

THE PHANTOM LIMB.
CAROL RAMA AND THE HISTORY OF ART

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Contemporary to No One... our Extemporary

Invisibilise, discover and reduce to an identity: these are three epistemological operations that the hegemonic discourse of art history has deployed to construct the norm. In the case of Carol Rama, these three critical operations explain the non-place that her work has occupied in museum discourses, anthologies and spaces of exhibition until today, and also make intelligible why it has been so difficult to create a space in which the artist can, in the words of Boris Groys, be considered 'a comrade of our time'.¹

The first normalising historiographical strategy consists of invisibilising a series of productions by defining them as 'non-art'. This condition of invisibility is what most characterises the complex position that the somatopolitical minorities have occupied throughout the history of art.² I call 'somatopolitical minorities', using Michel Foucault's notion, those bodies that have been more violently subjected to normative regulations by heterocentric capitalism and which occupy a subaltern position in relation to the processes of bodily reproduction/production. These are the sexual and racial as well as cognitively and functionally diverse minorities. While Spivak asked 'Can the subalterns speak?', we could ask if *the artistic production of the subalterns can be considered art*.³

These processes of invisibilisation succeed in the subaltern artist from being contemporary with her time, pulling her away from the present and situating her outside of all temporality. As Griselda Pollock stated, 'the absence of critical

1. Boris Groys, 'Comrades of Time', *E-flux Journal*, 2009.

2. Griselda Pollock, 'Old Bones and Cocktail Dresses: Louise Bourgeois and the Question of Age', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 22, no. 2: *Louise Bourgeois* (1999), p. 94. '[her] career spans the critical decades of this century, making her a "historical woman", a woman who bears that

history of both women and art. She is its agent and its witness.'

3. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press: 1988, pp. 271-313.

acknowledgement at the right moment means that there is no recovery of that lost chance to be seen in one's own history, as the absence in the historical record or archive can never be retrospectively filled by what was never said'.⁴

In the case of Carol Rama, whose work developed over the course of seven decades, her lack of public presence is marked by periods of censorship, erasure from the present and what could be called a 'phantasmal' return. Her first exhibition at Faber gallery in Turin (Italy), where all the artworks were signed with the name Olga Carolina Rama, was censored as 'obscene' by the Italian Fascist government of 1945. Twenty-seven watercolour paintings were withdrawn and some of them, it is believed, were destroyed or lost. What triggered the censorship were without doubt her representations of sexuality, institutional confinement, illness and disability... here is the emergence of a body that exceeds the somatopolitical norm. In *Appassionata* (1939) Carol Rama invents what would become her most reoccurring character: a semi-nude body, neither feminine nor masculine, dressed in a skirt and high-heeled shoes, wearing a crown of flowers on its head and sticking out its tongue in a gesture of disobedience and challenge. This 'transgender' body recalls the embodied subjects invented within the work of Claude Cahun, Klaus Mann or Annemarie Schwarzenbach from the same period. In *Bubi Deallegri* (1939) a man is depicted masturbating. This is perhaps the first representation of male masturbation produced by a woman. In *Eretica* (1944) a human body penetrates an animal. In *Opera 9* (1938) a tongue seems to be embracing a cluster of erect penises, while in the background four artificial dentures float. Amputated from history in 1945, the work of Rama would return later – insistent and harrowing, like a phantom limb.

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Organic Abstraction

Born in 1918 to a family of industrialists in Turin, Carol Rama never received any academic artistic training. When her first exhibition was censored she took the news as a warning: an 'invitation' to abandon the war of figurative motifs and engage in what we could call, to use her own words, the 'abstract war'. After some time with the artist Felice Casorati, Rama became involved in the Concrete Art Movement (MAC) in order to, according to her own statement, 'provide a certain order' and 'limit the excesses of freedom'. From this moment on her work would be signed Carol Rama. The name *Olga* had been eliminated just like the censorship had successfully eliminated her figurative work.⁵

⁴ See Griselda Pollock, 'Old Bones and Cocktail Dresses', p. 87.

⁵ Cited in Simon Grant, 'The Cruel Snake of Memory', *Tate Etc.*, no. 19 (Summer 2010).

Around the mid-fifties, Rama began to undo little by little the geometric conventions of the Concrete Art Movement while also experimenting with new materials and techniques. The energy of the body returns but this time transformed into vibrations that traverse the canvas. The vertical lines of the sketch in *Diagramma* (1960) and the numerous works *Untitled*, produced towards the end of the fifties, suggest the physical registers of some kind of apparatus (the artist's own body) which, like a seismograph or electroencephalograph, translate the energy of the movements of the earth, emotional energy and the activity of the brain into inscribed matter. A somatopolitical force haunts Rama's work. In *Melodrama* (1960), nine skulls, like the nine months of pregnancy, circle an island of embossed black ashes. In *Bricolage* (1963), a mass of metallic thread (recalling the metallic sculptures of Marisa Merz, Eva Hesse or Diane Itter) are extended in three dimensions from a black stain in the canvas. In *Contessa* (1963) and *Bricolage* (1964), the canvas is literally pierced by a multitude of animal claws. The painting, splattered with reds and blacks, is both abstract and organic – an artificial wound through which it is possible to read traces of aggression. Carol Rama invents *organic abstraction, sensurrealism, concrete-visceral art and porno brut*. This *de-figuration technique* extends to a limit when Carol Rama decides to name *Pornography* and *Pornography II* (no doubt mocking the archetypal characterisation of her work), two canvases from 1963 and 1965 respectively, in which the artist experiments with the capacity of pictorial matter to solidify. Here Rama creates a series of bodies dispersed across the canvas surface. The passion becomes abstraction.

Carol Rama was profoundly influenced throughout the sixties by the experimental linguistic and visual poetry movement of the Novissimi (much more than by her fleeting relations with figures such as Warhol or Buñuel). From 1956 onwards, the Italian neo-avant-garde literary scene surrounding the Novissimi movement and the Gruppo '63 moved between Milan, Palermo and Turin. The movement was constituted by members Nanni Balestrini, Alfredo Giuliani, Elio Pagliarani, Antonio Porta and Edoardo Sanguineti, among others. Although, as Lucia Re has shown, many of the writers of the movement reclaimed the 'feminine' gaze as a tool for critiquing the dominant ideology, the scene was paradoxically male.⁶

6. Lucia Re, 'Gender and Sexuality in the Italian Neo-Avant-Garde', *MLN*, vol. 119, no. 1, *Italian Issue* (January, 2004), pp. 135–73: p. 135. Amelia Rosselli and Carla Vasio were involved with the movement, however only as part of a second order. The authors who experimented with the feminine gaze the most were Elio Pagliarani (who in the poem *La ragazza*

Carla narrates the story of a working class adolescent girl pursued by her patron) and the poem *Laborintus* by Edoardo Sanguineti, which is written from the viewpoint of a young schizophrenic. The feminist version of these texts is the experimental writing and visual poetry of Mirella Bentivoglio and Lucia Marcucci.

During the fifties, the power of the Italian companies (Fiat, Mondadori, Olivetti, Pirelli or Zanussi) transformed the artistic and intellectual scene into an authentic ‘cultural industry’ in which the artists were positioned as ‘technicians’.⁷ The spheres of the economic and the cultural were fused and the independence of art was transformed into a dated nineteenth-century virtue. Art became a market and the artist, complicit or critical, a producer of mass culture. In this context the *intellettuali contro* of the neo-avant-garde fought to create a space of resistance within language. The artist was for the Novissimi a producer of ‘counter-mythologies’, capable of confronting the rage of tales of the consumer culture. Carol Rama never managed to fully join any of these scenes, nor was she embedded in the cultural industry or the neo-avant-garde, despite her friendship with Sanguineti. In both scenes, Pier Paolo Pasolini was the third figure visibly excluded. Carol Rama was the fourth invisible artist.⁸

In 1962, Sanguineti gave the name *Bricolages* to a series of Rama’s works in which various organic and inorganic elements were assembled to form new images in a process that applied a kind of Mary Shelley ‘Frankenstein’ principle. The same year, Umberto Eco published *Opera aperta*, in which he defended a form of relational semiotics: a means of dismantling traditional syntax implicating the reader in the production of the text.⁹ The *Bricolage* series can be seen as an equivalent to Sanguineti’s poems, which mix a multiplicity of languages (Latin, German, French and Greek) as well as linguistic registers (colloquialism, the political rhetoric of Marxism, pornography, advertising or the language of the mass media) in a non-linear way, to the point of constituting an entirely unique textual flow.¹⁰ There are also echoes of Balestrini’s *Cronogrammi* and the cut-ups of Brion Gysin and William Burroughs: existing texts are copied and pasted, and elements extracted from distinct rhetorical registers are reorganised in order to form a textual collage – a linguistic artefact whereby each of the parts is denaturalised, losing its contextual meaning in order to produce a new meaning within the poem. Here it is the experience of reading and viewing as representation that is being questioned: these texts and images are no longer intended to be read, or merely seen, but rather they are designed to be ‘experienced’ with all of the senses.¹¹ Sanguineti and other members of the Novissimi appealed to the

7. See Lucia Re, ‘Gender and Sexuality in the Italian Neo-Avant-Garde’, p. 138.

8. For Pier Paolo Pasolini ‘the neo-avant-garde’s war on language was a mere *bomba di carta* (paper bomb) and the neo-avant-gardists were mere exhibitionists whose protest was only verbal and essentially empty’. Lucia Re, ‘Gender and Sexuality in the Italian Neo-Avant-Garde’, pp. 141–42. See Pier Paolo Pasolini, ‘Fini del-

l’avanguardia’, *Nuovi Argomenti*, no. 3–4 (1996).

9. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.

10. See *Laborintus*, a poem included in the anthology *I Novissimi. Poesie per gli anni ’60*. Milan: Rusconi e Paolazzi, 1961.

11. See Lucia Re, ‘Gender and Sexuality in the Italian Neo-Avant-Garde’, p. 163.

performative dimension of their texts, relating to the material process of ‘action painting’ and ‘action poetry’.¹²

Let’s Spit on Courbet

While Carol Rama remained interested in the strategies of the neo-avant-garde, a feminist movement was emerging in Italy. Rama would ignore it as much as it would ignore her. There is no connection for example between the artist and the Milan-based feminist group DEMAU (Demystification of Authority), whose 1966 manifesto in defence of the demystification of the ‘authoritarianism of theory and the mysticism of morality’¹³ could be read today as a hymn to the work of Rama. She also had no connection with the Rivolta Femminile (Female Revolt), founded in 1970 by Carla Lonzi, Carla Accardi and Elvira Banotti in Rome. However, the parallels are profound. The Italian feminists of the sixties and seventies paid special attention to linguistic structures and visual codes as elements that configure the sexual order and define positions of power. The fluids (blood, semen, saliva, milk) which Carol Rama throws over the canvas in the *Diagrammas* and *Bricolages* of this period are also present in the political challenge made by the feminist Carla Lonzi with her 1970 publication *Sputiamo su Hegel* (Let’s spit on Hegel).¹⁴ Just as Carla Lonzi spits on the patriarchal idealism of Hegel, so Carol Rama spits on the realism of Gustave Courbet’s *L’Origine du monde* and even Duchamp’s *Étant donnés*. First Rama opens up the horizon: the spectator no longer looks through a crack; there are no limits. What is visible is there to be seen, face-to-face. Next she equips the sexualised body of *Étant donnés* or *L’Origine du monde* with a face, a gaze, a mouth and a tongue. This body is no longer a desired object but a subject who desires, acts: a political agent. Finally, Rama makes the vagina and anus more than orifices open to material or visual penetration by the heterocentric gaze. Rather it is from these orifices that snakes, pieces of shit or tubes spring forth, defining a new field of possible relationships.

Carla Lonzi’s work as a historian and art critic has often been overlooked. However, her aesthetic interests were directed towards the members of the Gruppo ’63. Another member of Rivolta Femminile was Carla Accardi, an abstract painter of the

¹² Edoardo Sanguineti, ‘Action Poetry?’, *I Novissimi, Poems from the Sixties*. Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1995, pp. 387–91.

¹³ Cited in Lucia Re, ‘Gender and Sexuality in the Italian Neo-Avant-Garde’, p. 152. Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp, *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, p. 33.

¹⁴ Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel. La donna*

clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti. Milan: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1974. English edition: Carla Lonzi, ‘Let’s Spit on Hegel’ (1979), in ‘Introductions: Coming From the South’, in Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp (eds.), *Italian Feminist Thought*. Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1991, p. 41.

avant-garde. Strangely, both thinkers were close to the (rather non-feminist) critic Gillo Dorfles. The critical erasure of Carol Rama within art history shows us that at any historical moment we can make misguided alliances, have aesthetic tastes that are not in accordance with our political ideals, and participate (through omission, forgetfulness or plain stupidity) in exercises of historiographical censorship. The women situated on the line between the avant-garde and feminism in Italy, such as Giulia Niccolai, Amelia Rosselli, Alice Ceresa in the arts or Teresa de Lauretis in semiotics, survived by leaving the Italian context in which the alliance between critical theory and feminism was denied, and sought other critical networks for their work.¹⁵

Damned Abstraction: Queer *Arte Povera*

Towards the end of the sixties, the Italian arts scene remained totally saturated by the male figures of the *Arte Povera* movement (Alighiero Boetti, Giuseppe Perone, Giulio Paolini, Mario Merz, Pino Pascali, Michelangelo Pistoletto...), with the exception of women like Marisa Merz.¹⁶ These male figures are to the Italian scene what the heroes of Abstract Expressionism and Pop art were to the American and British scenes (from Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning to Richard Hamilton or Robert Rauschenberg).

A woman-without-a-man¹⁷ who was surrounded mainly by homosexuals (the painter Carlo Monzino, the artist and activist Corrado Levi, Guido Carbone, Gianni Vattimo...), Carol Rama remained at the periphery of the Italian art scene in the sixties and seventies. However, it is impossible not to see parallels and resonances with what the Italian critic Germano Celant would call for the first time in 1969 *Arte Povera*. For Celant, *povera* was characterised by the transformation through the artistic process of industrial materials and ordinary consumerism. Furthermore, *Povera*, as opposed to Pop, achieved this without appealing to the iconography of popular culture.¹⁸ Used objects lacking any value (papers, broken plates, wood, stairs, wheels, cartridges, saws...) are recuperated as noble materials with which the artist initiates an immediate and intimate relationship and constructs new forms.

¹⁵ See Lucia Re, 'Gender and Sexuality in the Italian Neo-Avant-Garde', pp. 166–67. See also Graziella Parati and Rebecca West (eds.), *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002.

¹⁶ See Dieter Schwarz, 'The Irony of Marisa Merz', *October*, vol. 124, *Postwar Italian Art* (Spring 2008), pp. 157–68.

¹⁷ Carol Rama speaks about the institution of

marriage in a similar way: 'the idea of marriage or cohabitation has never tempted me. Solitude is liberating'. Interview with Carol Rama conducted by Vera Schiavazzi, 'Ma non chiamatemi artista al femminile', *La Repubblica* (6 March 2004).

¹⁸ Germano Celant, 'Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerilla War', *Flash Art*, no. 5 (1967). Available online.

The elaboration of organic forms, the use of primary matter or industrial materials, the attention to the relation between art and subjectivity, the privileging of popular and traditional craft forms... All of these resources that are characteristic operators of povera are present in the work of Carol Rama. Wouldn't it be possible to approach Rama's *Bricolage* series and the *Presagi di Birnam* (1970) – made with screws, sacks and inner tubing and tyres of a bicycle – as a paradigmatic example of Arte Povera? Celant never included any of them in his review.

Not only did the work of Carol Rama include bicycle tyres, but also prosthetic feet and legs, taxidermy eyes¹⁹, eyelashes, hair, skin, fingernails and teeth, electrical fuses and batteries, medical appliances, enemas, syringes... Somewhere on the road between Povera, Junk Art and Nouveau Réalisme, with Carol Rama painting becomes semen, blood, milk... and the canvas – as with the work *Le siringhe* (1967) – is a body addicted to paint transfusion. Her work is more visceral and dirty than poor. Rama's povera was a queer povera. Carol Rama understood that not only inorganic materials (absorbed by the alienating process of industrial production) should be recuperated by the artist through a new utopian encounter with matter, but also that the body itself (its organs and fluids, which are the objects of biopolitical management and social control) should also be recuperated and subjected to material intervention.

The work of Carol Rama couldn't have been seen in its moment: the frame of intelligibility through which to see her work simply did not exist. What should have been said about Carol Rama never was. There was no discursive regime capable of thinking through her work other than as examples of pornography or outsider art. Carol Rama couldn't become, despite her personal relationships, contemporary to Picasso, Duchamp or Man Ray. She was also denied contemporaneity to Merz or Pistoletto, or Cindy Sherman or Zoe Leonard. Her contemporaneity was always to be post-humous. She exists in a previous future. The work of Carol Rama is a phantom limb whose sensations return in order to reclaim another history. Her own image acquires a ghostly character in her studio, in which a multitude of photographs of the artist in different periods overlap in order to form a temporality outside normative time.

Carol Rama is not contemporary to anyone. And yet, from outside the dominant historiography, she is affirmed as our most absolute *extemporary*. She returns to undo the dominant narratives, reclaiming other discourses and another time. But, are we ready for Carol Rama? Now Rama is almost one hundred years old and has suffered from senile dementia since 2006. Questions about old age, conservation or the loss of memory and death thus become questions about temporality, history and the archive.

¹⁹ These materials came from an embalmer from Milan with whom Rama was in contact.

Interview with Cristina Mundici conducted by Teresa Grandas and the author, April 2013.

It seems outrageous to curate an international exhibition of an artist who has been entirely forgotten by the history of art and who has also almost lost her memory. Normative history of art is the history of our own amnesia – of forgetting everything that we did not know how to look at, of all that has resisted being absorbed by our hegemonic frames of representation. I ask myself if this exhibition could be a means of reconstructing or inventing her memory, or whether our attempt will form part of this great amnesic process that Walter Benjamin has called progress. I ask myself if our actions will be tautological or whether they could be oppositional. I wonder if we are just another moment in this collective forgetting or whether we can open a line of flight – invent another archive.

Discover, Identify... Control, Frame

The second hegemonic strategy of art history, apparently virtuous and therefore much more difficult to critically neutralise, consists of *discovering* the work and re-situating it within the dominant narratives. Here the word *discovery* activates the colonial meaning that this notion had in the language of the sixteenth century when the Spanish arrived in ‘America’. To discover is above all to take possession, to name with the language of power, to territorialise. In 1980, the Italian curator Lea Vergine curated an exhibition at the Giancarlo Salzano gallery in Turin, which presented Carol Rama’s early watercolour work. The same year she included some of her early works in the collective exhibition *L’altra metà dell’avanguardia, 1910–1940*, which brought together the work of more than one hundred women artists.²⁰

In the catalogue, Lea Vergine describes the historiography of women artists as ‘miserably censored’, ‘humiliating year after year’, made from ‘a lie that the recent hypocritical mythology has thrown against them’. Lea Vergine names the artists as ‘genius experimenters’, stating that ‘many of them were Jews, homosexuals, others were not alien to the experience of madness for having passed through the madness of the world: all of these “deviations” together have produced a rich sum of changes’. Lea Vergine complains that many of them have been considered ‘transvestites, camouflaged, deformed, or deviants’.²¹ The exhibition was therefore not about the ‘other side of the avant-garde’ but rather about its constitutive outside.

²⁰ Lea Vergine, *L’Autre Moitié de l’avant-garde, 1910–1940*. Paris: Éditions des Femmes, 1982 [exh. cat.]. Lea Vergine includes Carol Rama under the epigraph ‘anti-twentieth century’ together with Vanessa Bell, Anna Lesznai, Edita Broglio, Maria Grandinetti Mancuso, Jenny

Wiegmann, Deiva de Angelis, Pasquarosa, Maria Morino and Antonietta Raphäel.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 21 and 22. The same catalogue includes a letter that Giovanni Lista, one of the most well-known historians of Italian art, sent to Lea Vergine. It states: ‘the hypothesis of a

We could say then that Lea Vergine ‘discovered’ Carol Rama just like Lucy Lippard ‘discovered’ Louise Bourgeois.²² If it were not, as Griselda Pollock reminds us, for the fact that the very discovery is what ‘defines precisely the created gap between the knowledge allowed within a dominant discourse and that which, existing in its own temporality and history, suddenly re appears as if its own being was only in the eye of the “dominant” beholder’.²³

This ‘discovery’ served once again to invisibilise the work of Carol Rama. This occurred in two ways: on the one hand, the curator ‘recognised’ Rama on the condition of presenting her as a ‘woman’. Secondly, this recognition was based on the presentation of her watercolour works from the thirties and nothing else, which effectively served to eclipse Rama’s later career. According to this historiographical discourse, Carol Rama (who was sixty-two years old at this point) could not even have been contemporary with herself. Curiously the retrospective approval of the watercolours would lead Rama to recover the figurative style and ‘reproduce’ the early motifs of *Dorina* and *Appassionata* which, other than their creative context, appear now as ghostly inscriptions of the trauma of historical erasure. They emerge now as phantom limbs of Rama herself – desperate gestures in search of recognition.

This invisibilising discovery of Rama also functioned as a historiographical recuperation through the relations between the artist and other hegemonic artists. Carol Rama has been historicised in a similar way to Meret Oppenheim, Leonor Fini, Frida Kahlo or Marisa Merz... not through their work but through their anecdotal relationships with ‘their’ men-artists: *Indestructible Object* (1923), which Man Ray gave to her and always remained in her studio; the iron coat hanger bent in the form of a penis, which Picasso gave to her and would serve to hang the rubber in *Presagi di Birnam* (1970), *Movimento e immobilità di Birnam* (1977) or *Sortilegi* (1984); the rare photographs in which she posed beside Warhol. These objects became the icons that prove her anecdotal existence: Carol Rama exists because Man Ray, Picasso, Warhol, Orson Welles or Luis Buñuel exist. However, Rama herself always rejected

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specific feminine component, linked to sexuality and biological nature in general, must still be explored’, p. 25. We should note here that Lista attempts to do ‘justice’ to women’s art. He reaches conclusions such as ‘the woman would find it more difficult to deduce a three-dimensional vision from a two-dimensional drawing...’; ‘The Michaelangelesque connotation of the “genius” creator has conferred a scatological dimension on masculine creation while feminine creation would be carried out at the everyday level, through ornament and

decoration, applying themselves to sewing and patchwork’, p. 25. For Lista, for example, the artist ‘seems to respond to the culturally inappropriate status of her role through negation of their own biological identity: the number of homosexuals is in fact quite high among artists’.

²². With the *Femme-Maison* (1947), printed on the cover of *From the Center* (1976).

²³. See Griselda Pollock, ‘Old Bones and Cocktail Dresses’, p. 83.

the position of muse or disciple: 'I didn't have any painters as masters, the sense of sin is my master.'²⁴

When a work is 'discovered' or unveiled, it is also likely to be subject to eclipse by the third discursive strategy: classifying the artistic work based on the parameters of biopolitical control that seek above all to assign identity. The artist is reduced to their biography, ethnicity, body, sexuality, class or social condition, functional differences, mental health... as if these were universal and stable parameters and not the effect of existing relations establishing the field of visibility and power. This has been until now the only critical frame through which to approach the work of Rama.

The assignation of identity strives, as we have seen, to 'over-feminise' the work of Carol Rama making her work a mere example of 'women's art'. This identification brings with it certain historiographical reductions. To say that Carol Rama is the Italian Bourgeois is as absurd as saying that Frida Kahlo is a Mexican Carol Rama, or that Maria Lassnig is the Austrian Frida Kahlo. It is as if for every 'national' artistic landscape there were only one woman artist who repeats a series of 'marginal' gestures relating to the 'feminine' body and its traumas. This of course operates as both an anomaly and as a confirmation of the male rule by exception. According to this strategy of reducing to the feminine it would then also be true that Oskar Kokoschka, Antonin Artaud, Marcel Duchamp, Francis Bacon or Bruno Gironcoli are Carol Ramas to whom historiography granted the opportunity to be contemporary with their own time.

The historiographical inclusion of Rama the phantom limb into the history of art did not occur until the awarding of the Golden Lion prize for her career at the Venice Biennale in 2003. Carol Rama was then eighty-five years old. 'I suppose even nowadays someone might find my work too explicit, but I'm not interested in stupid people. The world, after all, has always paid little attention to my art... When I think of the attention I've been getting these last few years – since I won the Golden Lion award two years ago at the Venice Biennale, and so late in my career – I feel sadness. It leaves me somewhat stunned: all of this now!?'²⁵ The following year Achille Bonito Oliva, Gillo Dorfles and Marco Vallora commissioned her first retrospective exhibition in the Fondazione Sandretto. Her work finally entered into the market and the museum. The predictions made by the Guerrilla Girls came true in this case. These are 'the advantages of being a woman artist': 'Knowing your career might pick up after you're eighty; being reassured that whatever kind of art you make it will be labeled "feminine"; being included in revised versions of art history.'²⁶

²⁴ Kirsty Bell, 'Carol Rama', *Frieze*, no. 124 (June–August 2009).

²⁵ Interview with Carol Rama, 'Crazy Life',

The Walrus (March 2005).

²⁶ Guerrilla Girls, 'The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist', 1988, poster. Available online

The work of Carol Rama was also the object of what we could call a psychopathological reduction. Throughout the nineteenth century and a large part of the twentieth, the art produced by sexual and political minorities and those of functional and cognitive diversity have been strained by epistemological-political taxonomies. Non-academic or popular art has always been considered artisan, applied arts, folkloric. The art of sexual minorities has been classified as naïve, kitsch, theatre, transvestism, fetishism or pornography; the art of racial minorities has been read as black, indigenous or aborigine; the art of non-western cultures as simple ethnographic material; the art of the cognitive and functionally diverse as clinical pathology, outsider art or art therapy.

As is the case with Claude Cahun, Louise Bourgeois, Frida Kahlo, Helen Frankenthaler, Berthe Morisot, Georgia O'Keeffe or Maria Lassnig, the image of Carol Rama oscillates between the cultural tropes of the perverted child, the butch, the hysteric, the lesbian, the monster, the woman-without-children, the nymphomaniac, the old witch.²⁷ Carol Rama has been historicised as 'pornographic', 'mentally ill', 'fetishised' and 'sexually deviant'.

The few critical texts that comment on the work of Rama are as unjustified as they are paradoxical: Carol Rama is described as both histrionically female and indecently phallic, infantile and tenaciously old, a totally mysterious figure and unashamedly theatrical, obsessively sexual and rigidly frigid, a whore but also a pagan virgin. With her early watercolour work when she was young, the artist was classified as immature and pornographic. Later, after she passed forty years old, she became suddenly unruly and grotesque.

The critic and Italian curator Achille Bonito Oliva described the work of Carol Rama as invested in an 'infantile condition' – an effect of 'imitation' or 'feminine affection and narcissism'.²⁸ Her work was characterised as 'aggressive Expressionism'.²⁹ David Rhodes described her work as marked by 'her troubled erotic subject matter'.³⁰ He affirms that 'Bourgeois had her spiders – and Rama evidently has her

at www.guerrilla.girls.com. See also Roger Clark, Ashley R. Folgo and Jane Pichette, 'Have There Now Been Any Great Women Artists? An Investigation of the Visibility of Women Artists in Recent Art History Textbooks', *Art Education*, vol. 58, no. 3 (May 2005), pp. 6–13.

²⁷ See Griselda Pollock, 'Old Bones and Cocktail Dresses', p. 91. 'Veers unstably between cultural tropes of older woman and child.'

²⁸ In his 1994 introduction to a retrospective of her work, Achille Bonito Oliva, one of Italy's

most respected contemporary critics, described Rama's practice in painfully stereotypical terminology, using terms such as "childish condition", "imitation", "feminine affection" and "narcissism". Jennifer Griffiths, 'Erotically Engaged: Carol Rama's Politically Defiant Bodies', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 41 (Autumn 2013), p. 79.

²⁹ *Quando l'arte non era ancora povera, Torino tra 50 et 60*. Turin: Neos Edizione, 2008, p. 62.

³⁰ David Rhodes, 'Carol Rama: Spazio anche più che tempo', *The Brooklyn Rail* (4 October,

bicycle inner tubes'. Alfred Hickling repeats the same comparison in *The Guardian*, not hesitating to call her 'a bit of a mad old bird'.³¹

This clinical historiography is always supported in the biographical stories as psychopathological evidence. Most of the critical commentaries about Carol Rama repeat the same event: her mother, Marta Pugliara, was admitted to a psychiatric sanatorium between 1936 and 1940. Her father, an industrial producer of bicycles went bankrupt and committed suicide in 1942. As Pollock states, 'the problem with psychobiography... is that it is both bad art history and bad psychoanalysis'.³² The insistence of biography as clinical explanation of the work 'serves only to feminise (the artist) as a psychological malady and turn us all into voyeurs'.³³ All of the commentators forget that biography is always a fictional narrative: one possible story in a discursive field determined by the somatopolitical norm.

Talking with her friends, collectors and gallerists, another version of the story emerges, another rumour that is impossible to verify: Rama's father was a homosexual and led a double life. The dishonour that it would have meant to be a homosexual among the bourgeoisie in Turin in the forties would have been much worse than financial ruin. Many say that Carol Rama was bisexual; others say that her relationship with sex was 'abstract'. Many say that it was Man Ray who suggested she wear the large braid around her head, a typical look throughout her later life. Others attribute the braid to Cicciolina... The biography spiral could be infinite...

It is important to go beyond this 'clinical' reading of Carol Rama, which explains her work as a symptom of deviant femininity or psychological pathology. It is necessary to rethink the relations between trauma and memory, historiography and biography, norm and fiction, event and testimony. It is necessary to move on from historicising 'women artists' and seek out a transfeminist critical intervention into the historiographical apparatus of art: we need to step beyond thinking in terms of women's art, homosexual art, non-Western art or art produced by those with mental health issues. Instead we have to think about how art has functioned historically and politically as a technology of production of subjectivity, of normalisation but also resistance. We are not simply calling here for a post-feminist methodology that would make it necessary or obsolete to think about sexual difference, but rather to produce a somatopolitical epistemology that calls into question the way in which the sexual difference of

2012), on the occasion of the exhibition at Isabella Bortolozzi Galerie, Berlin, 11 September – 13 October 2012.

³¹ Alfred Hickling, 'Carol Rama', *The Guardian* (25 January 2005).

³² See Griselda Pollock, 'Old Bones and Cocktail

Dresses', p. 88. 'The problem with psychobiography which has in recent years progressively afflicted the slightly enlarging field of Louise Bourgeois studies is that it is both bad art history and bad psychoanalysis.'

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

man/woman is capable of defining the symbolic and political order leaving all other differences (of class, racial, sexual or functional diversity or of age) in the background.

It is necessary to defeminise, defolkloricise, defetishise, depathologise and depornographise Carol Rama. It is no longer possible to impose the opposition of masculine-phallic/feminine-maternal as a hermeneutic frame through which to read art work (as Rosalind Krauss, Marie-Laure Bernadac or Hélène Cixous often do when reading the work of Louise Bourgeois, Frida Kahlo or Nancy Spero). It is necessary to question the universal validity of the hermeneutic apparatus of psychoanalysis and its heterocentric narrative, as well as the universality of the tropes of sexual difference, of maternity and of the phallus, which have dominated the criticism of art of 'women', from Kristeva to Irigaray to the Lacanian uses of 'the feminine' that have prevailed in the writing produced during the eighties and nineties.

It is no longer enough to apply the analysis of the 'masculine gaze' popularised by Laura Mulvey. Carol Rama reclaims a wider analysis between corporeality and the politics of the gaze. Following Michel Foucault, T. Benjamin Singer proposes that it is necessary to speak of the 'disciplinary gaze', which determines the visual space in which bodies come to be seen as either normal or pathological.³⁴

Dorinas and Appassionatas: Antifascist Bodies

Carol Rama invents a desiring political body that resists the ideals of gender, sex and health imposed by Mussolini's fascist Italy throughout the forties, which remained in place after the end of the Second World War.³⁵

At the time of the censorship of Rama's watercolours, the Italian art scene (whose best examples were the futurist pavilion at the Universal Chicago Exhibition *A Century of Progress* in 1933 and the Italian pavilion at the New York World Fair in 1940) was eclectic and reflected the political contradictions of the avant-garde modernisms. On one hand there was a return to regionalism and the values of rural life embodied in a pictorial naturalism. On the other hand, the strategies unique to Futurism were also present: abstraction, speed and technology. Both tendencies were united in the common values of the 'fascist ethos': the transformation of history into mythology, the elevation of the landscape, the machine and the family as material signs of the collective body of the nation. The fascist programme also

³⁴ T. Benjamin Singer, 'From the Medical Gaze to *Sublime Mutations*: The Ethics of (Re)Viewing Non-Normative Body Images' in Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (eds), *The Transgender Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 601–20.

³⁵ Jennifer Griffiths, 'Erotically Engaged', p. 79. 'Celebrating bodies and pushing back against Fascist ideals of womanhood.' Catherine de Zegher and Jennifer Griffiths were the first to highlight this relation between Carol Rama and fascism.

required the praise of *la italianità*³⁶ (the essence of being Italian) and *schiettezza* (a frankness of character), all of which Mussolini considered to be reflections of a true Latin or ‘Mediterranean’ identity (and actively opposed to the abstract experiments of the communist avant-garde).³⁷

Mussolini’s government had passed a law in 1926 in defence of the regulation of publications and art exhibitions in order to protect ‘public decency’.³⁸ These measures of restriction of representation and speech in public space came with a series of biopolitical actions designed to redefine the national body through the control of women and sexual, cognitive and functional minorities.

As Griffiths has shown, ‘with its motto “everything in the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state” the Fascist government in Italy legitimised its intrusion into the lives of citizens. Fascism labelled non-standard bodies enemies of society while the practice of defining and disciplining individual bodies and sexualities became fundamental to building social consensus and national identity.’³⁹ The body of the woman, but also that of other somatopolitical minorities (‘inferior races’, ‘mentally ill’, ‘homosexuals’, ‘deficient’, ‘abnormal’ and ‘foreign’), became very quickly the material onto which the distinct governmental techniques of the sovereign law of the nation state were inscribed.

At the ninth congress for the International Woman Suffrage Alliance in 1923, Mussolini promised the vote only to ‘certain categories of women’: mothers, heads of families and widows of the veterans of war.⁴⁰ In 1929 his government secured relations with the church by signing a treaty with the Vatican. In one of its encyclicals on social issues the Pope XI blames the ‘weakening of national leadership of the paternal authority’ on the collapse of the Italian family.⁴¹ The encyclical *Casti connubii* of 1931 affirmed the position of women in society as wives and mothers.⁴² The law dictated by Mussolini in the same year tightened the punishment on abortions: the control and surveillance of sexual reproduction was officially affirmed.⁴³

³⁶ Sergio Cortesi, ‘Italian Painters and Fascist Myths across the American Scene’, *American Art*, vol. 25, no. 1 (Spring 2011), p. 58

³⁷ See Benito Mussolini’s public speech of 25 October 1932 in Milan, in Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce, vol. 1. Gli anni del consenso (1929–1936)*. Turin: Einaudi, 1974, p. 308.

³⁸ Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992, p. 55.

³⁹ Jennifer Griffiths, ‘Erotically Engaged’, p. 79.

⁴⁰ Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, p. 31. Alexander De Grand, ‘Women Under

Italian Fascism’, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 19, no. 4 (December 1976), p. 954.

⁴¹ Joseph Husslein (ed.), ‘Ubi arcano dei consilio’, *Social Wellsprings: Eighteen Encyclicals of Social Reconstruction by Pope Pius XI*, vol. II. Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1942, p. 8.

⁴² ‘Casti connubii’, *Social Wellsprings*, *ibid.*, pp. 150–51.

⁴³ See George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality. Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe*. New York: Howard Fertig, 1985.

In fascism, women remain excluded from the political realm, paid employment and education.⁴⁴ For Mussolini, female emancipation and the low levels of sexual reproduction were the main cause of ‘national decline’, against which the dictator had to fight as if it were a war inside the nation. Within national-catholic discourse only maternity and domesticity were acceptable for the social and political codification of women.⁴⁵ In his parliamentary speech on 26 May 1934, Mussolini declared ‘war is for man what maternity is for woman’.⁴⁶ The nation was constructed on these two fronts: the field of battle and the sexual and reproductive body. Bourgeois women and their tastes for independence and the decline of the national birth rate in cities such as Turin and Milan became the object of a campaign of fascist sensibilisation.⁴⁷ The solutions proposed by fascism for this ‘national problem’ were imperial expansion in Africa, the ruralisation of the population, the domestication of women and the increase in birth rate figures. The maternal, white, beautiful, healthy and reproductive feminine body became the biopolitical factory of the nation and had to be controlled and kept safe from degeneration or racial contamination. The Italian woman was the mother of fascism.⁴⁸ This sexist and racist politics became a patriotic obligation throughout the invasions of Ethiopia in 1935 and 1936 and the colonial war in 1938.

Throughout the thirties, the government of Mussolini implemented a series of institutional reforms designed to ‘better the nation’, inspired by Francis Galton’s eugenic practices, which were destined to eradicate those bodies in the population that were considered bearers of defects. In this inventory of the unacceptable body we find the mentally ill and the sexually deviant as well as the physically or psychologically deficient. These are precisely the sick and institutionalised bodies that the work of Carol Rama visibilises and celebrates through a vitalist and sexualised representation, which serves to reclaim them as political subjects who act and experience pleasure.

Carol Rama’s Somatheque

The work of Carol Rama, like Antonin Artaud, Francis Bacon, Louise Bourgeois or Bruno Gironcoli, neither expresses nor represents the body, but rather manages to make it visible as a ‘somatheque’: a biopolitical apparatus. Here the notion of ‘somatheque’ seeks to displace traditional metaphysics whereby form and matter are opposed as they are in the Western medical-anatomical tradition that approaches

⁴⁴ Nicola Pende, ‘Maternità, estetica e salute femminile’, *Maternità ed infanzia* (December 1934).

⁴⁵ Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, p. 53.

⁴⁶ *Scritti e discorsi di Benito Mussolini. 1934*, vol. 9. Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, p. 98. Cited in Jennifer

Griffiths, ‘Erotically Engaged’, p. 81.

⁴⁷ Alexander De Grand, ‘Women Under Italian Fascism’, p. 957.

⁴⁸ La donna madre del fascismo’, *Critica fascista* (1 June 1931).

the body exclusively as an empirical object. In this context the notion of ‘somatheque’ allows an understanding of the body as a living political archive: a biohistorical tapestry traversed by flows (blood, semen, milk, but also glucose, petroleum, text, power, image, desire, electricity...). These flows ultimately exceed the individual body and form part of a wider political and economic management.

The body that Carol Rama constructs and represents is no longer the anatomical system nor the pornographic icon, but rather a somatopolitical apparatus traversed by desires, fluids and energies. Carol Rama shows how the somatheque, as opposed to the body regulated by modernity’s forms of hypostasis, is an open system, a process, a practice, a social and political technique connected to other animal or human systems – living or dead, organic or machine.

In *Appassionata* (1940), for example, the body (naked apart from shoes) lies in a bed from which restriction belts have been hung. A structure built from the interlocking and intertwining of mattress springs floats in the background of the painting. We could say that this structure is the product of the schematic application of some of the visual laws of Cubism, which Carol Rama has modified through the introduction of the variable affect. *Cubism-Affection*, we could call it with Deleuze.⁴⁹ This form is the result of the extraction of the image from its space-time coordinates and its transformation into *percept and affect*. This floating structure is both madness and the system of imprisonment that it is subjected to. Rama draws a map of the subconscious and its relationship to the apparatuses of control that both produce and repress madness. The physical body, a pink silhouette lying on a white surface, is a two-dimensional plane onto which the mechanical system and fascist society construct and control the somatic apparatus. pp. 82–83

In another *Appassionata* (1940), the body – with amputated arms and legs – is presented naked and prostrate on a vertical plane with wheels. The feminist readings of these representations have always read in them a figure of feminine imprisonment and approached these works as images of the ‘static isolation of woman’⁵⁰ or the ‘misery of captivity’.⁵¹ Once again, we must begin to approach the art of Rama not as a symptom of a feminine pathology, but as an active exercise of resistance to the imposition of norms that subjugate the political and dissident body. Here, just like the floating structure of springs, the space-time of the wheels is distorted as if it were viewed simultaneously from a multiplicity of perspectives. This multiplication of perceptive positions does not however produce the sensation of movement (as in p. 76

⁴⁹ See Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logic of Sensation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

⁵⁰ Jennifer Griffiths, ‘Erotically Engaged’, p. 84.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

the work of Muybridge or Boccioni), suggesting instead incorporation: the wheels and the footrest have become prosthetic organs and limbs. In the centre of the image and against the faint colour of the body, the chromatic vivacity of the head-garden, erect tongue and vulva stand out – they are represented as external organs and not as orifices. In normative biopolitics, the body should be dead, but here it is alive. It should be asexual, but here it is desiring.

From Fetishism to Counter-sexual Desire

It would be an epistemological and political error to read the work of Carol Rama through the concepts of fetishism, which were articulated by the normative psychiatry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We could say it once and for all: the work of Carol Rama is not fetishist, nor zoophilic, nor voyeuristic, nor necrophiliac...

The term ‘fetish’ (*feticio*) appeared for the first time in the language of the Portuguese colonisers in 1552 and was used to describe the objects used in the religious practices and cultures of African tribes. African cultures were thought of as heretical and were subjected to the laws of the Inquisition. ‘Fetishism’ would later become an ethnological notion in the travel writing of the French colonialist Charles de Brosses. He used the concept to label ‘the most primitive state of religious rationality in which the believer substitutes divinity for an object’. Kant and Hegel would later use de Brosses’ descriptions of ‘primitivism’ to refer to the ‘religions of the object’ in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793) and *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (1831) respectively. The same notion reappears in 1842 when Marx uses it to discuss the ‘fetishism of the market’: for Marx, fetishism is a capitalist pathology that prevents the worker from recognising the market as a result of their own exploitation. Later, Alfred Binet coined the psychopathological and sexual definition in *Le Fetichisme dans l’amour* (1887). For Binet, the loving fetishist is a mentally ill patient who displaces the genital and reproductive organs with a material object (living or even inanimate: a nose or a shoe) to which they dedicate some form of sexual adoration. Krafft-Ebing reclaimed this definition and it would appear once again in 1927 with Freud: culturally it is necessary to repress fetishism, concludes Freud, because it would call into question the stable relationship between the genital and sexual organs. Without repression of fetishism, every organ would be potentially sexual. The notion of fetishism translates then as the attempt to pathologise any kind of religious or sexual practice that exceeds the limit of colonial reason and the heterocentric libidinal economy. To say that the work of Carol Rama is fetishist is to confine it once again to this normative logic.

Somatopolitical ('crip'⁵² and transfeminist) and schizo-analytic criticism offer more appropriate frames for understanding the work of Carol Rama than psycho-analysis or normative feminism. Defetishising the work of Rama implies first moving beyond the genital, gender and sexual binaries. It means saving it from the conceptual sovereignty of Oedipus. This is not about 'empty shoes that become phalluses and shovels that become vulvae (*Le palette*, 1940)', or 'shaving brushes that are transformed into clumps of pubic hair (*Gli scopini*, 1937)', 'dentures that are prosthetic devices reborn as *vagina dentata*'⁵³ or punctured rubber tyres that are actually flaccid penises. If this were the case, the work of Carol Rama would be reduced to a semantic translation – a 'linguistic game' which would not affect the dominant sexual grammar.⁵⁴ This would mean reducing Carol Rama's wild exercise of widening the dominion of sexuality to the logic of sexual difference or the regime of heteronormative pleasure. It is necessary to escape the tautological system of the Lacanian phallus: penises are not phalluses, they are penises. The snakes are not phalluses, they are snakes. The bicycle tyres are not phalluses, they are bicycle tyres. The shoes are not phalluses, they are shoes. These are not fetishes: they are somatopolitical organs. These objects and organs are not phallic metaphors nor displaced perverse fetishes: they are anti-patriarchal operators that come to de-gender the body, de-genitalise sex and liberate sexuality from religious and state authority. For sexuality is also a theory of forms – a visual and perceptive regime, a mode of understanding the body and its relation with an object, a disposition between inside and outside, a spatial installation. Here there is no pornography because these images cannot function like simple normative masturbatory supports.

Resist the translation to the economy of sexual difference. Provoke a counter-sexual displacement: the shoes and the brush, the shovel and the dentures could conceivably function as synthetic extensions of the inorganic body; counter-sexual organs capable of undoing the normative rituals of sexuality. This is why Rama's language is so threatening. While one of the gestures which characterise the Dadaist and Surrealist transformation of the object is its anthropomorphic sexualisation,⁵⁵ we could say that in the case of Carol Rama this operation questions the stability of sexual and gender assignations. If a semantic translation is possible, it could actually

⁵² The term 'crip' theory brings together a series of political discourses of critique of bodily, functional and cognitive normality. See: Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory. Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.

⁵³ Jennifer Griffiths, 'Erotically Engaged', p. 84. 'Empty shoes become phalluses, shovels be-

come vulvae, shaving brushes transform into clumps of pubic hair, and dentures are prosthetic devices reborn as *vagina dentata*.'

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 84.

⁵⁵ Jennifer Griffiths states: 'Gendered anthropomorphizing of objects was a common theme in Dada and Surrealism,' *ibid.*, p. 85.

occur in reverse. The shoe and the brush are not penises: and yet the penis could function as a shoe or a brush. That is, it could cease to be a normative genital organ in order to become a functional object in daily life – an object in which to walk, or an object with which to paint. In the same way, the shovel and dentures are not vaginas. However, understanding the somatheque as an *opera aperta*, the vulva could cease to be a penetrable and reproductive organ and become an excavating shovel or a chewing denture. We could say, paraphrasing Deleuze and Guattari: the bicycle inner tubing and the anus are the heart of the question. The question then is, given a certain effect, which body or machine can produce it? And given a certain body, or machine, what can it be used for?⁵⁶ In the capitalist economy, penises, breasts, tongues, rubber and shoes are exchangeable. All of them are desiring appendices and producers: of meaning, word-flows, semen, blood, milk, speed, energy, pleasure.

Animalism: ‘The Mad Cow is Me’

Throughout the nineties, when Carol Rama sought a place of identification, the artist refrained from appealing to figures of femininity and instead explored the figure of the animal infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy: mad cow disease. The mad cow occupied her last period of production in an obsessive way. The characteristic Rama motifs and use of materials (the rubber, the hessian of postal sacks, the breasts, tongues, penises, dentures...) are now reorganised in an abstract ‘*teatrino*’⁵⁷ to form a dislocated anatomy that no longer constitutes a body. Despite that, Rama would describe these non-figurative works as self-portraits: ‘These are extraordinary self-portraits; extraordinary not because they are beautiful, but the idea of these tits and bull dicks, this way of seeing the anatomy of everybody in shared parts, extreme.’⁵⁸ The artist affirms, ‘The mad cow is me, and this has given me a joy, an extraordinary joy.’⁵⁹

The proximity between the human and animal that Carol Rama brings out clearly in her work is not metaphorical. The outbreak of mad cow disease, which can be transmitted to humans, revealed humans’ biocultural, ritualistic, economic and sexual links with the animal. The epidemic appeared in the United Kingdom in 1986 as a bovine variation of the human illness Creutzfeldt-Jakob. This is a disease of the central nervous system caused by the mutation of a gene that changes the form of

⁵⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*. New York: Viking, 1977.

⁵⁷ A reference to the work *Teatrino n. 3* (1938), formed by a series of sectioned organs and a bird; see p. 68 in this publication.

⁵⁸ Interview with Carol Rama conducted by Corrado Levi and Filippo Fossati, Turin, 1996, reproduced in this publication, p. 235.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

a protein: this in turn affects the neural cells and they begin to disintegrate and die. The brain ends up literally full of holes, producing a gradual disconnection of the nervous system.

If in microcellular terms the epidemic was a question of forms – cellular aesthetics – etiologically this was rather a question of zoopolitical rites, a biosocial theatricality. The epidemic allowed for the discovery of a circuit of animal–human cannibalism generated by the food industry and the ‘animal industry complex’ that had been developed since the end of the Second World War.⁶⁰ After controversial scientific research, it was determined that the origin of the illness was a result of the inclusion of the remains of sheep, goat and even cattle meat in animal feed. Between 1998 and 2000, images of trembling cows foaming from the mouth appeared on televisions all over the world. Later, the world watched the slaughterhouses where the animal feed was produced: in the foreground images of meat transformed into dust. Then it was the microscopic images of the infected neurones. And finally the culling and mass incineration of animals. It is not just Carol Rama who is the mad cow: humanity is the mad cow.

We have transformed vegetarian animals into carnivorous cannibals. And we ‘humans’ were the last guests at this sacrificial banquet. Through an analysis of the relations between the visible and meat, the ecofeminist Carol J. Adams speaks of a ‘pornography of meat’, referring to the (visual, sexual but also gastronomical) logic of the representation–production of the animal body as consumable in heteropatriarchal societies.⁶¹ Carol J. Adams and anti-species activist Ami Hamlin refer to the gastronomic sexualisation of the animal and the pornographic representation of meat as the effect of an ‘anthropornographic’ visual system in which the dead body of the animal is represented as an object of sexual desire.⁶² The feminine body is meat and animal meat is a body that has been feminised by the normative heterosexual gaze. It is this cannibal chain and its biocultural links of blood relations, desire, power and violence that Rama highlights in her work.

This consciousness of animal-being-to-be-consumed was already present in 1980 when Carol Rama revisited the figure of Dorina in her work *La macelleria* (1980),^{P. 206} only this time the artist transforms her into a butcher. Represented with the face of a swine, the Dorina-butcher is an animal-human version of both Goya’s *Saturno devorando a un hijo* (Saturn Devouring his Son) and Pasolini’s *Medea*. This is

⁶⁰ Carol J. Adams, “‘Mad Cow’ Disease and the Animal Industrial Complex: An Ecofeminist Analysis”, *Organization & Environment*, vol. 10, no. 1 (March 1997), pp. 26–51. See also Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist*

Vegetarian Critical Theory. London: Continuum, 2000.

⁶¹ Carol J. Adams, *The Pornography of Meat*. London: Continuum, 2003.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 109.

the passion according to Carol Rama: the necropolitical urge to devour in order to possess, all the while knowing that we are devouring ourselves.

In Carol Rama, the mad cow is the post-human figure of hysteria. Just as disciplinary modernity made the feminine body hysterical, in late twentieth-century pharmacopornographic societies it is the animal that is constructed as hysterical. The trembles of the cows shaking their large udders, filmed in European slaughterhouses, are like the hysterical spasms photographed in the Salpêtrière by Charcot's photographic team. The mad cow is also another image of AIDS: Anselmino, the boyfriend of Giorgio Marin and a good friend of Carol Rama, died of AIDS around this time. Where the exclusion and death of those with AIDS was presented as a hygienic prevention strategy, the mad cow outbreak instead allows the discovery of the violence of contemporary necropolitics. As Roberto Esposito highlights, the technologies of immunisation destroy life in the name of life: it is not life that is being protected here, but rather the political idea of sovereignty, independence and autonomy in which the (central European) human should be defended against the threat of the contagious animal.⁶³ Lastly, the incineration of animals inevitably recall the Nazi concentration camps and racial extermination where the notion of 'purity of blood' determined the political paradigm. Against all of these figures, the work of Carol Rama functions as a material and artistic exorcism.

Here, it is not Bataille who is the main reference, for this is not only about showing the affective and visual proximity between spasm and orgasm, between eroticism and death. In a single gesture, Carol Rama overtakes Bataille and Simone de Beauvoir on the left. Mocking the imposition of the human/animal, masculine/feminine, healthy/ill binaries, the artist seems to be affirming a radical animalism in the face of the normative fictions of human, masculine and healthy... There is no humanism in the feminism of Carol Rama. Carol Rama affirms the radical historical pre-eminence of the animal, the feminine, illness and death – all embodied in the figure of the dying cow. The animalism of Carol Rama is an expanded and non-anthropocentric feminism.

⁶³ Roberto Esposito, *Bios. Biopolitics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2008, pp. 120–21.