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Visual Arts through a Queer Lens (1800-2000)

Introduction to the special issue

Over the last two centuries, in Western countries, many subjectivities judged socially eccentric and unable to fit into sexual, gender, or physical normativity have deployed strategies of dissimulation or adaptation before daring more explicit forms of contestation. Beginning in the 1970s, the organizing of homosexual, lesbian, and transgender movements (summarized in the 1990s under the acronym LGBT, later expanded over the decades to the current LGBTQIA+) provided the first discursive framework and history of proud resilience and anti-patriarchal struggle. Drawing on a body of theory ranging from Judith Butler's now classic definition of gender as performance to that of feminist biologist and theorist Anne Fausto-Sterling, according to whom "sex and gender are best conceptualized as points in a multidimensional space" (2000: 22), the contributions collected in this special issue of *Whatever* shed light on modes and forms of visual representation within twentieth-century Mediterranean artistic practices for the construction of expanded subjectivities in constant metamorphosis. The essays participate in the construction of an alternative historiography of Italian and Southern European art that acts as a narrative "against the grain" to foster a new area of art historical studies inflected by queer perspectives, complementary to the Anglo-American and North European theoretical and historiographical canons.

The studies published here focus on theories and experiences capable of expressing resilient and inventive forms of subjective identities that are hybrid or dissident from social norms. Authors in this special issue have addressed topics of the body, desire, and eroticism in areas traditionally considered particularly heteronormative and whose narrative strategies of subjectivity outside the norm have been less explored. We have welcomed research that aims to produce a cartography of desiring bodies, thoughts, and actions, particularly in Southern Europe and Italy. We have been

guided by the heuristic hypothesis that it is precisely in the Mediterranean area – where the culture of “male domination” (BOURDIEU 1998) seems to be most deeply rooted – that archaic motifs challenging bodies shaped by patriarchal masculinity have found their roots, and by the awareness that this narrative has been nourished by the interweaving of the arts. Thus an atlas of “becoming subjects” emerges, to echo a phrase born in feminist thought (beginning with DE BEAUVOIR 1949) and used by Mario Mieli in the context of homosexual critique (MIELI 1977: 48). They often draw on a karst counterculture already present in the Western Mediterranean tradition – from the iconographies and postures of the Dionysian to the filigree homoerotic narratives of Mannerism – and make it reappear in the present as a genuine return of the repressed.

The focus is on non-heteronormative male bodies, showing how narrative strategies and figurative models of marginalized and oppressed subjectivities can find areas of contact and proximity. From the practices of self-consciousness that were widespread in the Italian context in the 1970s, to the investigation of the body as a space of tension between oppression and liberation, to the subversion of gender as an act of social and political insurrection, iconographic and discursive genealogies originating in the feminist sphere resonate in much of the artistic research analyzed here. On the one hand, this points to the historical contiguity and ideal commonality between Second Feminism and the early gay and lesbian liberation movements, allied in the struggle against patriarchy and (often) capitalism; on the other hand, it suggests the idea of a plurality of feminisms, transcending an essentialist conception and open to a constellation of subjectivities in metamorphosis. This establishes the paradigm of ways of thinking that are emancipated from binary and hierarchical social schemes and that can be intertwined, in an intersectional perspective, with the whole range of other instances of emancipation, including the expression of gender and eros. The roots of queer, on the other hand, are in the wombs of feminism; and a cornerstone of the theory, *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler (1990), stated this in its subtitle: *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

From the beginning of the twentieth century to the decade of the 1970s, when the explosion of acts and paths of militancy and emancipation promoted, even in artistic practices, investigations of the body and sexuality as the foundational space of a new language, the essays in this issue of *Whatever* illuminate a web of threads that run underground through

the decades. Much like the anti-hierarchical rhizome of the *Mille Plateaux* evoked by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, it functions as a common insurrectionary root. It is a transhistorical *koiné* in which pictorial and photographic iconographies, performance practices, and curatorial and collecting choices have contributed to the nourishment of a determined and persistent, if long misunderstood, visual narrative.

Derived mostly from papers presented at the international conference *On Other Shores: queer counter-narratives in the art of Southern Europe and the Mediterranean: c. 1800-2000* (organized by Sergio Cortesini, Francesca Gallo, Giulia Simi, University of Pisa, December 12-13, 2000), the texts collected in the first part of the issue, entitled “Queer avant la lettre: allusions and reticences”, are dedicated to the experiences of the first half of the twentieth century, that is, before the explosion of LGBT movements in the 1970s.

Sara Vitacca’s study of Filippo de Pisis explores the construction of a kind of masculinity far removed from that promoted by the dominant culture. In de Pisis, classical mythology reappears not in the lines of muscular masculinity exalted by the fascist Ventennio, but in the ephebic, drawing on Dionysian iconography and depicting bodies that are either androgynous or reminiscent of typically feminine poses. They evoke both Pictorialist photography – such as that of Wilhelm von Gloeden, fashionable at the beginning of the twentieth century – and the long pictorial tradition of the female nude immersed in a natural landscape, reinterpreting it with explicit homage but with a bold subversion of the genre.

A reflection by de Pisis, published in 1923 in the pioneering journal *Rassegna di studi sessuali* (founded and directed by Aldo Mieli from 1921 to 1928), inspires the theoretical slant of the case studies inquired by Filippo Bosco. While de Pisis called in his article for a study of homoeroticism through art since – unlike the medical approach – it is able to capture those “irresistible complications” of the human soul, the magical realism of Felice Casorati and Ubaldo Oppi was more elusive. The latter, according to Bosco, explored the space of enigmatic inscrutability that escapes the normative boundaries of genre and transforms erotic desire into a field of negotiation for new subjectivities.

Evaguelia Diamantopoulou guides us through the artistic journey of the Greek painter Diamantis Diamantopoulos, who was particularly active in the 1930s and 1940s. A homosexual with a socialist vocation, his research

combines iconographic patterns of popular culture, at a time when national identity was searching for roots in tradition, with the thrust of continental modernism. Combining the gaze of the avant-garde with the pace of militancy, Diamantopoulos illustrated a gallery of male bodies: from bathers to workers, from satyrs to cyclists, adding a piece to the image of a more complex, broader masculinity that was already emerging in the first half of the twentieth century.

Greta Plaitano's study leads through gendered performance as a form of agency by female mediums who deviated from the dominant positivist culture in early twentieth-century Italy and France. Exploiting the rhetoric of documentary evidence of the photographic apparatus, and while medicine was refining techniques of biopolitics and control of the body, Linda Gazzera and Eva Carrère sought spaces of freedom and self-determination in the vast sphere of performance – to which even mediumistic séances seem to belong – that also pass through the subversion of gender. The masculine returns here, as it has often done for women, as a site for the expression of the forbidden, a territory of experimentation for oppressed, unrecognized subjectivities, often pushed to the edge of madness.

The second part of the issue, entitled “Speaking out and calling to action in the 1970s”, brings together studies that focus on the explosion of political activism. In that decade, homosexual movements and anti-patriarchal art practices marked what could be called, albeit anachronistically, a queer turn, where a new masculinity forcefully emerged and sought new grammars among artistic, critical, and curatorial practices.

Giorgio Di Domenico's research highlights the role of Corrado Levi, a critic, artist and collector from Turin, in the circulation of Francis Picabia's works and writings in the 1970s. Levi's activity lies at the intersection of collecting and the circles of homosexual and Marxist activism, particularly in the orbit of *FUORI!* Di Domenico offers an insight into the history of the art market in Italy, showing how the taste and reception of artworks constituted a not insignificant part of the practice and language of the homosexual struggle.

The multifaceted figure of Levi is still at the center of Sergio Cortesini's study, which outlines the language of an affective and autoethnographic rewriting of art history by analyzing the Warburgian montage of the poster book *Madame Pontormo*, where the paintings of the mannerist painter coexist with some *leather* iconographies by Tom of Finland. In

an interpenetration of discursive and artistic practices also belonging to feminist activism – from self-consciousness to the reinterpretation of the historiographical canon to the idea of relational subjectivity – Levi’s artistic-critical operations contributed to positioning the male body against the patriarchal canon and at the center of a network of meanings in which the repressed of the past emerges and finds a resemantization in the present.

The male body is also the subject of the essays by Francesca Gallo and Anna Mecugni. The former examines the performance practices of artists who have chosen to work with the nude as a space for possible negotiation between the sexes within new codes of desire and the erotic scopic act. Focusing in particular on the cases of Ferruccio De Filippi, Renato Mambor, and Vettor Pisani, Gallo traces the link between artistic languages, homosexual movements, and critical practices in the 1970s, in which some elements of premodern thought – such as alchemy and androgyny – rooted in the geocultural area of the Mediterranean appear.

Anna Mecugni’s research on Luigi Ontani’s *tableaux vivants* is in continuity with the same context and in a markedly socio-political perspective. In them, the artist plays with the potential conflict between sex and gender, drawing on past and present images, from Mediterranean mythology to mass culture, with the irony typical of camp, to redraw the extended boundaries of masculinity. Here, the queer perspective breaks down the boundaries of masculine and bourgeois dominance based on an oppositional, prevaricating binarism.

Instead, an intermediate lens runs through Antoni Danos’ analysis of the pictorial work of the Cypriot Andreas Karayan. The beautiful male bodies that Karayan paints resonate with the homoerotic narrative of many of the texts by the Greek poet Konstantinos Kavafis. At the same time, as a discursive threshold of desire, they enter into a dialogue with the imagery of the national tradition. Indeed, the highly eroticized bodies of sailors and soldiers, inserted into the public spaces of everyday life, function as figures of the uncanny in years when, in the Cypriot context, the possibility of constituting homosexual movements was still far away.

The issue thus unfolds an articulated landscape, both in terms of the historical depth in which these themes emerge, albeit with varying sharpness, and in terms of the coefficient of identification and activism with respect to divergent identities, and we hope that it will be a driving force for intensifying studies and research in the same direction.

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