

Against the Canon: The Unresolved Dispute between Carla Lonzi and Giulio Carlo Argan

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Post-war art history is punctuated by controversies between its established protagonists and a new generation of women scholars actively addressing the blind spots of their male colleagues. Famously, Griselda Pollock queried T. J. Clark's reading of Manet's *Olympia* (1863), showing how questions of class had been given priority over analysis of the gender-specific conditions of the painting.¹ On the other side of the Atlantic in the 1970s, Lucy Lippard dissociated herself from Clement Greenberg's formalist judgements and search for greatness.² Almost ten years earlier, in Italy, Carla Lonzi penned a vitriolic attack on the patronising attitude of 'the male art critic', exemplified by communist historian Giulio Carlo Argan.

These episodes, in no specific order, played a key role in the intellectual and political trajectories of the above art theorists, and in the history of twentieth-century art more broadly. Pollock's disagreement with Clark took the form of an articulate academic critique which redefined the contours of social art history. Lippard's refusal to abide by Greenberg's canon opened her way to feminist curatorship. Her feminism, she declared, began partly in rebellion against the illustrious art historian.³ Similarly, Lonzi's distancing of herself from Argan's authoritarian position informed her decision to quit the art world and fully embrace feminist politics. While the disagreements that separated Pollock and Lippard from their male colleagues have been retrospectively recalled both by the protagonists in question and in secondary literature,⁴ Carla Lonzi will never return to the conflict with Argan, nor is this episode given any particular prominence in scholarly research on her work.⁵

Such an academic blind spot will be addressed in the following text. Yet, what drives my research is not simply the desire to expand on areas overlooked by academic enquiry. By returning to the controversy between Lonzi and Argan I pursue a twofold, broader objective. Unlike a recent strand of research focusing primarily on Lonzi's writings and her exchanges with her cohort of artist-friends, the article reinstalls her work within a wider fabric of intellectual relationships, and analyses how her 'radical' hermeneutics and writing style sought to challenge the contemporary art-historical canon.⁶ In her early professional context, I argue, this was epitomised by the figure of Argan. More abstractly, the specific reframing advocates for a dialectical mode of art-historical analysis, one that doesn't lose sight of the 'norm' against which a dissident practice stands, since it understands the anti-canonical not as a antithesis of the canon, but as a complex formation that retains and appropriates residues of its 'enemy'.

1. Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988). Clark's reading of *Olympia* can be found in T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985).

2. Lucy Lippard's transition in art criticism, notably towards feminist analysis, unfolded over a span of years and through various publications. While the early signs of this shift can be traced back to the collection *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism* (1971), it was in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976) where she explicitly articulated her feminist perspective.

3. I recognise now the seeds of my feminism in my revolt against Clement Greenberg's patronization of artists, against the notion that if you don't like so-and-so's work for the "right" reasons, you can't like it at all, as well as against the "masterpiece" syndrome, and "three great artists" syndrome, and so forth'. Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), p. 3.

4. See the introduction to Lippard's *From the Center*. As for secondary literature, consider in particular Julia Bryan-Wilson, 'Still Relevant: Lucy Lippard, Feminist Activism, and Art Institution', in Catherine Morris and Vincent Bonin (eds), *Materializing Six Years: Lucy R. Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art* (Boston, MA and New York, NY: MIT Press and Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2012), pp. 71–92. As regards Pollock, in one of her recent essays she recalls herself challenging Fred Orton after realising the total absence of female figures in his planned syllabi. Griselda Pollock, 'Feminism and Art c. 1970: Writing Art Otherwise', in Francesco Ventrella and Giovanna Zapperi (eds), *Feminism and Art in Post-War Italy: The Legacy of Carla Lonzi* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 249–274.

5. One exception is Michele Dantini, who addresses the conflict between Lonzi and Argan in 'Una polemica situata e da situare. 1963: Lonzi vs. Argan', *Predella Journal of Visual Arts*, no. 36, 2014, pp. 87–103. His analysis, however, sits in a larger enquiry into the emergence of an art-historical 'tradition' in relation to the nation-building project of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italy. My research, the first instantiation of which is presented in this article, instead focuses on the relationship between canon and anti-canon in post-war art history and criticism.

6. I am referring, in particular, to Ventrella and Zapperi, *Feminism and Art in Post-War Italy*, Giovanna Zapperi, Carla Lonzi. *Un'arte della vita* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 2017), and Laura Iamurri, *Un margine che sfugge. Carla Lonzi e l'arte in Italia, 1955–1970* (Rome: Quodlibet Studio, 2016).

7. Carla Lonzi's letter to Marisa Volpi (29 December 1959), in Iamurri, *Un margine che sfugge*, pp. 79–80. Emphasis and translation mine.

8. An in-depth analysis of Longhi's figure is beyond our scope but it is opportune to signal a selection of articles on his work given the near absence of primary sources available to an Anglophone readership. David Tabbat, 'The Eloquent Eye: Roberto Longhi and the Historical Criticism of Art', *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*, no. 5, Spring 1991, pp. 109–134; Carlo Ginzburg, 'On Small Differences: Ekphrasis and Connoisseurship', *Visual History: Rivista internazionale di storia e critica dell'immagine*, no. II, 2016, pp. 11–30; and the more recent, though cursory, Laura Moure Cecchini, 'Baroque Futurism: Roberto Longhi, the Seventeenth Century, and the Avant-Garde', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 101, no. 2, 2019, pp. 29–53.

9. Longhi theorises art criticism as the act of producing 'verbal equivalents' to works of art in several instances, but this particular definition appears to encapsulate his proposition well: 'we believe that it is possible to create specific verbal equivalence of specific visual experiences; equivalences which may have a quasi genetic dimension, in so far as they replicate the way in which a work of art has been created and expressed', Roberto Longhi, review of 'Enzo Petraccone' by Luca Giordano in *L'Arte*, XXIII, 1920, pp. 92–3. Now in Roberto Longhi, *Scritti giovanili. 1912–1922*, vol. I, t. I (Florence: Sansoni, 1961), p. 456.

10. Longhi's work reflects the influence of Crocean idealism, notably in its understanding of visual language as divorced from external realms beyond art history, yet unlike Croce, it prioritizes the materiality of the art object. The principles of Crocean idealism are explored in his *The Essence of Aesthetics* (New York: Noonday Press, 1967, 1902). On Croce and Longhi consider Ginzburg, 'On Small Differences'.

The second aim here is to offer a standpoint from which to look at the relationship between art history and politics. We can view 1970s feminism as an essential event in Lonzi's political development, one that provided the framework for articulating the oppression specific to her experience through a critical language.

Similarly, we can infer that Lonzi's animosity towards Argan's style of art criticism and intellectual posturing played a role in shaping her proto-feminist consciousness, eventually leading her to disengage from art altogether, as she perceived it to be structured upon patriarchal relations. It is to this latter side of the story that I will devote my attention. While holding on to the thesis that societal and political concerns inform the paradigms of art history, I will explore how art history can generate its own lexicon for conflict, becoming a terrain of epistemological rupture.

Early Detachments

In a 1959 letter to her colleague and friend Marisa Volpi, a young Carla Lonzi (1931–1982) expresses a certain disgruntlement towards the aesthetic theories and figures in vogue in post-war Italian art:

I find Argan and Adorno's methods very stimulating, but also very dangerous when these invite 'general propositions' which, outside of a rigorous dialectical system, hypostatise the experience of the subject and its habitual moods. I prefer when the 'generalisation' is implied and derives directly from a concrete observation, that is, from language.⁷

Her desire to take distance from a generation of intellectuals looking at art through the prism of abstract categories finds its origin in an art historical training centred on very different premises. Lonzi had graduated in 1953 under the supervision of Roberto Longhi (1890–1970), at the time the major exponent of a method of 'pure visibility' in post-war Italy.⁸ Inspired by the Vienna school and situating itself polemically against certain traits of Crocean idealism,⁹ the interpretive method devised by Longhi centred on the formal and tactile aspects of art, aimed at identifying verbal equivalents for the sensory perceptions of the works. His formalism exceeded a mere description of the visible, and aimed to convey the experience of encountering the artwork, ultimately producing texts possessing a quasi-independent existence from the object addressed.¹⁰ In a 1982 commemorative essay on Longhi, the French art historian André Chastel referred to him as an 'Ekphrasis genius'.¹¹

In light of this brief gloss, Lonzi's quotation acquires a renewed meaning, and her placing of the terms 'language' and 'concrete observation' next to each other appears perhaps less incongruous. Rebuffing the taxonomic usages of language she associated with Adorno and Argan, Lonzi turns to Longhi's dazzling prose, stirred by its *proximity* with the paintings. A search for proximity, as we later see, will become a cipher for her approach to art criticism, and will eventually inform the relational mode of her feminist practice.

This first departure from Argan's universe pre-dated a much more resolute breakaway. In 1963, after ten years working as a critic for cultural magazines and galleries,¹² Lonzi starts to grow disillusioned by her profession, and in 1963 writes an embittered text entitled 'The Solitude of the Critic' in which Argan figures amongst her targets. The problem was indeed larger than Argan himself, and lay with the role of the critic in a rapidly changing artistic milieu. After the demise of the fascist regime, and its policy of economic and cultural autarchy, the country opened its doors to international influence and foreign capital investment, under the spur of the Marshall Plan. Italy underwent a

phase of unprecedented vitality, which saw Rome and Milan competing against established cultural capitals. Private galleries started popping up in different cities, altering an artistic scene until that point largely dominated by state-led institutions.

When Lonzi writes 'The Solitude of the Critic', however, more than ten years have passed since the termination of the war, and optimism has given way to a phase of critical reflection on the secondary effects of the much-appraised 'miracle'. The figure of the art critic, initially encouraged by the proliferation of art events and specialised magazines, finds herself imbricated in a commercial art system, which puts her integrity at risk. Lonzi describes a scene dominated by the interests of an 'intellectualised guild of art dealers' and the opportunism of a new generation of artists that 'regard critics as mere means to an end'. '[E]stranged from [...] her/his own work and concerns', severed from the artists previously considered friends, the critic, laments Lonzi, is ultimately *lonely*.¹³

There is, she adds, an exception to such a generalised impasse, but this appears to her eyes more an attempt to repair one's own loss of authority than a viable form of resistance. Lonzi's response towards what she perceives as a problematic shortcut has a clear addressee: the father figure of Italian post-war art history, Giulio Carlo Argan. Argan is accused of performing 'a rote defence of his own function', by creating disingenuous alliances with artistic movements, towards which he acts more as a leader than as an interpreter. In embracing the cause of specific groups of artists, Lonzi doesn't see a sincere camaraderie but the attempt to establish what she calls a 'fraternal siege mentality' blended with 'party discipline'.¹⁴

As we will observe throughout this article, Argan's position, although tinged with patronising undertones, forms part of a nuanced understanding of the social function of art history that remains largely unaddressed in Lonzi's polemical text.¹⁵ This aspect will be unpacked more closely later. For the moment my interest lies in retracing the first signs of Lonzi's detachment from the art world, and in situating these in relation to the unfinished conflict with Argan.

Argan never directly replied to Lonzi's reproach. Nor did he show any interest in her implicit attempt to reopen her polemic in *Autoritratto* (1969), an experimental book project seeking to blur the distinction between artists and critics by cross-editing transcriptions of interviews. In the seemingly random selection of excerpts of conversations collated by Lonzi in the book, the name of Argan appears frequently, always recast negatively as the voice of suffocating authoritarianism.¹⁶ Argan's reiterated silence is furthermore surprising when considered within the framework of the post-war Italian cultural debate, a space where left-wing intellectuals with differing views nonetheless formed a community of engaged thinkers, sharing platforms for disseminating their thoughts.

Lonzi never elaborated on Argan's indifference to her attacks, but the episode must have left some marks. I want to suggest that Argan's neglect, which I read synecdochally as a neglect of her criticism on the part of the art history establishment at large, may have informed Lonzi's feminism, eventually leading her to embrace separatism. For Argan's neglect laid bare how women's recent access to cultural platforms and professional recognition was not sufficient to counter the structural invisibility of their critical voices. In other words, it called into question the core claim of liberal feminism: its belief in legal recognition as a guarantee of concrete egalitarian status for women in society. These concerns would be openly addressed by Lonzi in 1974, in her pamphlet 'The Absence of Woman from the Celebratory Moments of Male Creative Display'. The text asserted her feminist collective's refusal to perform any intellectual or creative task within the institutional cultural realm, which was recast as the reign of

11. André Chastel, 'Roberto Longhi, il genio dell'"ekphrasis"', in G. Previtali (ed.), *L'arte di scrivere sull'arte. Roberto Longhi nella cultura del nostro tempo* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1982), pp. 56–65.

12. Lonzi mainly wrote for *Paese sera*, *Avanti*, *NAC*, and *Marcatré*, and collaborated with the Notizie gallery in Turin and the Ariete gallery in Milan. For an analysis of Lonzi's writing on art in Italian newspapers and cultural magazines, see Vanessa Martini, 'Carla Lonzi per "Il Paese"', 'La collaborazione di Carla Lonzi alla rubrica arti figurative de "L'Approdo"', and Laura Iamurri, 'Carla Lonzi sul "Marcatré"' in Carla Lonzi, *Scritti sull'arte* (Milan: et al. Edizioni, 2012), pp. 655–699, pp. 669–684 and pp. 705–723. For a historical account of Lonzi's collaboration with the Galleria Notizie, see also, in the same volume: Lara Conte, 'Carla Lonzi a Torino: Alcune coordinate', pp. 685–704.

13. Carla Lonzi, 'La solitudine del critico', in Lara Conte, Laura Iamurri, and Vanessa Martini (eds), *Scritti sull'arte* (Milan: et al. Edizioni, 2012), pp. 353–6. Originally in the newspaper *Avanti!*, 13 December 1963. Translation mine.

14. Lonzi, 'La solitudine del critico', pp. 353–6.

15. For an analysis of Argan's understanding of the relation between art and politics in light of his collaboration with state-led artistic institutions in his early professional years, see Claudio Gamba (ed.), *Giulio Carlo Argan. Promozione delle arti, critica delle forme, tutela delle opere. Scritti militanti e rari (1930–1942)* (Milan: Christian Marinotti edizioni, 2009), and in Dantini, 'Una polemica situata e da situare. 1963: Lonzi vs. Argan', and footnote 5.

16. *Autoritratto* (Bari: De Donato, 1969). From 1965 to 1969, Lonzi recorded one-to-one conversations with a number of established artists, which included Lucio Fontana, Jannis Kounellis, and her close friend Carla Accardi. Some of the transcripts were published in the magazines *Collage* and *Marcatré*, and were later collected in the groundbreaking book *Self-portrait (Autoritratto)*. *Self-portrait* was an experimental project defying the conventions of art writing and of established roles within the art system. Largely ignored by its contemporaries, the book has been recently reappraised on an international level, and translated into English by Allison Grimaldi Donahue. Allison Grimaldi Donahue, *Self-Portrait* (Brussels: Divided Publishing, 2021).

17. Carla Lonzi, 'Assenza della donna dai momenti celebrativi della manifestazione creativa femminile', in *Sputiamo su Hegel. La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti* (Milan: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1974).

18. The main texts by Argan available in English are *Fra Angelico: Biographical and Critical Study* (Geneva: Skira, 1955); *The Europe of the Capitals 1600–1700* (Geneva: Skira, 1964); *The Renaissance City* (London: Vista, 1969); *Henry Moore* (New York, NY: H. N. Abrams, 1971); and *Michelangelo: Architect* (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1993). A selection of his artistic and architectural writings is in the process of being published as part of the Columbia GSAPP Sourcebooks series. See Craig Buckley (ed.), *Giulio Carlo Argan: The Crisis of Values; Essays on Modern Art and Architecture 1930–1965* (forthcoming).

19. Giulio Carlo Argan (1909–1992) studied history of art at the University of Turin, his hometown. After graduating with a thesis on the theoretical writing of the architect Sebastiano Serlio (1931), he began to work for different state-led bodies responsible for the protection and management of national artistic heritage. After the World War II, Argan was appointed professor in the History of Art Department at the University of Rome, where he taught until 1979. During this period, he published extensively on both contemporary and past artists (Manet, Degas, Borromini, Michelangelo, Gropius, and Fontana, amongst others), bridging art and architecture, history and theory. From 1968 to 1970, he embarked on the writing of a three-volume textbook on the history of art which would become a core text for three generations of Italian students. In 1979, he left his academic position to take up a more direct role in the political and cultural life of the country, becoming the mayor of Rome. Towards the end of his life, he sat in the senate of the Italian parliament as an independent representative of the Communist Party, where he continued his work in defence of the country's artistic patrimony. His most notable works, in chronological order, include: *Pier Luigi Nervi* (1934); *H. Moore* (1948); *Borromini* (1951); *W. Gropius e la Bauhaus* (1951); *F. Brunelleschi* (1955); *L'architettura barocca in Italia* (1957); *Salvezza e caduta dell'arte moderna* (1964); *Progetto e destino* (1965); *Capogrossi* (1967); *Storia dell'arte italiana* (3 vols, 1968); *Studi e note: dal Bramante al Canova* (1970); *Man Ray* (1970); *Libera* (1975); *Storia dell'arte come storia della città* (1983); and *Michelangelo architetto* (1990, with B. Contardi). For a comprehensive analysis of Argan's intellectual and political career, see Claudio Gamba (ed.), *Giulio Carlo Argan (1909–1992). Storico dell'arte, critico militante, sindaco di Roma* (Milan: Electa, 2012).

20. Mino Monicelli, *Un'idea di Roma* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1978), p. 22–3.

exclusive 'male creative display'.¹⁷ Loosely evoking the 'Argan-affair', she argues that women are present and active in the reign of 'male creative display' but are never granted a full *interlocutory* role. Before we explore how the conflict developed in the aftermath of the publication of 'The Solitude of the Critic', let us cross over to the other side of the barricade, and take a closer look at the figure of Argan.

Uneven Beginnings

Little known in the Anglophone world due to the lack of translated texts,¹⁸ Argan (1909–1992) was a key player in post-war Italian culture. Between the inter-war years and 1992, the moment of his death, Argan authored more than twenty books on art and architecture, founded and directed art journals, and took up leading roles in the cultural institutions of the country, ranging from the Central Institute of Restoration to the Superior Council of Antiquities and Fine Arts (progenitor of the Ministry of Culture).

These early professional experiences would influence his understanding of art as a public good and of criticism as a praxis aimed at challenging the autonomy of art rooted in modernist aesthetics. Argan's political and cultural commitment culminated in his role as the first Communist mayor of Rome, from 1973 to 1976.¹⁹

He wasn't 'born' a communist though, as he himself admits in a 1979 interview with journalist Mino Monicelli.²⁰ Raised in a cultural context permeated by the idealism of the philosopher Benedetto Croce, Argan collaborated in the corporatist reorganisation of the arts led by Giuseppe Bottai, Mussolini's art minister.²¹ Yet, as he managed to keep himself at a remove from the regime, he also soon lost interest in Crocean idealism. In his university years, under the guidance of Lionello Venturi, an anti-fascist intellectual who supported the idea of an art practice that was committed to its historical time, Argan discovered William Morris and John Ruskin.²² These latter influenced his 'materialistic' turn, epitomised in the 1951 publication *Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus*.²³ Here Argan places his reading of the school in the context of its surrounding political environment, and gives priority to nascent industrial design, challenging the established hierarchy between fine and applied arts.²⁴

Two years before Argan terminates his studies, Carla Lonzi was born. A generation divides these intellectuals and informs their response to the cultural turmoil in the aftermath of the war. Lonzi's academic upbringing occurred in a country set free of the spectre of fascism, turned into the home of one of the largest Communist Parties of the west. In her university years, she joined the Florentine section of the P.C.I., read the classics of Marxism, and speculated about employing the sociological methods inaugurated by workers' enquiries to examine the living and working conditions of the women in a district of Florence.²⁵

Soon after graduating in 1959, Lonzi began to work as an art critic, and did so up until 1968.²⁶ Her interventions are concise, and rush, almost impatiently, to the core of the matter, brushing over the preliminary pleasantries – no mention of the artist's professional credentials nor the background information of the show. Lonzi looks instead towards the artists' life, albeit in a largely fictionalised manner. In her 1960s text for Pinot Gallizio's catalogue, for example, she declares her intention to 'introduce the man before the painting', and soon abandons herself to a lyric description of his hometown. The 'old house', 'the

close texture of traditions and relations', and 'the lavender crops' almost take precedence over Gallizio's work.²⁷

Similarly, in a text on Carla Accardi,²⁸ her painterly scribbles and calligraphic abstractions are compared to a technique to 'visualise the chaos of psychic stimuli, and to classify these by morphological affinity and intensity'.²⁹ Lonzi insists on a reading of these signs as automatic transcriptions of the artist's life, paying almost no attention to their formal and tactile aspects; her use of vivid colours, for example, the quality of brushstrokes, or her well-known reinvention of the canvas through its replacement with Sicofoil.³⁰ A further case in point is offered by her stripping Lucio Fontana's spatialist painting of any connotative value, recasting it as indices of 'the oneness of the space of existence'. We read: 'Fontana's graffiti, holes, cuts are not signs in the strict sense, since they do not tend to be resolved into a meaning; they are events, concrete structures, realities which gain value by their efficiency and their transposition'.³¹

In apparent defiance of Longhi's lesson – art criticism conducted 'in the presence' of the work – Lonzi's texts show little interest in conveying the sensuous aspects of art through the minutiae of formal analysis. Yet, while the materiality of works slips into the background, the artist comes forth, and installs itself at the centre of her writing. Longhi's call for 'proximity' somehow persists, but the focus shifts to the figure of the artist, painted by Lonzi as a magical life force imbuing the artwork with existential depth and spiritual zeal. 'Artistic success', Lonzi remarks, 'is strictly in relation to the amount of risk with which [artists] have been able to touch a kind of authentic depth in their own personalities'.³²

In an insightful essay engaging with Lonzi's art writing, Michele Dantini speaks of 'historiographical cruelty' to indicate her lack of concern about artistic lineages and the relations between individual artists and broader trends.³³ What Dantini describes is not 'just' a detachment from the prevailing interpretive canon but a plain-spoken retort to historicism, which is replaced by a notion of art as an event that unfolds in the present, and simply attests to the possibility of (human) being. This is apparent in Lonzi's reviews of Fontana and Mario Nigro, whose focus on the spatio-temporal dimension of art is read through an existential lens. In Fontana's randomly slashed or punctured canvases, for example, Lonzi grasps 'a profound adherence to the randomness of events' which she reads as a form of historical 'necessity'.³⁴ The artist's work would announce a new conception of time no longer '[constituted] in the mental category of history, but [...] strictly connected to the experience of occurrences which transform the world' where '[...] transformation is understood purely as the incessant dynamism of life'.³⁵

A similar approach is observable in the texts on Mario Nigro's abstract painting series *Total Space* and *Total Time*.³⁶ Diagonal lines dividing the space of the canvases are compared to signatures which 'force the viewer to think of the passing of time', for Lonzi equivalent to the 'the very sensation of existence'.³⁷ Her hermeneutic strikes as unequivocally humanistic – works of art are recast as emanations of core human faculties (in the case of Accardi's scribbling) or, in a Kantian fashion, evidence of a priori forms of sensible intuition (Fontana and Nigro). However, as much as this may appear more aligned with the grand narratives of Argan and Adorno, her later writings reveal another side to her approach. Her obsessive pairing of art with the fundamental aspects of life moves towards dethroning both artistic expertise and the art object, in the attempt to pave the way for a broader and diffuse notion of artistic creativity. This will first become apparent in her book *Autoritratto*. Here, the cross-editing of a series of meandering conversations with artists will have the effect of expanding the imaginary of artistic production beyond the asphyxiating circuit of the studio and the gallery.

21. For a close critical analysis of Argan's presumed complicity with the fascist regime, see the essay by Claudio Gamba included in *Giulio Carlo Argan. Promozione delle arti, critica delle forme, tutela delle opere. Scritti militanti e rari (1930–1942)* (Milan: Christian Marinotti edizioni, 2009), pp. 5–35.

22. Lionello Venturi (1885–1961, Rome) was an Italian historian and art critic who specialised in Italian Renaissance art and late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art. He edited the first Italian *catalogue raisonné* of Paul Cézanne. Although he belonged to a formalist tradition, he sought to situate the figure of the artist and the act of creation within a historically determined context. He also understood art history and criticism as intertwined activities. Alongside his academic achievements, Venturi was known for his anti-fascist commitment: he refused to swear allegiance to Benito Mussolini's regime and as a result was forced to resign from the university. He left Italy, first moving to France and then to the USA. He later returned to live and work in his homecountry in 1945.

23. Argan, *Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus* (Turin: Einaudi, 1951).

24. Retracing his formative years, Argan admits a shift from an idealistic to a sociological 'and to some extent anthropological' conception of art. He however detaches from 'a fully Marxist' approach. See Monicelli, *Un'idea di Roma*, p. 26.

26. His reservation towards a Marxist-inflected history of art is reinstated in the brief text 'Le quattro fondamentali metodologie negli studi di storia dell'arte', in Giulio Carlo Argan and Maurizio Fagiolo (eds), *Guida alla storia dell'arte* (Rome: Sansoni, 1974), pp. 31–39.

25. 'I would like to work with you on an inquiry into a sector of women in a certain zone. Something like Cassola and Branciardi on the miners in the Maremma', from one of Lonzi's letters to her friend Marisa Volpi, 1956, in Iamurri, *Un margine che sfugge*. Trans. Christina Chalmer. On the workers' enquiry as a new tool of political analysis in the post-war period, see Asad Haider and Salar Mohandesi, 'Workers' Inquiry: A Genealogy', *Viewpoint Magazine*, 27 September 2013 <<https://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/27/workers-inquiry-a-genealogy/>> [accessed 1 July 2021].

26. Carla Lonzi, 'Le arti figurative e il teatro contemporaneo' (1959), published posthumously as *Rapporti tra la scena e le arti figurative della fine dell'800* (Florence: Leo Olschki, 1995).

27. Lonzi, *Scritti sull'arte* (Milan: et al. Edizioni, 2012), p. 162.

28. Carla Accardi (1924–1914) was an abstract painter associated with art informel and co-founder, together with Carla Lonzi, of the feminist collective Rivolta femminile.

29. Conte et al., *Scritti sull'arte*, p. 373.

30. In the mid 1960s, Accardi starts experimenting with Sicofoil, which will soon become one of her defining artistic ciphers. On Accardi's use of Sicofoil, see Teresa Kittler, 'Living Differently, Seeing Differently: Carla Accardi's Temporary Structures (1965–1972)', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2017, pp. 85–107.

31. Lonzi, *Scritti sull'arte*, p. 299.

32. Lonzi, *Scritti sull'arte*, p. 288.

33. Michele Dantini, 'Storiografia e crudeltà. Microsaggio su Carla Lonzi', in *Geopolitiche dell'arte. Arte e critica d'arte italiana nel contesto internazionale dalle neoavanguardie ad oggi* (Milan: Marinotti Edizioni, 2012), pp. 183–187.

34. Lonzi, *Scritti sull'arte*, p. 300.

35. Lonzi, *Scritti sull'arte*, p. 301.

36. Mario Nigro (1917–1992) was an abstract Italian painter and musician, loosely influenced by Neo-Plastic experimentation. Lonzi will dedicate considerable critical attention to his work; see in particular Carla Lonzi and Paolo Fossati (eds), *Mario Nigro* (Milan: All'insegna del pesce d'oro, 1968). *Total Space* (1953–1955) and *Total Time* (from 1965 onwards) are considered the apex of Nigro's abstract painting career. The series are also theorised in a collection of writings published in 1954 and 1955.

37. Lonzi, *Scritti sull'arte*, p. 301.

38. Giulio Carlo Argan, 'Fontana', in U. Apollonio, G. C. Argan, and M. Masciotta, *Cinque scultori d'oggi: Moore, Fontana, Mastroianni, Mirko, Viani* (Bologna: Edizioni Minerva Artistica, 1960).

39. Giulio Carlo Argan, 'La storia dell'arte', *Storia dell'arte*, no. 1–2, 1969.

40. Giulio Carlo Argan, 'La crisi dei valori', *Quadrum*, IV, 1957, pp. 3–15, republished in Argan, *Salvezza e caduta nell'arte moderna. Studi e note* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1964), *Progetto e destino* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1965).

41. Alongside the term 'Gestaltic', seemingly coined by Argan himself, the current has also been referred to as 'Arte programmata' or 'Arte cinetico-programmata'. For a recent analysis of the movement in English language, consider Lindsay Caplan, *Arte Programmata: Freedom, Control, and the Computer in 1960s Italy* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Press, 2022).

42. Argan, *Progetto e destino*, p. 51.

'Context' and 'History'

In the very same years, Argan would write about Fontana and Nigro. In a text for a 1960 catalogue on contemporary sculpture he reviews Fontana's entire artistic career, highlighting an apparent 'formal inconsistency,' which he reinterprets positively as a deliberate challenge to the division between abstraction and figuration.³⁸ Despite the presence of overlapping points between Lonzi's and Argan's analyses, Argan's readings place greater emphasis on Fontana's position within the contemporary artistic landscape and the *longue durée* of his career. Their approaches to 'context' and 'history' set them apart, but to fully grasp this difference, we must turn to Argan's methodological texts.

Argan's essay, 'The History of Art', arguably his most programmatic contribution to the national debate on methodology, is perhaps the best place to start. The text presents Argan's clear attempt to adopt a materialist approach.³⁹ Moving away from a tradition centred around discrete, autonomous art objects, Argan espouses a new method hinged on the analyses of the web of 'experiences' and 'relations' in which artefacts are imbricated. The historian tries to break what he calls the 'indivisible unity' of the artefact, without ever fully dissolving it into the field of culture or history, nor subordinating it to economic matters. His position seems sympathetic to a non-orthodox Marxist concept of art as relatively autonomous vis-à-vis the techno-economic base.

This approach is put to the test in the critical essays addressing the post-war artistic changes, such as 'Salvage and Fall of Modern Arts' (1964) and 'Project and Destiny' (1965).⁴⁰ Here Argan offers a far-reaching diagnosis of the societal crisis induced by rampant technological determinism which reverberates throughout the fine arts ('Salvage and Fall'), architecture, as well as the nascent industrial design ('Project and Destiny'). Published a year apart, these two texts can be considered a single piece of research. The titles already suggest some similarities, for they both express a split between what Argan considers two possible scenarios for the arts: on the one hand their salvage, granted by the prevalence of an idea of creativity as an intentional project; on the other, their fall, prompted instead by the artist's acceptance of the (technocratic) destiny of contemporary society as their own.

Echoing the same dual structure of the titles, in the essay Argan interprets the concrete artistic response to the crisis in terms of a polarisation into opposed yet dialectically bound currents, such as pop art and Gestaltic – a 1960s Italian current merging Constructivism's mechanised aesthetic with research on the Gestalt psychology of Kinetic art.⁴¹ The homage to the chaotic universe of commodities of Pop is set against the rationality of industrial production evoked by Gestaltic. And while Gestaltic's exploration of the open-ended possibilities of viewership is reframed as 'the project which doesn't do things', Pop art's incorporation of discarded readymade objects amounts to a series of 'things done without a project'.⁴² The use of the term 'project' must be stressed here since it represents one of the key categories through which Argan looks at art, and one that takes us to the second aspect I want to address in relation to Lonzi: 'history'.

For Argan, historical analysis is essential for 'understanding' art, insofar as art is a historical phenomenon, namely an activity with a *purpose* which supersedes its moment of creation, whilst challenging the technologically laden idea of time as made of a series of finite, homogenous events.⁴³ The emphasis on the historicity of works of art must be also read as a worrisome retort to Italy's post-war industrialisation, which Argan associated with an accelerated and irresponsible will to seize the future through technological means. Despite the idea of *telos* being key to its thinking, disclosing an unintentional attachment to an idealistic tradition, Argan remains critical of a progressivist notion of history,

which he sees as an expression of prevailing contemporary ideology. Works of art are bearers of an internal purpose, without necessarily abiding by an ascending historical movement. And the task of the art historian is bringing this to light, combining philological research with interpretative endeavour.⁴⁴ Linking this analysis back to the reading of Pop and Gestalt, we can now surmise how the notion of the ‘project’ – with its compound of intentionality and planning – rests at the foundation of Argan’s understanding of art.

Lonzi’s relation to history and historiography has primarily been explored through the prism of her 1970s feminist writings.⁴⁵ In these works, she openly challenges Hegelian-Marxist teleological narratives for attributing an unquestioned purpose to the course of history ‘as a whole’. In her pamphlet ‘Let’s Spit on Hegel’ we read:

‘The phenomenology of the spirit is a phenomenology of the patriarchal spirit, incarnation of the monotheist divinity of time where woman [...] appears as an image whose signifying level is the hypothesis of others’.⁴⁶

The meaning of history, to paraphrase her words, coincides with the process of the self-determination of a spirit that is modelled after a male subject, neglecting all others. Confronted with this scenario, women must uncompromisingly refuse the Hegelian-Marxist historical model. Only through its refusal would an ‘unexpected [female] subject’ be allowed to unfold, as a subject until then unable to exist on her own terms.⁴⁷ Lonzi opposes a ready-made image of the future resulting from deterministic logic, advocating instead for a present to be re-imagined.

Without delving into her 1970s criticism of Hegelian metaphysics and its historiographic correlate, we can already discern an emphasis on the ‘now’ in Lonzi’s early art writings. In ‘The Solitude of the Critic’, for example, artistic value has little to do with belonging to a particular lineage but stems from the ability ‘to develop life-techniques demonstrative of a non-neurotic human response’.⁴⁸ The significance of art lies in its opening up new paths for living in the present, which the critic has to identify and encourage.

Recalling her interviews with artists for *Autoritratto* almost two decades later, Lonzi admits to having chosen figures unrelated to each other, with whom she had tried to establish an individual connection over the course of the encounter.⁴⁹ Her gesture is presented as a ‘binding element’, having the power to turn a group of loose individuals into a compact group. I mention this retrospective description of *Autoritratto* since it exemplifies, once again, what Dantini has aptly defined ‘historiographical cruelty’. Evoking the approach of her art reviews, Lonzi here refuses to consider the broader historical context as a unifying category for evaluating artistic practices. What counts, in the elaboration of critical judgement, is the encounter with the critic, for ‘it is there that something can occur that is worth writing about’.⁵⁰ This point finds further backing in the very first pages *Autoritratto*, where Lonzi asks the sculptor Luciano Fabro to start his narrative following ‘an order of stimulus’ in place of an ‘order of time’.⁵¹

If we expand the scope of our research to her very last writings, however, we would notice that historical research isn’t really proscribed. After a decade immersed in the ‘present tense’ of her encounters with artists and the practice of self-consciousness common to her feminist cohort, Lonzi will embark on research into the female characters in Greek tragedies and seventeenth-century comedies, which will take her to archives in Milan, Rome, and Paris. Through archival research, Lonzi uncovers Molière’s *Les Précieuses ridicules*, a comedy of manners narrating the story of two women associated with a literary circle of

43. See ‘Arte e critica d’arte’, in *Salvezza e Caduta*, p. 87. This viewpoint is further exemplified in the following reading of informal art: ‘the informal is not an organised tendency around a program and above all it is not an avant-garde tendency because when one does not recognise oneself in history anymore—the foundation and the structural principle or directive of humanity experience and activity—one can no longer consciously connect to the past nor hope to condition the future’, *Salvezza e caduta dell’arte moderna*, p. 55. Trans. Christina Chalmer.

44. This is articulated in Argan’s ‘La storia dell’arte’, 1969, p. 10.

45. See, in particular, Giovanna Zapperi, ‘The Time of Feminism: History and Subjectivity in Carla Lonzi’, *Studi Culturali*, no. 1, 2015, pp. 63–82; and Carla Subrizi, *La storia dell’arte dopo l’autocoscienza. A partire dal diario di Carla Lonzi* (Rome: Lithos, 2020).

46. Carla Lonzi, ‘Sputiamo su Hegel’, in *Sputiamo su Hegel e altri scritti* (Milan: et al. Edizioni, 1970, 2010), p. 20. Translation mine.

47. In her *Let’s Spit on Hegel* (1970), Lonzi tries to spur a consciousness-gaining process to recast women as what she termed the ‘soggetto imprevisto’ or ‘unexpected subject’ of a ‘total transformation of life’.

48. Lonzi, ‘La solitudine del critico’, pp. 353–6. Translation mine.

49. Carla Lonzi, *Armande sono io!*, ed. M. Lonzi, A. De Carlo, and M. Delfino (Milan: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1992), p. 21.

50. Lonzi, *Armande sono io!*, p. 21. Translation mine.

51. Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto* (Milan: et al. Edizioni, 2010), p. 8. Translation mine.

52. Molière, *Les Précieuses ridicules*, 1659.

53. Lonzi, *Armande sono io!*, p. 9. Translation mine.

54. Jaquinta, in Carla Lonzi, Marta Lonzi, and Anna Jaquinta, *È già politica* (Milan: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1977), p. 78.

55. 'Armande is not yet an historical subject, but an attempt to be one, clearly and obviously a failed attempt', Lonzi, *Armande sono io!*, p. 15. Trans. Christina Chalmer.

56. Lonzi, *Armande sono io!*, p. 26.

57. The link between feminist liberation and the emergence of new artistic forms is best expressed in the following sentence: 'The liberation of woman from her old identity also brings with it the end of art as we have conceived it up until now', Lonzi, *Armande sono io!*, p. 13. Trans. Christina Chalmer.

58. Lonzi, *Armande sono io!*, p. 13. Trans. Christina Chalmer.

erudite ladies known as 'Les Précieuses'. Widely regarded as a satire of the excessive pursuit of refinement typical of the Baroque era, the comedy recounts the tale of the women falling in love with the sophisticated manners of two servants dressed up as aristocrats. Interrogating accepted interpretations of the tale, Lonzi asks whether Molière's choice to mock the Baroque by focusing on the women's naive pursuit actually aligned with society's attempt to marginalise 'Les Précieuses', due to their unmarried status and intellectual ambition.⁵²

Lonzi's 'archival turn' led to an attempt to reexamine seventeenth-century French theatre and its female characters through a gendered lens, similar to the feminist excavations undertaken by art historians such as Linda Nochlin or Griselda Pollock. However, due to her premature death and non-academic position, Lonzi's research never materialised into a formal essay but was instead published posthumously as a collection of miscellaneous texts (*I am Armande!*, 1992). This collection included notes, a conversation with her friend Anna Piva, and a commentary on her archival trips. Preferring modes of writing beyond the academic essay, Lonzi exercised the liberty to intersperse her historical analysis with first-person disclosures, allowing her to oscillate between past and present. In the introduction to the book, Lonzi openly acknowledges that her research on Molière was prompted by deeply personal issues affecting her at the time:

In Spring last year, I was reading Greek tragedies and Molière. For me it was a painful period. In these tragedies, I passed through and through again the moment when, without any warning or any solution of continuity, destiny is overturned and all one's happiness appears lost.⁵³

Together with her feminist comrades, Lonzi turns to seventeenth-century literary texts in search of historical precedents for their actual vicissitudes, and in the hope of staging 'a direct comparison with the womanhood of other times, without any other measure of value than [them]selves'.⁵⁴ The term 'direct' must be stressed here, indicating a phantasy of an encounter with the past which transcends one's own historical situatedness; a quasi-spiritual séance that allows one to reconnect with proto-feminist figures striving to become 'historical subjects'.⁵⁵ Archival research unexpectedly leads to an impersonation where Lonzi becomes Armande, one of the Précieuses deprecated by Molière – as the title proclaims: *I am Armande!* Yet, the 'performance' doesn't limit itself to rechanneling a message from the past, but actively seeks to address aspects of that time still lingering in the present: 'If I am Armande', Lonzi concludes, 'three centuries later I am also something else'.⁵⁶ Rather than just tracing lines of continuity, the search for precedents interrupts an historical pattern which relegates women's creativity to an ancillary role, allowing for the emergence of an 'unexpected' female subject and new artistic forms.⁵⁷

Both Argan and Lonzi, as observed, position themselves critically within the idealist tradition prevailing in post-war Italy, but their understanding of the relation between art and historicity presents a stark contrast. As I attempted to illustrate, despite his steadfast refusal of technological determinism, Argan imbues the artistic object with a telos that supersedes the present. Art, for him, is fundamentally a project that affirms human intentionality. Lonzi, on the other hand, rejects any ideas of futurity and emphasises the immediate moment. For her, the emergence of a new form of art that doesn't replicate its gender-exclusionary paradigms can only occur by suspending any notion of posterity. This is because our imaginative capacity is influenced by a specific historical legacy, according to which, she writes, 'art is made in the way it has been made (by men)', 'and it is replicated in the way it has been replicated (by women)'.⁵⁸

From the Existential to the Political

In 1963, Argan directed the 'International Conference of Artists, Critics and Exponents of the Arts' in the Italian city of Verucchio. As the title indicates, it was no regular art fair nor an academic congress, but an attempt to bring theorists and practitioners together, discussing central concerns in the contemporary artistic landscape.⁵⁹ The event highlighted a focus on what Argan termed Gestaltic art, which he praised for its scientific elements and collective aspirations in a series of endorsing reviews.⁶⁰ While this might initially seem like an inclusive gesture aimed at breaking down disciplinary boundaries, it was instead perceived by the artists in the opposite manner. Alongside boycotting the event, the invited artists penned a vitriolic letter against it and sent it to the organisers, later published in the newspaper *Avanti!*

The letter started as follows:

We painters and sculptors declare that we do not wish to intervene on the themes of the Conference, but to take our position in opposition to the reasoning behind the Conference itself. Aware of the qualities and the value of Italian art today [...] We declare our wariness and mistrust towards a critical habit which has become peremptory to the point of wishing to intervene directly in art during the very moment of its development and projection, following rushed schemes and even imposing directives and programmes. We do not want to define the limits and legitimacy of the militant art critic, and to establish in what sense he can be configured with respect to creative work

It concluded with an invective addressed to Argan:

We believe that Professor Carlo Giulio Argan, who chaired the Verucchio Conference, has recently assumed a critical attitude that is incompatible with his function as a scholar and historian of art. For some time, his critical statements have assumed the peremptoriness of a judgment and even an historical systematization, but do not belong to critical examination, rather to the artistic manifesto. We artists deny that anyone can make history before history has been made.

Gastone Novelli, Achille Perilli, Antonio Sanfilippo, Giuseppe Santomaso, Giulio Turcato, Toti Scialoja, Carla Accardi, Pietro Consagra, Antonio Corpora, Piero Dorazio, Umberto Mastroianni.⁶¹

The letter spurred a lively debate on the role of criticism which was hosted in the pages of the *Avanti!* Both artists and critics intervened, for the most part expressing feelings of caution with respect to Argan's position. On 12 December 1963, following the contributions of artists Pietro Consagra and Carla Accardi, among others, Carla Lonzi wrote 'The Solitude of the Critic'.

To get a sense of what stirred such a barrage of discontent, we may want to take a closer look at the speech delivered by Argan at the opening of the Verucchio event. Published in the proceedings of the conference, the intervention 'The Function of Criticism' advocated for a departure from a type of criticism resting on distance and judgement, and expressed instead the will to take on a more proactive, if not programmatic, role vis-à-vis artistic currents.⁶² Argan seems to oscillate between a benign attempt at bridging the two realms, and a more insidious desire for leading (and implicitly 'bettering') artistic practices. Both art and criticism, he opines, possess a critical and a creative component but it is up to the critic to 'determine the condition of availability of the artist with respect to a further expressive and social engagement exercising a solicitation to artistic work'.⁶³ This formulation sums up Argan's ambition to rethink both art and criticism as allied *practices* geared towards societal and political transformation, and to assign cultural elites a pedagogical role in a newly reborn democratic state – this point was, as Dantini stresses, largely missed by Lonzi.⁶⁴ Equally, however,

59. For an accurate account of the event, consider Federica Boragina, 'Il convegno di Verucchio del 1963 e il dibattito critico nel mondo dell'arte contemporanea', in *ARTE ITALIANA 1960–1964. Identità culturale, confronti internazionali, modelli americani* (Milan: Scalpendi Editore, 2017), pp. 151–162.

60. Giulio C. Argan, 'Aut-Aut', *Il Messaggero*, 7 August 1963, p. 3; 'La ricerca gestaltica', *Il Messaggero*, 24 August 1963, p. 3; 'Le ragioni del gruppo', *Il Messaggero*, 21 September 1963, p. 3.

61. 'Dissensi sul convegno di Rimini', *Avanti!*, 29 September 1963. Translation mine.

62. Giulio Carlo Argan, in *Atti del XII Convegno Internazionale Artisti, Critici e Studiosi d'Arte*, Rimini, Verucchio, and San Marino, 1963.

63. Giulio Carlo Argan, in *Atti del XII Convegno Internazionale Artisti, Critici e Studiosi d'Arte*, Rimini, Verucchio, San Marino 1963, p. 8.

64. See Dantini, 'Una polemica situata e da situare'.

65. Carla Accardi, 'Siamo contro ogni super-potere', *Avanti!*, 19 November 1963.

66. Pietro Consagra, 'Un po' di umiltà signori critici!', *Avanti!*, 2 November 1963.

67. Lonzi, *Scritti sull'arte*, pp. 354–5.

68. Lonzi, *Scritti sull'arte*, p. 355.

69. Acronym of *Notiziario di arte contemporanea*, an independent cultural magazine founded in the aftermath of 1968.

70. The first Italian translation appeared in 1967.

71. Celant, Germano, 'Per una critica acritica', *Casabella*, n° 348, December 1969, p. 42–44; Celant, Germano, 'Per una critica acritica', *NAC*, n° 1, October 1970, p. 29–30.

72. Carla Lonzi, 'La critica è potere', *NAC*, 3 December 1970; reprinted in Carla Lonzi, *Scritti sull'arte*, 2012.

73. On Lonzi and Celant, see also Francesco Ventrella, 'Magnetic Encounters: Listening to Carla Lonzi's Tape Recordings', in Ventrella and Zapperi, *Feminism and Art in Post-War Italy*, pp. 45–73.

the 'stimulating role' of the critic with regard to art betrays, in spite of Argan's declared intentions, a sense of the superiority of theory and a hierarchy between the intellectual and the masses. It was precisely Argan's self-assigned licence, or what Carla Accardi sardonically calls 'super-power',⁶⁵ which led the artists to boycott the initiative and their demand for 'some humility'.⁶⁶

Lonzi steps into the frame of the heated debate in solidarity with the artists, and accuses Argan of 'deluding himself that he possesses a clairvoyance'.⁶⁷ Temporality once again emerges as a divisive point between Argan and Lonzi, but in this instance it is the critic, rather than the work of art, who strains toward the future. Argan feels entitled to predict and project his own vision onto others, and 'coordinate the facts of reality'.⁶⁸ The discussion in *Avanti!* dwindled just after Lonzi's intervention, but a sense of irresolution was palpable – Argan remained anchored to his positions, Lonzi and others' tirades were ignored. Such an impasse presaged the possibility that the same questions would return once again.

So it happened, little less than a decade later, in the pages of a new magazine (*NAC*),⁶⁹ that the debate on the contours of criticism gained a new momentum. This time the trigger catalyst wasn't Argan's authoritarian tones, but a provocative intervention by Germano Celant, a critic whose name would soon become synonymous with Arte Povera and international curatorship. Building on Sontag's *Against Interpretation*, translated into Italian just a few years before, Celant argued for a type of criticism that swapped criticality for congruity, proposing that artist and critics were simply in affinity.^{70,71}

Certain parallels can be noted between Celant and the concerns raised by Lonzi in 1963, which she further elaborated on in a piece published for *NAC* in 1970 titled 'Criticism is Power'.⁷² Both Celant and Lonzi exhibit a shared rejection of 'critical distance', that can be interpreted as a response to militant criticism à la Argan, as much as an embrace of new interpretative paradigms introduced by post-structuralism. However, in situating Lonzi's work within a larger discourse, we must hold on to the singularity of her position and trajectory. While in the case of Celant, the refusal of 'critical distance' will lead to the embracing of curatorship, as a practice supporting artists and opposed to criticism, in Lonzi, a similar attitude precedes an abandonment of the art world altogether and the exploration of forms of creativity cutting across professional roles.⁷³

The Celant-Argan cases well exemplify the stakes of the 1970s critique of mediation and its reverberation throughout art discourses. If such critique on the one hand eradicated generative conflicts and resulted in opportunistic alliances between artist, curators, and dealers, it equally helped to illuminate the hegemonic patriarchal structures of art history. This aspect will become apparent in 'Criticism Is Power', the text that marks Lonzi's farewell to the art world. Lines of continuity exist with the 'The Solitude of the Critic', but the scope of her critical endeavour has now expanded. If before the problems raised were somehow ascribed to specific figures in her vicinity – in particular to Argan – they now entail the institution of art criticism in its entirety. This change is registered in the titles, where the existential tone ('the solitude') makes way for a straightforward denunciation ('critique is power'). Lonzi has acquired a new politico-philosophical jargon: she accuses the (male) critic of intellectual domination, of being trapped in dialectical thinking, and concludes by appealing to the subjects oppressed by patriarchal society and excluded by the ideology of class struggle.

A Covert Universalism

The premises for Lonzi's departure from the art world and subsequent embrace of separatist feminism are set, but before we follow her on this journey I want to place her 1970 text alongside Argan's 'La storia dell'arte'. Such an exegetic exercise, I argue, serves to bring to the fore aspects that until now have remained covert, and to help us better understand Lonzi's move. As we have seen, Argan strives to leave the neo-idealist tradition behind. He dislodges the artwork from its auratic position and places it within the fabric of social relations, claiming that an analysis of art's historical determinacy must be supplemented by a political analysis. He restores dignity to artistic praxis and materiality. Yet, in spite of his declared intentions, I argue that Lonzi unveils the limits of his materialist 'turn'. And she does it, paradoxically, by resuming key categories of idealist aesthetics such as 'intuition' and 'consciousness'.

In her 1970 essay for *NAC* magazine, Lonzi launches a scathing attack on criticism, which she deems a *falsifying* activity (*mestiere fasullo*). We should pay attention to the use of the term 'false' here, since its meaning is far from immediate. It doesn't refer to the phoney coquetry of critics bent to the promotional needs of the market, but to a structural inability to testify to the truth content of art. For while art is the emanation of a moment of 'exalted consciousness' or 'intuition' that exists 'outside the domain of ideas', the critic only exists in that domain.⁷⁴ In Lonzi's description, artist and critic occupy different epistemological and ontological spaces, yet it is art that pays the higher price for this difference, for the critic seeks to assume it into its own language, betraying (or falsifying) its (quasi-spiritual) singularity.

At first glance this text may appear to be a nostalgic homage to an outdated idealistic aesthetics, but if we do the effort of situating it both in the broader fabric of intellectual relations and in the *longue durée* of Lonzi's trajectory, another interpretative path may open before our eyes. What I see here, rather than a yearning for the past, is a resorting to idealist categories which assists Lonzi in the elaboration of a proto-feminist critique of the approach to art history championed by Argan. In my reading, Lonzi's vouching for art as a moment of 'high consciousness' to be apprehended through 'intuition' intends to restore some 'otherness' to the artistic object – an 'otherness' vis-à-vis abstract thinking, which Argan's criticism has instead denied, geared, as it is, to transform art into 'an object of knowledge'. In this energetic claim for 'otherness', I argue, one can glimpse the seeds of her feminist separatist choice.

If we now turn to Argan's 'History of Art' and closely examine the phrasing, we will notice that the attempt to align the art object with the discerning art critic carries a somewhat universalist ambition. In the text in question, Argan defines critical judgement as an act that lends the work of art universal value, while enhancing a process of individuation of the subject elaborating the judgement.⁷⁵ Through the exercise of critical judgement, in sum, art objects are raised to a higher rank, turned into a referent for the whole humankind, and the critic is confirmed in his ability and status.⁷⁶ The positionality of the (male) critic is not simply left unquestioned, but ratified in the process. Against this interpretative endeavour, which shields the judging subject in his ivory tower while bending the world to his view, Lonzi opposes a notion of criticism that disintegrates certitudes and exposes the dynamics of power subtending the process of judgement. 'Our crisis is our criticism', she claims, suggesting a rethinking of critical work that goes hand in hand with an undoing of the self.⁷⁷ Only a couple of years later, in the first Manifesto of her collective Feminist Revolt, she will write:

74. Carla Lonzi, 'La critica è potere', in Lara Conte, Laura Iamurri, and Vanessa Martini (eds) *Scritti sull'arte* (Milan: et al. Edizioni, 2012 [1970]), pp. 647–50.

75. In the text we read: 'each thing that is made has meaning for he who made it; but, judging it as having value, I claim that it has meaning also for me, for others, for all', Giulio C. Argan, 'La storia dell'arte', pp. 11–12.

76. 'With the act of judgment, I qualify the thing as something having value, an object; and in parallel I qualify myself as the one for whom the thing has value, a subject', Giulio C. Argan, 'La storia dell'arte', pp. 11–12.

77. Carla Lonzi, 'La critica è potere', p. 649.

‘[...] by not recognizing herself in male culture woman deprives it of the illusion of universality, [...] man’s strength lies in identifying with culture, ours in refuting it’.⁷⁸

78. Rivolta Femminile, ‘Manifesto of Rivolta Femminile’ (1970), in Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp (eds), *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader* (London and New York, NY: Blackwell 1991), p. 40.

The feminist stance that had begun to take shape in her art writings is now fully articulated. In the 1970s, art may have seemed like ‘a thing of the past’ for Lonzi, but on closer inspection, it emerges as a present concern—one that is finding new form and legitimacy through the rise of an ‘unexpected subject’.