

## THE REST CAN GO TO HELL

### Other Possible Tales of Carol Rama and Turin

*Teresa Grandas*

Carol Rama has lived most of her life in an apartment on Via Napione by the river Po in Turin, her birthplace. A space of black walls, black curtains and closed windows, filled with objects, photographs and memories. According to the writer Nico Orengo it is similar to a ‘camera oscura’ or a theatre constructed by the artist; an archive of materials that have accompanied her throughout her life and nourish her work and her biographical journey.<sup>1</sup> In a wonderful article, Corrado Levi recounts Carol’s explanations of some of the objects that she kept and the small stories that each of them retains: a typewriter from her father’s factory, presents from friends, the clothes she wore the first time she went to the opera... ‘objects that I love very much, which are present when I work so that the painting turns out well’.<sup>2</sup> There are hundreds of possible stories in this living, dark and hermetic home, which keep her away from the city and which live on in her.

In the early twentieth century, Turin was a great industrial capital where almost three quarters of the population were workers.<sup>3</sup> Metal – including car and aeronautical factories – constituted a major part of industrial production. At the same time, the city was the birthplace of big banks and the food manufacturing industry, as well as a main centre of cinema production.<sup>4</sup> Carol Rama was born on 17 April 1918, just before the so-called Biennio Rosso (1919–20) – a period marked by popular

1. *Carol Rama. Di più, ancora di più*, (Television programme) RaiSat Art, 2003. Project directed by Simone Pierini and produced by Mitzi Boidi Sotis in collaboration with Maria Cristina Mundici.

2. Corrado Levi, ‘Del come da un registratore in casa di Carol Rama uscirono cose straordinarie con un incontro a sorpresa. Nastri di Corrado Levi’, *Domus*, no. 659, (March 1985), pp. 32–37.

3. See the report by Antonio Gramsci ‘Il movimento torinese dei consigli di fabbrica’ (The Turin Factories Councils movement), sent to the executive International Communist

Committee, July 1920 (subsequently published in *L’Ordine Nuovo*, 14 March 1921). Available online in Spanish at [www.gramsci.org.ar/2/19.htm](http://www.gramsci.org.ar/2/19.htm). The metalworking sector counts had than 50,000 workers and an extra 10,000 technical employees had their own trade union (FIOM, Federación Italiana de Trabajadores del Metal).

4. In the automotive field the family business Fiat was founded in 1899 and would spread their factories throughout the other industrial centres of northern Italy. The main office was in Turin. Others are Lancia (founded in 1906), the SPA-

revolts led by the socialists and anarchists. Throughout these years, strikes paralysed industrial activity while go-slows led by other groups aimed to maintain production. This was the time of workers' occupations of factories, the formation of the Red Guard units and the Factory Workers Councils (which many witnesses have described with great enthusiasm).<sup>5</sup> This was when Antonio Gramsci edited the magazine *L'Ordine Nuovo*. Initially there was a widely held belief that it was really possible to transform the processes of production and break with capitalism and the bourgeois hegemony. However, after the police evictions, suddenly the differing factions within the workers movement itself became evident and the attempt to initiate a self-regulating market was shown to have failed. The climate of distrust on the part of the bourgeoisie toward the workers' movement ultimately aided the rise to power of the fascists. Fascism came to power not only through violence, but also by taking advantage of the crisis in the workers' movement and supported by the blessing of economic power, made up of big industry and the service and distribution sectors which consolidated their position through tying into consumption in the growing urban sprawls.<sup>6</sup>

Carol Rama came from a comfortable bourgeois industrial family. She deeply admired her father, Amabile, 'who was an exceptional man and industrial inventor (and thanks to that, money and privileges)'.<sup>7</sup> Carol Rama has explained that her father had a bicycle and car factory.<sup>8</sup> In some of her work from the seventies she

Società Piemontese Automobili (1905), Chiribiri (1911), Diatto (1905) and SIT (1912). In the aeronautical field there was Fiat Aviazione (since 1908), also Chiribiri and SIA, Società Italiana Aviazione (1914) and Società Anonima per Costruzioni Aeronautiche Ing. Ottorino Pomilio (1916). Most of them were to turn to military production at the beginning of the Second World War. In the financial field the main bank was Istituto Bancario Sanpaolo. In the food industry there was the chocolate company Gianduiotto or the industrial production of biscottis Wammar. As for film, at the beginning of the twentieth century there were five cinematic production companies in Turin (Ambrosio Film, Aquila Film, Itala Film, Pasquali Film and Savoia Film, with the addition of Studio Fert in 1919) as well as a large number of picture houses.

<sup>5</sup> See the testimony of Pietro Nenni, who speaks with some fascination on the subject, or the

then secretary of the PSI Egidio Gennari (who complained about the lack of control over the situation) which have been collected in Diego Carrasco, 'Luchas obreras. Turin 1920', *El Viejo Topo*, no. 5 (February 1977).

<sup>6</sup> See *Torino tra le due guerre*. Turin: Città di Torino. Advice by Cultura-Musei Civici, Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna, Borgo San Paolo and Scuola Media Statale di Via Vigone 72, March–June 1978 [exh. cat.].

<sup>7</sup> Declarations of Carol Rama in Lea Vergine, 'L'angoscia è un trip', *Carol Rama*. Milán: Mazzotta Editore, Sagrato del Duomo, 29 May – 28 July 1985 [exh. cat.].

<sup>8</sup> Although Gianna Besson believes that, as well as manufacturing bicycles, Amabile Rama was a supplier for automobilistic prototypes, not actually a manufacturer. See Gianna Besson, *Carol Rama. Casta sfrontata stella. Biografia corale di un'artista extra-ordinaria*. Turin: Prinp Editoria d'Arte, 2012.

makes allusions to the family factory, using rubber from the inner tubes and wheels of a bicycle, which she assimilated into her work as a kind of human skin. The economic crisis of the twenties caused the company to close in the middle of the decade and the family was bankrupted. In an interview she explains that ‘at eight years old I began to understand that the island of happiness does not exist. Not because I suffered from contempt. Rather I had fallen into disgrace precisely in the environment that once favoured me’.<sup>9</sup> Her mother, Marta Pugliaro, began to produce fur garments in response to the family economic problems. The fur and the presence of dead animals would also be a recurring element in her work. In the same interview she comments ‘then, my mother became ill, etc., etc. I would visit her in the psychiatric hospital. It was then that I began to make indecent drawings’. From time to time, Rama recounts that when she was ten or eleven her mother became ill and was sent to hospital, although the details are not known. She also explains that when she was twelve she went to see someone – one supposes her mother – in a psychiatric unit almost every day and there she found freedom in the people who were staying there: always with their mouths open and the tongues hanging out in alienation. In 1942 her father committed suicide, ‘destroyed by a spiral of misunderstandings. He was at breaking point, practically a beggar.’<sup>10</sup> This was a death produced by the inability to overcome the social stigma of ruin and the personal problems causing this spiral of misunderstandings. Carol Rama has described the experience as a kind of ‘amputation’: ‘Private circumstances led me to a situation of amputation and psychological loss... I understood then that I obeyed a mechanism for repeating pain that, seen retrospectively, reveals itself as the emergence of pain, happiness and death at once.’<sup>11</sup>

She began to paint as a therapeutic process, a form of healing that allowed her to expurgate all that transgresses through her work: ‘I only feel safe when I am standing in front of a blank sheet. It is the only thing that relieves my fears. Painting is my transgression.’ In 1981, in a meeting of students at the Faculty of Architecture in Milan, she explained ‘above all I paint in order to cure myself; if the person who views the work also makes a connection, it is possible that they will also be cured. When I speak of being cured, I speak of a venial curing for having fornicated without limit in a world of fears.’<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup>. Declarations of Carol Rama in Lea Vergine, ‘L’angoscia è un trip’.

<sup>10</sup>. Lea Vergine, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>. In a conversation with Manuela Grassi, 1986. In *Edoardo Sanguineti. Carol Rama*. Turin:

Franco Masoero Edizioni d’Arte, 2002, p. 100.

<sup>12</sup>. Carol Rama, conference to the students of Corrado Levi, ‘Omaggio a l’Ospite il 25 March 1981’, Faculty of Architecture in Milan.

A self-taught artist, it seems she began to paint because of an anger crisis, influenced by Felice Casorati, working in a city where artistic activities mainly followed bland figurative styles.<sup>13</sup> However, Carol Rama broke with this straitjacketing script and began to make watercolours and drawings of characters that often took the name of family members or friends: Marta, Amabile, la Nonna Carolina, Dorina, Appassionata. She draws bodies in hospital beds; figures strapped in with restrictive belts in wheelchairs; bodies that masturbate, shit and fornicate; mutilated and amputated bodies; prosthetic limbs; extremities, tongues, penises, snakes and all kinds of phalluses; animal skins and shoes. ‘I love the fetishes, the sex, dreamt and fantastical sex, objects of use capable of giving pleasure. They call for the role of the disconcerting and the erotic in daily life.’<sup>14</sup> They are especially harsh works, despite their likeable presentation, which emerged at the height of fascism, in a conservative and Catholic context. This Catholicism had been a part of Rama’s attempts to exorcise the errors of her father in her teenage years, but she ultimately shunned religion as a form of liberation: ‘To sin is one of the most important things in life... ; to sin is one of the most beautiful things in the world.’<sup>15</sup> Sin is thus a form of rupture and painting becomes a form of transgression, an exercise in affective exorcism: ‘I discovered that painting freed me from the anxiety I felt after what happened in my family. It transformed my feelings into anxiety about everything that society classified as transgressive.’<sup>16</sup> But it is important to highlight, as Corrado Levi points out, that these works have no moral emphasis.<sup>17</sup> That is where their interest is founded, they look and they display without prejudice, from a poetic position which legitimises the obscenity of the very act which has drawn them. Against the petit bourgeois mentality, she proclaims ‘I make whatever I feel like.’<sup>18</sup> These drawings were presented in her first exhibition at the Faber gallery in Turin in 1945, which was closed down for ‘obscenity’. The date of the exhibition is unknown; Alexandra Wetzel thinks that the exhibition took place in April 1945 after the fall of Mussolini: ‘Immediately after the war there was a very stimulating intellectual movement that could have made it possible for Casorati (who was never fascist) to find a gallery for Carol’s works.’<sup>19</sup> She goes on to explain that the artist recounted that ‘the exhibition was censored by the police the same day of the opening because somebody

<sup>13</sup>. See *Torino tra le due guerre*.

<sup>14</sup>. In a conversation with Marco Marozzi, 1992. In *Edoardo Sanguineti. Carol Rama*, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup>. In *Carol Rama. Di più, ancora di più*.

<sup>16</sup>. *Böse Zungen. Carol Rama*. Düsseldorf: Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 21 April – 24 June, 2012 [exh. cat.].

<sup>17</sup>. Corrado Levi, ‘Well-defined and vulnerable organisms. The art of Carol Rama’, *Arts Magazine*, vol. 65, no. 5–7 (January 1991).

<sup>18</sup>. Television programme *Arte Culture. Journal de la Culture* presented by Florence Dauchez, canal Arte (4 May 2004).



accused her of showing obscenities in public. She explained that all of the works exhibited – the majority were watercolours from her first period – disappeared, never to be seen again.’ About these paintings from the forties and some of the objects used in them: ‘The palettes, the toilet brushes, the urinals’, Rama said, ‘are objects of daily use.’ The artist explains: ‘I have always seen them like this: with a capacity for bewilderment and eroticism that should be introduced in daily life. Public urinals attract me as much as church interiors. I loved the prosthetic limbs in the house of an aunt of mine from Livorno, the forms of orthopaedic shoes piled up behind my grandmother’s nineteenth-century bed and the glass eyes.’<sup>20</sup> The individuality of these works contrasts with the later works of the fifties, which was the only moment in her entire career that she ascribed to a group: the Concrete Art Movement.<sup>21</sup> In this context she was to strip back her works and blend with the other artists in the group, although very soon she focused on the development of her own visual language.

A part of Turin admired her; another ignored her. Carol Rama did not appear for example in *Manifesto* (1967), a work by Alighiero Boetti that consists of a list of the names of sixteen artists who worked there during this period,<sup>22</sup> the ones that the critic Germano Celant brought together under the name *arte povera*.<sup>23</sup> She also failed to appear in *Città di Torino* the following year – another work by Boetti that presented a plan of the city showing the location of the studios of the artists that had exhibited with him. It would certainly not have made sense to link Rama and what she herself called her *piccolo linguaggio* (little language) with the work and concerns of these artists with whom she had little in common.<sup>24</sup> However, the surprising element is not her lack of relation to these artists but how they managed to

19. Alexandra Wetzel, in an email sent to the author on 28 February 2013.

20. In a conversation with Lea Vergine, 1983. In *Edoardo Sanguineti. Carol Rama*, p. 69.

21. Together with Annibale Biglione, Albino Galvano, Adriano Parisot, Filippo Scroppo and Paola Levi.

22. In the manifesto, the following names appear: Paolini, Fabro, Gilardi, Piacentino, Nespolo, Zorio, Pistoletto, Boetti, Simonetti, Kounellis, Ceroli, Pascali, Icaro, Mondino, Merz, Schifano.

23. *Arte povera* united a group of young artists who worked independently and never formed a structured movement. It was the critic Germano Celant who grouped them together under the

name, a term taken from the theatrical concepts of Grotowski and which appeared for the first time in the catalogue for the exhibition *Arte Povera – Im Spazio* at La Bertesca gallery in Genoa in 1967, where he defined it as an art that materialises the sensory perceptions and rejects the hierarchies of technique and material. He published an article in *Flash Art* magazine the same year, entitled ‘Arte povera: Notes for a Guerrilla War’ in which Celant attributes the role of ‘guerrilla warrior’ to the artists, seeing as their work was a social gesture, a composed liberation that marked the identification between the man and the world.

24. Interview with Carol Rama by Barbara Codogno, 2004.

ignore her work. Marco Vallora has explained that, in contrast to Carol Rama, the *poveras* used material pragmatically and polemically in order to make a break with the dominant art – a means of developing an ideological discourse.<sup>25</sup> At this time, Carol Rama was making explicitly material works, supposedly without any latent social concerns. However, if we examine a few titles, we notice references to the Vietnam War and the use of napalm, Martin Luther King quotes or other references to the atomic bomb: ‘these images are like burned and tortured people, always with a problem of the body and Eros. There is a poverty of materials that have been sprayed black or coloured with glued on eyes that came from an embalmers in Milan. I always had the need to mutilate the event of the war, but also myself.’<sup>26</sup> It had already been a few years since she began working with what Edoardo Sanguineti called *Bricolages*.<sup>27</sup> The term was coined by Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi Strauss employed it in reference to the complementary epistemological strategies in a given culture. They are works in which matter – ‘the physical’ – becomes patent as a form of induction to the bodily, in what Paolo Fossati called ‘absolute realism’.<sup>28</sup> The artist inserts artificial eyes and organic fragments such as fingernails and teeth and references to bodily fluids into her works as well as adding objects marked by a physical character such as syringes or medical tubes that she mounts together with written texts and mathematic formulae. These works, often self-referential, were made almost entirely against the current of the moment in which a large part of the artistic scene was engaged in a repositioning of the models imposed by society and mass culture in a search for alternative answers. Many artists critically examined the environment of industrial production and consumerism, understanding their activities as an act of resistance to capitalist and bourgeois society. In the sixties Turin was experiencing a profound process of transformation. The strong economy attracted a large number of workers from all over the country (around 600,000 in 1967). This was an immigrant population that settled in the suburbs of the city and caused the urban and social landscape to change. The politicisation of daily life, especially noticeable in the second half of the sixties, became evident in the importance of the Communist Party, in the student revolts, the protests and workers’ strikes, as well as the creation of extremely committed Political groups, many of whom supported armed struggle. These were the years of Potere Operaio, the Lotta

<sup>25</sup> In *Carol Rama. Di più, ancora di più*.

<sup>26</sup> In a conversation with Corrado Levi, 1993. In *Edoardo Sanguineti. Carol Rama*, p. 104.

<sup>27</sup> In ‘Carol, o del bricolage’. Turin: Galleria Stampatori, 1964.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted by Corrado Levi in *Carol Rama. Di più, ancora di più*.

Continua, the magazine *Classe Operaia* and the terrorist actions of the Red Brigade. This was a time of tension and struggle, recounted in novels such as *Vogliamo tutto* (1971) by Nanni Balestrini, who narrates how the Fiat factory workers debated about work as the production of wealth and its role in political organisation. The struggles and workers' assemblies united with the student movements in the spring of 1969 at the Mirafiori plant, and the so-called battle of Corso Traino occurred in July of the same year. This happened in the middle of a trade union strike organised over pension reforms. The workers' movement in large factories and companies attempted to activate the revolutionary consciousness of the workers and they coexisted with the underground armed struggle, who used bomb attacks, assassination and kidnapping as a way of attacking economic power and the institutional politics of the state. These were the years of repression and confrontation.<sup>29</sup> Rama remained relatively isolated from the happenings of the city and these positions of artistic, political and social resistance. She seems to have been uninterested in these forms of questioning and destabilising the established order, despite the fact that her work is transgressive and disruptive of artistic conventions. Although she referred to the importance of the social environment, she proclaimed the autonomy of her work with respect to the contexts of revolutionary struggle otherwise inseparable from the economic development of Turin. This was a process which, by the eighties, had already shown itself to be fully transformative. By the nineties the city of Turin had reconstituted itself with an entirely new image, one that wished to distance itself from its almost exclusive link with industry and that maximised diversification through culture. In these years there was a progressive reduction of the population as well as the number of job positions, while a large part of the industrial landscape found itself inoperative. The closure of the Lingotto branch of Fiat is exemplary in this context – the stage of the great worker and student action. This factory, which was opened by King Vittorio Emanuele in 1922, would later become a multifunctional centre for congresses, shops and offices after being redesigned by the architect Renzo Piano. Between 1993 and 1998, strategic planning of the city was undertaken, aiming to promote Turin as a 'city of culture, tourism, business and sport'. This resulted in the production of an image of the city through the modernisation of its cultural attractions.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup>. On this period, see Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni, *La horda de oro (1968–1977)*. *La gran ola revolucionaria y creativa, política y existencial*. Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, 2006.

<sup>30</sup>. On this subject see Daniel Paül i Agustí, 'Las instituciones culturales en la transformación de la imagen de Turin', x Coloquio Internacional de Geocrítica, Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona, 26–30 May 2008. The scientific

The work of Carol Rama, which traverses a large part of the twentieth century, is largely indifferent to the main artistic movements. She thus emerges as determined to disobey the trends of the hegemonic history of art that cross the path of her work but fail to fuse with her extensive trajectory. ‘I paint by instinct and I paint for passion. And because of rage and because of violence and because of sadness. And for a certain fetishism. And for happiness and melancholy together. And especially for anger’, she stated in 1996.<sup>31</sup> Her work is not a catalogue of filth nor scatology; it is rather an exhibition of ‘the real’ – a blend of the beautiful and uncomfortable. Passionate and provocative. When discussing Carol Rama, various attributes often arise. Her character is described as strong, rough, destructive but also vulnerable. ‘It is true that my character is surly, but character, like beauty, is something you either like or you don’t.’<sup>32</sup> What is certain is that there is a group of friends, collectors and followers of Carol Rama who have supported her over time in deep admiration of her work. Among them are people in the cultural field such as Edoardo Sanguineti, who dedicated various poems and critical essays to her; the musician Luciano Berio, who in 1984 composed *Omaggio a Carol Rama* (‘Homage to Carol Rama’); Man Ray, with whom she maintained a longstanding friendship expressed in the objects he sent her and which remain in Via Napone and also a text he wrote reordering the letters of her name; the architect Carlo Mollino, with whom she shared a hate for the mainstream.<sup>33</sup> There are many that have remained close to the person and the artist throughout her life. Lea Vergine believes that the fascination surrounding Carol Rama derives from ‘her madness and wisdom, of the total anti-conformism’.<sup>34</sup>

There are many stories about Carol Rama and we will perhaps never know which are true and which form part of the vital fiction that accompanies her life and work: a tale made official through repetition, but which reveals cracks every time it is delved into. ‘Who is Carol Rama, really?’, asks Lea Vergine. ‘Nothing is verifiable with Carol Rama,’ explains Giancarlo Montanella who saw Rama as the personification of ‘when art, sexuality, exclusion, torment and pain describe marginalisation and make us feel marginalised’.<sup>35</sup> Nico Orengo also alludes to her appearance as a petit bourgeois woman from a good family with an extensive education, but later

committee was responsible for facilitating the project and was presided over by the then mayor of Barcelona, Pasqual Maragall.

<sup>31</sup>. In Edoardo Sanguineti. *Carol Rama*.

<sup>32</sup>. In *Carol Rama. Di più, ancora di più*.

<sup>33</sup>. Interview with Carol Rama conducted by

Carlo Olmo and Bruno Reichlin, *Televisione Svizzera Italiana*, 1989 (video taken from the original conserved in Archivio Mollino).

<sup>34</sup>. In *Carol Rama. Di più, ancora di più*.

<sup>35</sup>. From a conversation with Beatriz Preciado and the author, Turin, April 2013.



becomes the opposite: 'a lover, a devil, a whore' who does nothing else but 'escape the norm, reinventing herself continually in varying forms of femininity'. He contrasts this strong erotic verbal power with grey Turin's factories,<sup>36</sup> the city where Carol felt uncomfortable but would never avoid. 'Turin is a city where we are all surrounded by the mediocre and imbeciles,' she says frankly, going on to say, 'Turin is a city that needs to camouflage itself. Not to be a publisher, a faculty, a political trend or a supporting part in a play.'<sup>37</sup> Turin, that unruly, elegant, revolutionary and rebellious, productive, contradictory and hidden city, perhaps a grey box but luminously fertile, is one which welcomes what Renato Alpegiani calls the 'closed, black and golden' world of Carol Rama. In a drawing she gave as a present to her friend Franco Masoero, the artist writes a dedication with the defiant, unashamed, uninhibited and ironic gesture characteristic of the artist: 'Dear Franco, we are geniuses. The rest can go to hell, this is a shit city.'

<sup>36</sup>. In *Carol Rama. Di più, ancora di più*.

<sup>37</sup>. Interview with Carol Rama conducted by Carlo Olmo and Bruno Reichlin, 1989.