different terms and criteria for a culture that dwells on close reading. Drawing on their vocabularies, and the literary tools they experimented with, in this thesis I accounted for both the literary specificity and the political significance of the works of this group of women writers, artists and poets. I’ve examined the ways in which they make a series of feminist propositions of refusal which called for a women’s collective of refusalists to materialise and improvise new forms of sociality in art and writing. This study invokes a community of feminist refusalist writers and poets formed by Carla Lonzi, Hélène Cixous, Moyra Davey, Frances Stark and Anne Boyer, and the many voices that inhabit their writing, to investigate the relation between womanhood and writing and the ways in which they have given personal accounts of their lives and selves in the key of refusal. Together they form a constellation of feminist practices, ideas, conceptual and literary tools that I have called a “Poetics of Negation.”

Drawing on Lonzi and Cixous’ “culture of relations” I examined the conditions, necessities, motivations and poetic intentions that influence the styles and forms of this group of women writers artists and poets. With “negation” I here invoked an inclination, a method, linguistic and rhetoric tools, a set of poetic and creative actions, a disruptive and life-affirming force of the otherwise—a “yes” in the carapace of a “no,” as Boyer beautifully put it. It is Lonzi and Cixous’ feminist practices of a radical alienation, where the negativity of a death-bound alienation is passed through, as *écriture féminine* suggests, into a creative affirmation of materiality (a radical form of alienation) as a source of poetic becoming. Their writing invokes the negative space of imagination, the power of the Keatsian “negative capability” that allows the poet to remain on uncertain ground and imagine the “not-yet.” There is the “negative” side of writing, that is reading and making—two practices continuously invoked in their writings. There is writing’s “promise of the negative,” of a way of saying that avoids speaking, that says as it unsays it—an evasive manoeuvre against the language of patriarchy. There is the language of not-writing, where “not” establishes differences via a negative dialectic of difference and proximity to the one and the other: to work and not-work, writing not-writing. There is the negative space of the trace, of what

drives, moves, influences and inspires their writing—the necessities, the reactions, the alienating conditions of women’s lives and work under capitalism. There is the “no” of their gesture of refusal. As I have attempted to show in this study, I derive the multi-faceted idea of poetic negation from the practices of this group of women writers, artists and poets, who, as I have shown, make a differentiated use of negation in their writing.

It is my thesis that the diversity of writing styles examined in this study have a common denominator, namely the author’s conscious attempt to refuse the commodification of existence in all of its forms: the refusal to be reduced to a single social or professional role (as writer, a poet, a visual artist, a mother), one identity or being, and a rejection of the narrow definitions of what it means to write or make art. In doing so they have developed what I call “a poetics of negation,” to refer to poetic practices that can be characterised by the following five qualities: 1. They refuse binaries of thinking, separations and oppositions, instead employing literary techniques and conceptual strategies (fragmentation, non-linearity, the dialogical, and relational, openness, opacity, the use of metaphors and metonymies, the language of poetry; intertextuality; and practices of mixing and remixing material from different sources) to speak of the open and multiple dimensions of existence and being; 2. They defy narrow definitions of genres and gender; 3. They refuse the legitimacy language of theory, its pretences to rationality and “objectivity,” and instead reclaim the body and the senses, the realm of personal experience, emotions and feelings (as we have seen with Cixous, for instance, feminine writing attends to real bodies with their unique needs and specific desires which, as she argues, have often been occluded by abstract philosophical discourse) as places of knowledge. As Lonzi writes in *Let’s Spit on Hegel*, “by not recognising herself in the male culture, women deprives this culture of the illusion of universality,”¹ and challenges the metaphysics of presence; 4. They refuse the capitalist economies of appropriation and commodification of life and instead represent a subject in their art and writing which is relational, permeable, open, unstable, mutable, multiple, polyphonic, contradictory and entangled in the world; and finally, 5. They make use of the personal and the autobiographical in writing that, instead of using self-disclosure as a gesture of laying bare the private details of one’s own life, plays with the dynamic of disclosure and concealment in order to refuse to show themselves clearly, and to undo the patriarchal and capitalist representation of the Subject as a homogeneous and coherent whole.

In identifying the *Poetics of Negation*, I have established how the writers’ “no” is woven into the very fabric of their works: in Lonzi’s feminist practice of “deculturalisation” and *autocoscienza*; in Cixous’ conceptualisation of the *écriture féminine* as an insubordinate form of writing moved by the forces of deconstruction and “depersonalisation;” in the disruptive qualities of Davey’s “promiscuous” writing, which unsettles given oppositions and categories. I have shown how Davey gives an account of herself by adopting a negative dialectic of proximity and difference, through which she writes a personal account by “reading obliquely,” through the lives and works of literary and artistic figures such as the reading of the story of her family through the life and work of proto-feminist Mary Wollstonecraft or film-maker Chantal Akerman in her text “Hemlock Forest.” This form of scepticism toward the status quo of art and culture is present in the convivial space of Stark’s “sandwich-like” writing, where many voices and subjects gather together to help the artist who “can’t” and “doesn’t” and “isn’t” and struggles to gather herself together in texts such as

1 Carla Lonzi, *Let’s Spit on Hegel* (1971).

“Just me me me” or “Knowledge Evanescent” because enraged by the hyper-alienation of contemporary artists and the ways in which art students are treated as consumers and professors as content-providers. It is the “no” of the “terrible forms” of Boyer’s poems, the ways in which her prose poem “Not Writing” tells of all the things she is not writing about when she is not-writing. Or the ways in which she refuses to give a transparent account of herself in her breast cancer memoir *The Undying*, whose opacity calls for a poetic formal undoing and self-abolition in writing that invokes the presences of the many subjects of Boyer’s accounting: as the subtitle of the book suggests, *The Undying* is a memoir of “pain, vulnerability, mortality, medicine, art, time, dreams, data, exhaustion, cancer and care.”²

In their attempt to give voice to the conditions of alienation in their life and work, this group of women mobilises the power of linguistic negation to, for instance, destabilise meaning to express the instability and precarity of any linguistic and social system. The “no” articulated in the works of this group of women writers, artists and poets is not a form of denial or nihilism; nor does it take the form of a withdrawal that denies the possibility of a dialogue. In this study I have shown the ways in which this group of writers inhabit culture negatively by invoking the power of a critical imagination that destabilises habits and norms, while enabling the possibility of a multiplication of poetic forms of action. While Lonzi’s refusal makes this “no” more immediately tangible; to speak of “no” in relation to Cixous’ *écriture féminine* might seem inappropriate since it is Cixous herself who, in “The Laugh of Medusa,” emphasises the “feminine” as a force of affirmation. Yet, this affirmation as proliferation of differences does not exclude a negative moment; a moment of saying “no” to internalised structure of language that tears “the clichés from their tongues, throwing down the crutches.”³ I have shown how negation operates a suspension of the reproduction of the capitalist “yes,” namely the drive to reproduce “things” as they are, and enables the possibility of a “no” that interrogates and questions.

In navigating the polyphony of voices and practices documented in *Poetics of Negation*, I have focused my attention on the way this group of women writers, artists and poets have practiced a refusal that is “quiet”—because it is elaborated in the silent space of writing and as a moment of working alone in the studio or in their apartments—and quotidian—as the daily practice of questioning the givenness of experience and paying attention to the small details of a woman’s daily routine: the ways she performs several different roles and unrecognised forms of work; the ways in which society subordinates and devalues her body and life. One aspect that brings the works of these writers together is the way they challenge women’s desire for identification with the normative space of cultural production, which reproduces forms of power, subordination and inequalities, where women’s bodies, desires, lives and work are continuously objectified, vilified, diminished, exploited, and reduced to a sexual function within a regime that controls and extracts value from their bodies—emblematic is the figure of the technobitch described by Paul Preciado as the product of what he calls the pharmacopornographic regime, a more contemporary and more aggressive version of the Cixousian Empire of the Selfsame, readings of contemporary forms of patriarchal alienation.

In this study, I have shown how these writers refuse the classificatory drive of patriarchal societies, and reject the violence inscribed in language, and the tyranny of naming ‘woman’: “I would like to live in a time in which language would not be bound, castrated,

2 Anne Boyer, *The Undying. Mediations on Modern Illness* (London/New York: Allen Lane/Penguin Books, 2019).

3 Hélène Cixous, ‘We who are free, are we free?’. Trans. by Chris Miller, *Critical Inquiry*, 19:2, (New York: Basic Books, 1993), pp. 201–19.

intimidated, obliged to obey the false scholars who are true ignoramuses,”⁴ Cixous writes. Indeed, this group of writers, artists and poets challenge the necessity of naming, exposing, clarifying; of male culture’s obsession with the objectifying, colonising and normative functions of language and discourse that reproduce the status quo. They reject the Empire’s need for naming and its pursuit of practices that force identification. As Cixous argues in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” the Empire of the Selfsame, “wants to know what it’s buying. The unknown just doesn’t sell. Our customers demand simplicity. You’re always full of doubles... Give us a homogeneous Cixous. You are requested to repeat yourself. Nothing unexpected,”⁵ the works of this group of women writers refuse social reproduction.

As women working in culture, they understand their practices as part of a larger feminist discussion where what is at stake is social reproduction—of life, artistic forms, culture, political structures, discourses. Their works are intimate and personal explorations of the multiple realities of life and creative work. Yet, their accounts do not disclose intimate details of the artists’ private life or their successful careers. Their attentions focus on the process of making: as for instance in Davey’s series of notes in which the artist records the process of making a new film composing “The Wet and the Dry” and “Hemlock Forest;” or the ways in which Stark’s reflects on the process of assembling her writing the same way that she creates her collages. They describe as the quotidian exercise of paying attention to the details of relations—for instance, in Lonzi’s examination of her relations; to the unsaid the unrecognised that haunts language and a woman’s work: the forms of micro-aggression in language; the violence of love; the contemporary conditions of production that exhaust life that are attended by Boyer’s writing. What distinguishes their refusal is the creative ways in which they developed critical and literary tools to reject the alienating conditions of contemporary life and to refuse helming a social and economic order in which, as Boyer writes, “to work... is to be asked, more and more, to do without thinking, to feel without emotion, to move without friction, to adapt without question, to translate without pause, to desire without purpose, to connect without interruption.”⁶ In this passage, with clarity and sharpness Boyer, perhaps the most direct example of a refusalist, outlines the refusal of contemporary alienation as the ways in which work in contemporary capitalism requires a total alienation of the worker who becomes a smooth operator of the system that exploits her. In their works, this group of writers, artists and poets express an understanding of artistic work as a mode of producing otherwise: one that must engage with emotions, feelings; produce reading and thinking; generate friction and questioning, which, as their works show, has the potential to interrupt the reproductive cycle of the Empire.

They call for a disruption, a virtual break with given literary histories and forms of cultural reproduction (especially pointing to the confessional culture that characterises contemporary culture). To do so, they call on a community of poets, artists and writers to share their insights and help in making sense. They refuse to write or make art on someone’s else terms, resisting the ideological demand to de-complexify discourse, and align the construction of subjective identity to the needs of the market and its neoliberal ideologies. Against the conditions the contemporary culture of presence and self-exposure that reproduces toxic narratives of self-empowerment through consumer choices, a culture that

4 Hélène Cixous, “Extreme Fidelity” in *Writing Differences: Reading from the seminar of Hélène Cixous*, (England: Open University Press, 1988).

5 Hélène Cixous, “Coming to Writing,” p. 33.

6 Stefano Hardy and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Thesis* (New York: Autonomedia/Minor Compositions, 2013), p. 87.

diminishes womanhood and devalues women's lives and works, they experiment with the possibility of giving an account of their lives that pose questions, rather than providing answers—for instance, Lonzi's self-questioning in her diary; the form of her poem which gives the title to the diary, in a series of questions to her sister. Boyer too has written long prose-poems as a series of questions addressed to poets, and Stark's own self-questioning is often a way of paying attention to what emotions tell us; to the little details of her everyday experience as a woman and artist. Davey questions established forms and, in her writing as in her photographic practice, she searches for those unpredictable moments of an encounter produced, like in the Index Cards or "The Wet and the Dry," by differences rubbing shoulder with each other.

Their accounts are full of interruptions and breaks—they remain opaque, incomplete, partial, multiple, open, porous, promiscuous, exuberant, and in which the self appears in fragments, never given once and for all; but represented as dialogical, and vulnerable to social and economic power relations that render their lives and work precarious. Yet, their insistence on the opaqueness of the self and the incompleteness of any attempt to give a truthful account of oneself, as I have shown, does not necessarily translate into a "pornography of particularisation" in which women give away their pain and personal information for the profit of neoliberalism. Yet, they do not renounce to the possibility of giving an account of their lives and works. They question mainstream liberal feminist narratives of self-empowerment, and call their communities to a mutual responsibility to envision different modes of inhabiting the social economies of art and culture. Although incomplete, fragmented, personal, intimate, ordinary and unexceptional, their accounts are not less driven by a sense of responsibility toward the communities which they care for, and who they invoke in their works. This explains also the dialogical mode of their writings, which leaves space for the others to make themselves heard; the ethical responsibility of doing without the kind of realism that supposedly "shows things as they *really* are," fundamentally obscuring the incompleteness of any system of knowledge and any attempt at disclosing the truth of the self and of the other. They experiment with personal accounts that, instead of foregrounding the centrality of the self, move the focus onto interpersonal social relations—where the self is always more than itself; it is many others that exist within and outside the self. Their writing calls for a form of giving an account that invokes a collective in the making.

Refusing the reproduction of the contemporary technobitch who is wired into a circuit of production based on cycles of excitation and frustration; and rejecting the given options to either be objectified or put on a pedestal, this group of writers insist upon a vital, unbounded womanhood and a culture of relations that opposes the moniker of the "relations-witch" to the technobitch: as these women writers create links, bridges and passages in their writing; new relations through associations and invocations of the many ghosts and influences that inhabit their practices. In this study, I've shown how the works of this group of women writers turn naming into a gesture of dedication, an invocation that conjures up, invokes, evokes, convokes, calls on and forth, stirs and summons the ghosts and forces of a sociality to become. In this attempt to reproduce the power of revolt and questioning capacity of women's writing, they refuse to give an account of themselves that reproduces the violence of naming in which the 'I' is assumed to have mastery, control, and possession of the full truth of the subject. They question hierarchies, categories, genres and genders, mastery, break syntax and meaning, subverting the unity of time and space and the coherence of the authorial voice in favour of the openness of the text and of a rep-

resentation of the self as fragmented and relational. In their writing, they invoke the presence of many others who partake in and have enabled their practices, and to whom they dedicate their works: the women of the feminist collective (Lonzi), the many ghosts that inhabit writing (Cixous); family, artistic and literary figures (Davey); the artistic community of mutual admiration (Stark); the community of refusalists forming a society for the destruction of unwritten literature (Boyer). They turn their personal accounts into an occasion for a dedication which summons the many different voices and influences that have made their artistic practices and political subjectivities possible.

In this thesis I have chosen to take as a point of departure the practices of Carla Lonzi and H el ene Cixous, for instance the autonomous feminist group Rivolta Femminile and the feminist practices of sexual difference, which emerged as part of a general social critique of institutionalised forms of power, and experimented with forms of collective organising and doing. Lonzi and Cixous joined other feminists in their effort to rethink their ethical commitment to their sex, both politically in terms of women’s control of their bodies and reproductive capacities, and poetically. It is within this context that their writing has emerged from the necessity to find new words to account for their lives and ways of feeling and experiencing the world, and test theoretical claims and presuppositions against their own bodies and lives.

I’ve approached the feminist practices of Carla Lonzi and H el ene Cixous aware of the historical limitations of their feminist politics.⁷ If there is an aspect that makes them representative of the European feminist practices of the seventies it is the identification of politics with the existential space. This aspect constitutes both the limitations and the strength of the women’s struggle of that time. On the one hand, as feminists have argued,⁸ the priority given to sexual difference and female desire has risked overshadowing the social and systemic dimension of oppression, and the fact that not all women are oppressed in the same way. On the other hand, the great merit of Lonzi and Cixous⁹ is to have understood the multiple ways in which colonisation operates through the body and the mind; how the Empire of the Selfsame reproduces itself through images, narratives, literary and poetic forms. Their critique of power is carried out not through the conventional means of social activism or political theory, but through improvised poetic means, made of bits and pieces drawn from the words of other writers, artists, strangers, poets, philosophers—as they attempt to refuse to reproduce imposed professional and social roles. Here it is significant to recall Lonzi’s poem, which gives the title to her diary, *Taci, anzi parla*. Through a series of questions addressed to her sister about social pressure and her desire to be a good mother, an excellent wife and a successful professional, the poem becomes the space of Lonzi’s questioning of women’s desire for social and professional recognition. As feminist scholar Giovanna Zapperi has pointed out, “through the creative process of writing Lonzi strives to undo the roles that she links to her oppression, while constantly trying to articulate her subjective experience within a collective endeavour: “the consciousness of myself as a political subject,” Lonzi writes, “is born out of the group, from the realisation [*realt a*] that has taken the shape of a non-ideological collective experience.”¹⁰

7 In *Autoritratto*, Lonzi discusses the student protests of ’68 with the artist, and she shows scepticism about the students that she considered them too politicised, “candidates for the role of oppressors” and insufficiently creative in their forms of refusal.

8 In this respect, paramount has been the critique developed by Black feminists such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks and Kimberl e Crenshaw. <https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mapping-margins.pdf>.

9 One was the activist that, in Italy, for instance, turned into the groups and committees of the Wages for Housework campaigns, and the one of self-awareness [*autocoscienza*], embodied by the radical practice of Lonzi and the women of Rivolta.

This is a subjectivity constructed in collaboration that expresses itself through an insurgent writing that is thus dialogical, fragmented, multivocal, in dialogue with the women of the feminist group; but also with philosophers, literary figures and refusalist poets; with a community of artists, critics, film-makers, friends and families who are called on to deliberate and collaborate in the process of making art or writing.

As I have shown in this concluding chapter, Moyra Davey's refusal of the self-centred confessional mode of accounting takes the form of literary montages in which multiple voices and subjects are invoked in order to experiment with a practice that takes place in the gaps and cracks of writing, in the encounters prompted by readings, shaped by associations and affects, and that resist the demand to become an account of the person and are instead transformed into an occasion for dedication, an address to the many others who have enabled Davey and inhabited her practice. Like Davey, Stark too represents the self as dialogical and art making and writing as practices of paying attention to the insignificant and quotidian. Her literary assemblages are dedications to her influences and favourite artists and literary figures. In a polemical yet humorous way, Stark's literary assemblages question and refuse the status quo of culture, as Stark emblematically writes in a text entitled "Scared to Death," "I don't want not to talk [...] just because I can't talk the way I think I am supposed to."¹¹ Her observations sound like desperate calls from the artist for help, in a way that discloses the writer's vulnerability as the conditions for engaging in a practice of making art and writing that acknowledges its collaborative dimension, refusing the cultural representation of the contemporary artist as competitive alienated subject. Stark invokes the possibility of a community of "creative types" that, as a matter of mutual admiration, freely improvise in collaboration.

In a similar way, Boyer's poems and essayistic writing call on a community of terrible and sick refusalists to materialise and articulate together a "no" that is a "yes in the carapace of a no" to the landscape of destruction outside poetry: In her writing, Boyer invites poets to experiment, for instance, with forms of "not-writing;" with writing poems in the shape of "poetic non-actions;" with the technique of "turning the world upside down," of literary transposition, of a reversal that turns her 'against' into a 'for', "expanding the negative to genius and the *opposite of* to unforeseen collapses and inclusions."¹² Boyer calls on a community of women and poets to invent new languages and vocabularies, ways of saying and speaking that do not reproduce the same oppressive structure of language and discourse; a language that remains close to experience—that demands paying attention to what and how she feels—that remains muddy and opaque, that acknowledges the incompleteness of any attempt to account for one's own experience, in order to preserve the multiplicity of what we are.

Through their writings they imagine a community of refusalists that improvise alternative forms of sociality and disrupt the reproduction of alienated forms of work and social reproduction; including the reproduction of neoliberal forms of accounting that reduce women's lives and experiences to more of the same commodities on the literary market. In this study, I've shown how this group of women writers have experimented with forms of self-narration that refuse neoliberal narratives of self-empowerment aligned with

10 Giovanna Zapperi, "Challenging Feminist Art History: Carla Lonzi's divergent paths" in Victoria Horne, Lara Perry (eds.) *Feminism and Art History Now: Radical Critiques of Theory and Practice* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

11 Frances Stark, "Scared to Death" in *Frances Stark: Collected Writing: 1993–2003*, (London: Book Works, 2003), p. 99.

12 Anne Boyer, "No" (April, 2016).

consumer culture, which support an ideology of individual responsibility and that demand to maximise one's own market value. The works of the group of writers discussed in this study speak from within and address the precarity of their life and work, the ways in which Empire and its neoliberal versions make life precarious, fragmenting society and producing historical narratives that emphasise the self-evident truth of appearances. Their writing practices question appearances, and a culture in which interpersonal relations are commodified, "used" as means toward an end, to the advantage of someone's else profit; and in giving an account of themselves they reject the position of the omniscient narrator. Yet, despite its incompleteness, their work does not escape or evade their responsibility toward readers. Indeed, it calls the reader to an active engagement with their thoughts as they conceive of their writing and artistic practices as "counters" for "encounters"—as spaces where small and large groups might gather to rejoice or express their indignation, to enact their plural differences in the public space of writing and art.

Their personal accounts are constructed as an appeal to their community to question the modalities of their being together; the power relations and the economies that influence social relations and cultural production; questioning the particular demands that generate value, and to imagine alternative forms of sharing the space of cultural production, of collaboration and mutual responsibility, in which art and writing are recognised as the result of a collective endeavour; a making that is always a doing in collaboration. With their writing they appeal to their intellectual communities to imagine an alternative "culture of relations" than the one characterised by neoliberal survival—perpetual interconnectedness, competition, selfishness, sensorial and libidinal hyperstimulation, permanent anxieties, stress, precarity, and the loneliness and sufferings of underprivileged, humiliated individuals and groups. They make these alternatives exist, not through a heroic revolutionary gesture; but, as I have argued, through their "quiet" and quotidian refusal in their art and writing. They call on their communities to rehearse together a series of gestures of refusal and radical negation, by inventing and sharing with their readers tools of deculturalisation, depersonalisation, promiscuity, influence, dedication and self-abolition; by nonaction as a form of paying attention and observing the minutiae of encounters and relations.

Their writings offer a series of conceptual tools, materials and inspirations for further enquiries into the feminist uses of negation and refusal in personal forms of writing. I believe that exploring the potential of such writing will contribute to an enriched understanding and the practical facilitation of practices dedicated to experimentation with and thinking about the possible forms of refusal in art and writing and envisioning the possibilities of a community of writers, artists and poets to improvise the refusal of the status quo in collaboration. Artist and editor Liz Allan, with whom I have been in dialogue with during the writing of this piece of writing, perhaps offers the best description of the desire, the poetic intention, what moved and sustained my investigation of feminist refusal and negation. I leave the last words to her: "I very much like the idea that one could belong to a community of poets and artists across time who, because of their opposition to exploitative gender conditions, have developed a set of practices of affinity across time. Perhaps that solidarity is a consolation and a call for becoming an artist writer poet in such hostile climates!" *Poetics of Negation* points to the possibility of this solidary in the key of a generative refusal, and makes a call to the larger community of artists, writers, curators, poets and scholars I am part of to refuse the performance of the self-serving self, and come into solidarity, share their tools and improvise new forms of sociality in collaboration.

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