A Genealogy of Artists in Madrid

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In January 2020, I visited two exhibitions in Madrid I consider important contributions to our reflections on the presence and role of women in the field of artistic creativity. They were A *Tale of Two Women Painters: Sofonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana* at the Museo del Prado celebrating its 200th anniversary, and *Defiant Muses Delphine Seyrig and the Feminist Video Collectives in France in the 1970s and 1980s* at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.

That Madrid hosted these two exhibitions simultaneously was itself significant in that it illuminated connections between two great artists of the 1500s and the feminists who had rediscovered and valorized their work in the 1970s and 1980s. For these women art served as a means of self-transformation and political activism. Both exhibitions focused on what Carla Lonzi called the "unexpected subject." "We recognize within ourselves the capacity for effecting a complete transformation of life. Not being trapped within the master-slave dialectic, we become conscious of ourselves; we are the unexpected subject."[1] And as such we renew ourselves through the centuries always in the moment we are living via an uninterrupted flow of subjectivities.

This is what I found so remarkable about these two exhibitions in Madrid. I was able to fuse my reflections on 16th and 17th century female painters with my impassioned research of feminist artistic practices and politics which combined, have been so pivotal to my sense of being.

At the Prado Museum exhibition I felt instantly at home, exchanging glances with the women portrayed on canvas with whom I have had countless conversations. The self-portrait of Sofonisba Anguissola at her easel, looking pensively at us has been hanging in my house for years. One of her most well-known paintings, it was used to promote the Madrid exhibition as well as the first major exhibition of Sofonisba and her sisters in 1994 in Cremona, her birthplace. It was a groundbreaking event, a milestone in research studies, attribution and restoration of the Anguissola sisters' oeuvre.

I had visited it with friends from the Sofonisba Anguissola Association, which we had established in 1987 in Turin along with the Galleria delle Donne to valorize women artists. The Cremona exhibition allowed us to experience the paintings up close, some of them publicly available for the first time**.** I was viewing work I had only seen reproductions of. Darkened by time, they have been beautifully restored, such as the painting of Bianca Ponzoni, Sofonisba's mother. She was only 20 when she painted this solemn portrait of a woman adorned with pearls in a gilded brocade dress.

In the same year I attended the first monographic exhibition of Lavinia Fontana in Bologna. I had already encountered some of her altarpieces and portraits in churches and the Pinacoteca Museum of Bologna, the city where I live. But seeing such a comprehensive collection of her work took my breath away.[2]

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[1] Carla Lonzi, Let's Spit on Hegel, 1974

[2] The two exhibitions then landed in 1995 at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC, whose collection includes both artists.

So in Madrid I was all the more elated to see the works of these two artists in a single exhibition. I noticed in particular a sequence of self-portraits revealing how the artists had been inspired by each other in what I would describe as a passing of glances beginning with the Flemish painter Caterina Van Hemessen's portrait of her sister sitting at the spinet and her self-portrait at the easel, 1548, which then inspired Sofonisba's first self-portrait at the spinet in 1557, and in turn Lavinia's some twenty years later.[3]

It was an extraordinary sequence, each artist having turned to the work of another woman to express and validate herself as a painter. To me it showed how women artists reciprocate respect, reference one another and build tradition.

One other important practice of 16th century women artists was adding the word "virgo" to their signatures. This practice dates back to women painters in antiquity such as Marcia, in her miniature *Marcia Painting Self-Portrait using Mirror* that appears in Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris,* Latin for *Concerning Famous Women*. In the miniature, a woman is painting her self-portrait from her reflection in a mirror she's holding. Understood in today's currency, this image can be interpreted as an archetype of women's emancipation from the male gaze. It is a declaration of one's autonomy as a woman and as an artist in a world in which women were solely spectators and objects of male artistic expression.

Sofonisba and her sisters

There were six Anguissola sisters all born into fortunate circumstances. Amilcare Anguissola, their father a Cremonese nobleman took to heart the education of his daughters, sending Sofonisba and Elena, the oldest, to study painting with Bernardino Campi an important painter of the time. This was unheard-of as only daughters of artists could become artists themselves. Elena soon thereafter entered a convent where she continued to paint. The third sister Lucia was a very talented painter who unfortunately did not reach the age of 30. Minerva the fourth, preferred literature, then Europa and Anna Maria who would sacrifice, at least in part, their artistic activity for marriage.

The sisters all looked alike and often painted each other's portraits in what I call a game of mirrors, echoes and cross-references because even today we can't be certain from the attributions who painted whom. What is clear however is Sofonisba's unmistakable style and her influence as the eldest, and more importantly the teacher of her sisters. The portrait of Pietro Manna, a Cremonese physician painted by Lucia is one such example. His intense yet sensitive expression was indicative of her sister's talent of capturing the model's subtle moods.

In *The Game of Chess* (1555), Lucia and Minerva are pitted against one another dressed in their mother's jewels, while their governess off to the side smiles, watching the game with young, mischievous Europa, who can't help but revel in her sisters' determination to win.

While Sofonisba had mastered her technique with Bernardino Campi, her talent for introspection and rendering deep emotions, which make her portraits so innovative and inimitable[4] derives, in my opinion, from the bound between the sisters. It was already present at a young age, in, for example the portrait she painted at 15 of Elena dressed as a nun. Infused with

[3] See Theme 2, Donatella Franchi, Lavinia Fontana and 16th and 17th century Bolognese artists

[4] See Flavio Caroli, "Ritratti di famiglia in un interno, un fanciullo, un crachio, e la fisiognomica nel Cinquecento" in Sofonisba Anguissola e le sue sorelle, Leonardo Arte, Milan 1994, pp. 48-49.

love of each other and a desire to transform everyday joys and sorrows into symbols and color, her art was born of and woven into her sibling relationships.

And she continued this tradition throughout the fourteen years (1559 to 1573) she spent at the Spanish court as a lady-in-waiting to Isabella of Valois, Philip II's teenage bride. Far from home in Madrid she recreated the same atmosphere she had grown up with, nurturing while teaching the young queen drawing and painting, and bringing to the court the same warmth and affection she cultivated with her sisters. Her portrait of King Phillip is testimony to her influence. While his official portraits depicted him as a powerful, armored warrior, Sofonisba's rendered him almost shy and defenseless with her light brushstrokes evincing a hidden vibrancy and affection.

In 1573, at 41 she returned to Italy the wife of a Sicilian nobleman who would leave her a widow soon after, which allowed her to remarry freely choosing her own partner. She was ninety years old when she passed away, having borne no children but an oeuvre of unprecedented importance.

The luminous fabrics of Lavinia Fontana

The life of Lavinia Fontana,[5] born in 1552, seventeen years after Sofonisba, was that of a professional painter commissioned to create religious works, such as large-scale altar pieces as well as mythological paintings. She was trained and worked in her father's studio, a business she would then inherit. She was the mother of 11 children and the wife of a minor artist, who was also her manager. Reaching international notoriety as a professional painter she was called to Rome in 1603 to create significant public works and would remain there until her death in 1614.

But she was also a portrait painter and one whose attention the gentlewomen of Bologna vied for regularly. A portrait painted by Lavinia Fontana was esteemed even more than one by the famous Van Dyck. The women in her portraits donning sumptuous jewels and garments, evinced the grandeur of their nobility and at the same time their true selves, for Lavinia rendered their features authentically, never falsely beautifying them.

She was able to achieve this because of the tradition of women painters before her, and because she was afforded great freedom via her unexpected subjectivity, being a self-aware woman capable of being creative without breaching any rules of morality or language. It was the age of Counter-Reformation when art was rigidly controlled by the Catholic church. Still, she succeeded in appropriating male artistic traditions to her own expressive ends. Those in which her experience of relationships and affections, of motherhood and her own body were important to her artistic endeavors.[6]

Lavinia painted with the skill of a miniaturist. I was particularly struck by the sensuality of *Venus and Cupid* in which the gentlewoman Isabella Ruini, richly dressed, allowed herself to be painted half-length nude in the company of a plump cupid. In this painting the jewels glimmer and the transparency of the veils cascade like water. The luminous fabrics become a sensual landscape, similar to those of many Flemish painters. If we follow her brush, we lose ourselves

[5] See Theme 2 Lavinia Fontana y las otras

[6] Ibid.

in the depths of her textures, the shadings and highlights and find ourselves relishing in the form and material of the painting.

Lavinia's nudes broke tradition, as did those of Artemisia Gentileschi, the first women painters to paint female bodies.[7] One of Artemisia's most well-known paintings is *Susanna and the Elders* which she painted in 1610 at 17. In it she is crouched below a wall nude in a twisted gesture fending off the gaze of two old men.

We know that at that time female artists were precluded from studying the human body, but women did not need professional models to represent the female body, they needed only to draw on their experience.

Thus, in *Minerva Dressing* (1612-1613), Lavinia's daughter Laudomia[8] is captured while she is dressing. Fully nude she wears a helmet adorned with colorful feathers. A sheer veil stitched with golden threads accentuates her body as she holds a robe lined in scarlet she is about to wear. Hers is a fresh and confident sensuality, one which Lavinia repeated in a later similar nude of her daughter. In this painting the length of the body is illuminated as are the textures of the brocade drapes and the diaphanous robe she holds. Behind her there is a French window and outside an olive tree and an owl perched on the balcony baluster. It is a sequence of symbolic images that brings to mind the tradition of the goddess as creator of all things and counselor of prudence.

Defiant Muses

From the Prado Museum I leapt four centuries over to the Reina Sofia and the exhibition *Defiant Muses Delphine Seyrig and the Feminist Video Collectives in France in the 1970s and 1980s*. It was a span of time feminist scholars had given life to, populating it with women, bringing them into existence and reconfirming a genealogy in which we can place and orient ourselves. At the beginning of the 1970's and using an array of expressive tools women put themselves "beyond the lens" by creating a revolutionary collective work: feminism. I am part of that story.

The exhibition curated by Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez and Giovanna Zapperi, a Carla Lonzi scholar and author of Carla Lonzi, *Un'Arte della Vita,*[9] was a rich choral testimony to how in those years women used visual art politically, in this case video, to express another view of the world: their view.

In her book *Shut up. Or rather, speak: Diary of a Feminist*, Carla Lonzi saw video art as an effective means of focusing on the care women's lives and daily practices embodied. "Once again I felt like making films of the gestures of women sustaining humanity. . . . Becoming aware of their value, not only practical, but cultural, can be a way of understanding who we are and where we come from. I would like to film just the gestures to highlight their expertise and the legacy of experience it requires." "I would like to film those that don't become a product (i.e. a work of art), only a caregiver. Gestures in the air, like those of a tightrope walker, gestures made of air, gestures on which we build a life."[10]

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7 A precedent in Bologna is the marble bas-relief by Properzia de Rossi, with the nude of Puttifares' wife attempting to restrain Joseph, in the Museum of the Basilica of San Petronio.

8 See Patrizia Tesini, in *Historia de dos Pintoras, Sofonisba Anguissola y Lavinia Fontana,* p. 227.

9 Giovanna Zapperi, Carla Lonzi, *An art of life*. Derive Approdi, Rome, 1917.

10 Carla Lonzi,*Taci, anzi parla, diary of a feminist*, Sritti di Rivolta Femminile, Milan 1978, pp.763,767.

These words express Lonzi's thinking on the role of art. For her it must be in service to life, aimed at building relationships, not at being identified as a product which by definition engenders competitiveness, possession and power relations. A type of art that is neither a style nor a movement, but a way of life. To the women who in those years experimented with finding themselves together with others in their artistic practices, what counted most was the creative process, the opening of spaces and their personal transformative encounters.

This exhibition was designed to highlight this approach to artistic endeavors. One went from room to room, twelve rooms in all, in an echo of voices surrounded by video projections of images and interviews, and displays of photographs and written documents. The installations transmitted the creative fervor, enthusiasm and sense of discovery that was present at the time.

I reexperienced the vision, the creative and political energy of those years in full force when art and politics flowed continuously into each other. I reflected on their presence today, how the liberating capacity of feminism informs and manifests itself in the visual arts, transforming the concept of art and the artist herself.

The entire exhibition revolved around Delphine Seyrig. In the first room I saw the spectacular dress of shiny red vinyl and feathers that she wore in Ulrike Ottinger's film *Freak Orlando*.

Delphine Seyrig (1932-1990) had become famous as an icon of auteur cinema in the 1960s and 70s, first as the protagonist of *Last Year at Marienbad* by Alaìn Resnais, then in films by François Truffaut and Luis Buñuel, who would cast her as the beautiful, distant and silent muse, in short, the male ideal of femininity.

Through her encounters with feminism and collaborations with women directors of the 1970s and 1980s, such as Marguerite Duras, Chantal Akerman, Ulrike Ottinger, Agnès Varda and Liliane de Kermadec, Delphine began to use acting to reflect on female stereotypes, carving a new path for herself as a woman, an actress and most importantly as a feminist. Learning video techniques that Carole Roussopoulos, a pioneer of feminist videos, taught in her home, she became an author and a director herself of video art.

In 1974 with Carole Roussopolous and her friend Joana Wieder, she founded the collective Les Insoumuses through which, together with other women, they built an extraordinary archive of videos focused on the construction of women's liberation. The videos explored roles, addressed the diffusion of a female view of the world, reflected on sexuality and the freedom to choose motherhood, and the international struggles for women's liberation.

In 1982 they opened the Centre Audiovisual Simone de Beauvoir in Paris to preserve the passionate work of those years by inserting it into a female genealogy with the collaboration and contribution of Beauvoir herself, witness to the continuity of that genealogy. This is where most of the material in the Madrid exhibition came from, the result of years of research by the curators. Their commitment and passion testify to another stage in the creation of a genealogy of present-day women.

The name of the collective, *Les Insoumises* used for the title of the exhibition *Musas Insumisas* comes from a play on words: "insoumises" meaning not submissive, rebellious, and "muses," words that summarize the politics of the project, that of the female gaze, critical and completely autonomous.

The exhibition catalog reads: "The continuity between actress and activist, which Seyrig impersonated throughout her life, and especially in her career, points to the heart of feminist

politics, then and now: the close relationship between life and politics. Seyrig was not just an actress who used her celebrity and privilege to advance a political cause, but a woman who continually sought to challenge herself in the complex intertwining of art, work, personal life, and politics. For her, creative expression was always linked to personal becoming, and the attempt to transform both life and work through political activity."[11]

The Undoing the Diva section featured one of the most significant videos: *Sois belle et tais-tois*! (Be Pretty and Shut Up!) This video, whose title echoes Carla Lonzi's *Taci, anzi parla! (Be quiet, or rather speak!*), testifies to the collective awareness of the mechanisms of power to which actresses were subjected in the film industry and which forced them into rigid, pre-established roles.

In this video, filmed by Carole Roussopoulos, Delphine Seyrig interviews twenty-four actresses in the United States and France, including Jane Fonda, Maria Schneider, and Viva. The actresses talk about sexual stereotypes, their relationships with directors, and male partners, their loneliness while working, the need they felt for roles written by women, and the desire to make connections between women.[12]

Although each interview was filmed separately, the editing created a powerful effect of collective awareness in that the camera listened attentively to each woman's experience, breaking down any sense of isolation or potential hierarchy. Instead it embodied the art of dialoguing, the experience of speaking and being listened to.

As an expressive medium, the video camera in the hands of a woman pointing it at another woman takes on a disruptive symbolic meaning. It makes concrete a representation of becoming the subject of her own gaze through the gaze of the other woman. She--the woman being filmed--is no longer the object of the male gaze, nor playing the role of spectator of the creative gestures of others. But art produced by women, beginning with medieval miniaturists has always been about displacing the gaze.

With the political practice of consciousness raising in the feminism of the 1970s, this shift of gaze, which starts within oneself, became a manifestation of female subjectivity, one in which women's art and creativity was born.

In the urgency to visually express their search for themselves, women artists used tools that did not require long periods of training such as painting and sculpture. They tended not to refine their work, favoring performance or body art, where the body itself became language, photography, installation and video.

For feminists, the portable video camera, a new medium, was a means of self-expression that freed them from the male-dominated traditions of film and television. With it they denounced the tradition of "the auteur" which conceals the indispensable collaboration of others.

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11 Musas Insumisas, Madrid 2019, p. 15.

12 In the path of Delphine Seyrig , in her rebellion and in the video Tais toi resonates the struggle of the Me too movement of recent years, a movement that started from Hollywood actresses and spread throughout the world. A rebellion against sexual domination and the system of power that sustains the cultural industry of film and the arts in general, and in many fields of work. Insumisas, p.15.

For Carole Roussopoulos, video was the ideal medium to give voice to those who did not have it.[13] For Delphine Seyrig it was the instrument to make her own voice heard without having to interpret the words of others, to put her own gaze into action by moving behind the lens.

One of their best-known videos is *SCUM* (1976), after the eponymous title of Valerie Solanas' famous *SCUM Manifesto*.[14] In it they reflect on the relationship between women and the patriarchal power of the media, on its implicit violence, on how feminism questions this power,[15] and on the importance of women building relationships to give them strength and autonomy. It was a work that brought out of oblivion and indifference Valerie Solanas' radical and solitary revolt.

The video was conceived as a conversation between two friends, Delphine Seyrig and Carole Roussopoulos. The scene is intimate, they are in a room with a bookcase and a television turned on (symbolizing the object of their criticism). On a wall is the face of Valerie Solanas on the cover of *SCUM*. They are sitting at a table, facing each other, Seyrig is reading *SCUM* aloud giving the impression that it is Solanas herself who is echoing her words full of defiance and rebellion, intelligence and humor while Roussopoulos transcribes them on a typewriter. Roussopoulos' action with the typewriter reminds us that Valerie Solanas always carried one with her, as she wrote solely on a typewriter. But the typewriter also represents the roles traditionally assigned to women, those that are undervalued and considered repetitive, such as that of secretary and typist, serving the creativity of others, with no creativity of their own.[16]

Having staged the relationship of friendship and collaboration between Seyrig and Roussopoulos the curators told us, the video is a testimony to how the political and creative relationship between women frees them from stereotypes and generates desire, love and care for the creativity of others. And I would like to add that this relationship is fundamental to building a genealogy--as we saw in the most powerful years of feminism--that continues in the present. This exhibition was an example of that.

P.S.

I'd like to thank Maria-Milagros Rivera Garretas for inviting me to Madrid to see the exhibitions, and for hosting me.

Thank you to Letizia Bianchi for listening to me and talking with me about this experience.

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[13] Musas insumisas, p.105.

[14] Valerie Solanas is a lonely, tragic, and courageous figure. After a childhood of abuse and violence, she leads a stray life, between prison and psychiatric hospitals, but all dedicated to her passion for writing. She was best known for the famous *SCUM Manifesto* (*SCUM* is an acronym for Society for Cutting up Men) and for shooting Andy Warhol, an icon of narcissism in male culture. Her complete writings were translated and published in Italy by VandA. epublishing in 2018.

[15] Musas Insumisas, p.105.

[16] Musas insumisas, p.109.