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# Dal momento in cui…

## Ketty La Rocca à Fri Art

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With *Dal momento in cui…*, Fri Art retraces the short career of the Italian artist and writer Ketty La Rocca. Through a series of collages in particular, the show examines the way La Rocca, with both humor and determination, set about deconstructing language, criticizing especially its role in devaluing women, their image, and their work.





Exhibition view, Ketty La Rocca, *Dal momento in cui…*, Fri Art, Fribourg, 2020. Photo Guillaume Baeriswyl. Courtesy Fri Art.

Writing a review commentary on a Ketty La Rocca exhibition is a delicate operation. Even more so when the very title of the show quotes a piece by the artist that embodies all of the mistrust she directed at the language of criticism, which a university and cultural elite – male naturally – had transformed into its own playground in postwar Italy. *Dal momento in cui…* is indeed the title of a solo show at Fri Art that goes back over the ten years or so that the Italian artist's career lasted, but it is first a text by La Rocca that may be syntactically correct yet makes no sense. It is constructed like a long sentence devoid of punctuation in which words and expressions pile up without ever really getting to the point. This continual buildup of complicated turns of phrase and scholarly terms parodies elitist jargon and takes it to absurd lengths, voiding the text of its semantic substance to the point of rendering any interpretation impossible.[1] The piece is displayed behind a small frame assembled in 1971 in which a typed and a handwritten version of the text are shown side by side. In the wake of this piece, the same text was to crop up again and again in the Italian artist's output until her early death in 1976 at the age of 37. It assumed many different forms, written out but also recited as part of several performances. With each use, *Dal momento in cui…* enabled La Rocca to reveal how language can lose its function as a tool of communication and become a mechanism of exclusion by limiting access to information to only individuals who are able to decipher its overly abstract vocabulary.




Ketty La Rocca, *Dal momento in cui...*, 1971, typed and handwritten text on paper, 27.5 x 18 cm. Photo Guillaume Baeriswyl. Courtesy Fri Art and the Ketty La Rocca Estate

In the show, not far from the small frame, a work from the series of *Riduzioni* offers us one example of the reuses of this text. *Photo 13, riduzioni* (1973) is a triptych. Starting on the far

left, we see the cover of a magazine that displays a woman shown from behind; she is naked from the waist down, her legs partly bent, and she is leaning in between the legs of a fully clothed man. The woman is looking up in a submissive posture. To the right of that panel, there is an outline of this image, the lines of which are in fact formed by handwritten text. And finally, at the far right, we see the same "reduced" outline, indicated this time by simple ink lines. The text used to recreate the outlines of the photograph in the central panel of the triptych is taken from *Dal momento in cui…*, whereas the textual elements of the original cover are now replaced by the word "you" repeated over and over. In this use of *Dal momento in cui…*, it isn't only meaning the text is deprived of; its very function as text is also gone. The words are practically illegible, i.e., they only serve to trace out the winding lines of the bodies in the image. The handwritten text becomes here a manifestation of the artist's subjectivity, as if La Rocca was looking to put herself directly in the image, breathe an identity into this woman who has been reduced to a mere body. In *Dal momento in cui…* (1971), when La Rocca copied out the text by hand, it was as if she wanted to make its meaningless elitist terms her own. In *Photo 13, riduzioni* (1973), the same text becomes the vehicle through which the artist expresses herself, not by investing these words with a particular meaning, but through the very materiality of the calligraphy. This "I" of the artist, who shows herself physically in the tiny scrawl, echoes another that can be glimpsed in the series of "you you you yous," which seem to take the audience to task. There is then an "I" subject and a "you" object – even several – that the artist establishes. Or rather the opposite, that is, several "you" subjects for an "I" object, like a multitude of gazes that play along, scrutinizing both the body of the woman displayed on the magazine cover and the artist – through both her writing and her work of art.




Ketty La Rocca, *Photo 13, riduzioni*, 1973, magazine cover and ink on paper, each panel 33.3 x 23.8 cm. Photo Guillaume Baeriswyl. Courtesy Fri Art and the Ketty La Rocca Estate

This double questioning of the audience echoes what seems to have been the source – double as well – of a feeling of injustice for La Rocca, that is, the feeling of being dependent on a gaze and a language that are fundamentally sexist – both as an artist by a sectarian body of critics and as a woman by a backwards society. One of the rare sculptures created by the

Italian artist, the only one figuring in the Fri Art exhibition, makes this feeling of alienation tormenting her concrete. The piece represents a large j fashioned from black PVC that is almost human scale, an anthropomorphized “dje” (as the letter is often pronounced in Italian when used at the start of a word) with its little round head, like an alter ego symbolizing the dissociation through which part of the artist remains a prisoner in her own work and at the mercy of the critics. Although most art criticism, so awfully male, quite simply failed to consider the artist’s work at all, it remained no less a threat, given the omnipotence of its authority, to the integrity of this fractured identity. Throughout the artist’s career, it was this feeling of forced vulnerability –as an artist and as a woman – and a mistrust vis-à-vis a hostile language that served as a starting point for La Rocca. The artist transformed these into the very driving force of her artmaking. In her earliest artworks – a series of collages from the years 1964-65 that form the great majority of pieces on display at Fri Art – the artist was already taking aim at the way mass media fashioned a constricted image of women through the superficiality of a visual and textual discourse that objectified them.




Ketty La Rocca, Nervi distesi, 1964-5, collage on paper, 66 x 48 cm. Photo Guillaume Baeriswyl. Courtesy Fri Art and the Ketty La Rocca Estate

Ketty La Rocca's art practice goes back to her membership in *Gruppo 70,* a Florentine collective of artists, poets, and intellectuals founded, as its name does not suggest, in 1963. The collective's interdisciplinary work sought to take artmaking closer to the language of modern society while turning a critical eye on mass culture and consumer society. Thanks to *poesia visiva* in particular – a practice at the intersection of writing and the visual arts that reflected the Italian neoavanguardia – members of the group experimented with new formats that were more in tune with modern forms of language and means of communication. In this affiliation, La Rocca's first works were collages juxtaposing images and scraps of text she cut out from mass-circulation newspapers and magazines to create compositions that caustically reappropriate the codes of the tabloid press and advertising. It is these collages from 1964-65 that make up the majority of works shown at Fri Art. In one of them, for instance, we easily recognize an element from a contemporary spacecraft set near another unidentified object whose central part suggests a smiling face; this is associated with a text, "nervi distesi / NUOVE SOSPENSIONI HYDROLASTIC."[2] The wordplay combines a reference to self-help or well-being culture and an advertising slogan for hydraulic shock absorbers for your automobile, implicitly referencing the body-machine and the performance and productivity imperatives in a then booming industrial and postindustrial economy. While wielding ambiguity, double meanings, insinuation, and pastiche, these works by La Rocca decrypt the "rhetoric" of mass media and in particular advertising in order to point up the ideology that often operated subliminally on the audience.[3]




Ketty La Rocca, *Diario della donna che lavora*, 1965, collage on paper, 44.5 x 29 cm. Photo Guillaume Baeriswyl. Courtesy Fri Art and the Ketty La Rocca Estate

Ketty La Rocca often used this strategy to lend a feminist coloring to the *poesia visiva*. Many of her collages thus include images of women or parts of the female body while the texts refer

to beauty products or archetypes from women's magazines. On one of the collages in the show a slogan assures the reader that "è quello che ci vuole / PER I VOSTRI PREZIOSI 'PEZZI,'"[4] resonating with the image of a woman who seems to be wearing a luxury bracelet and nothing else. Another features a woman's armpit with an accompanying text that reads "DIARIO DEL/la donna che lavora / io devo radermi tutti i giorni…"[5] These works deride the image of femininity that is not only clichéd but above all prescriptive, which the commercial press was promoting. The works were attacking in particular the weight of patriarchal dogma in producing that image. In an almost Dadaesque approach, La Rocca draws on the absurd and humor in these collages, not as an end in itself but in order to formulate a biting critique of society, notably touching on the condition of women in Italian culture after World War II and fascism.

In postwar Italy, women were grappling with two simultaneous systems of oppression. On the one hand, they were living in a conservative culture that was still forcefully conditioned by Catholic morality; on the other, they faced a consumer society that had recently exploded in Italian life along with its share of stereotypes shaping the image of the "modern woman." Behind slogans that were all about freedom, modernity was synonymous not with women's equality but with quite simply their subjugation to another form of prescriptive conditioning. It was in the context of this dual obstacle to emancipation that the movements of second wave feminism took shape in Italy starting in the 1960s, precisely when La Rocca was active artistically. While she was not officially linked to any one of these movements, she certainly did remain quite close to them since the feminism of those years was mainly focused in cultural circles and especially around Carla Lonzi. This rare female figure in the milieu of art criticism devoted herself to questioning the power of critics with respect to artmaking. She reproached them for using their role to fashion an exclusive artistic myth that disregarded many discourses, particularly the discourse of women, whom they confined to an exceptional status. The part language plays in excluding women proved central to the feminist struggles of the 1960s and '70s. Deeply influenced by recent research in semiotics and nascent poststructuralism, women militants and intellectuals decried the betrayal of a language in which they saw an instrument of eminently ideological power wielded by a male academic elite.[6] Coming to that realization, Carla Lonzi ended up abandoning art criticism to devote herself entirely to her feminist struggle, founding the movement *Rivolta Femminile* in 1970.



Ketty La Rocca, Appendice per una supplica, 1972, video, 9’30’’. Photo Guillaume Baeriswyl. Courtesy Fri Art and the Ketty La Rocca Estate

It was an identical realization in the same year that led La Rocca to write *Dal momento in cui…*[7] While language’s complicity in gender inequality led Lonzi to turn away from art and adopt a more overtly activist position, it is indeed that same complicity that is the source of La Rocca’s artistic expression. Rather than give up on language, she tried to deconstruct it through pastiche and by taking it to absurd lengths to expose its ideological biases. Throughout her career, this deconstruction led La Rocca, moreover, to question the very foundations of human communication, undertaking to experiment with nonverbal forms and particularly gestures and signs starting in 1971 in a series of works on hands. These experiments gave rise to her video piece *Appendice per una supplica* (1972), which is on display in the Fri Art basement. In this pioneering work of video art in Italy, hands dance soundlessly against a black background. Initially it is two hands that touch, explore each other, embrace; then there are three hands, with two male hands surrounding a woman’s hand; and finally two hands once again, one of which counts the fingers of the other. Through this series of silent sequences, more lyrical than narrative, all the power and sensuality of nonverbal communication are mobilized – with an allusion no doubt to the expressive hand gestures Italians are famous for. Between collage, video, text, and sculpture, the show devoted to La Rocca at Fri Art offers a detailed if not exhaustive survey of the many strategies and mediums the artist adopted in her brief career to explore, deconstruct, and occasionally denounce power and the limitations of language.

In an article published in *Artforum* in 1993 for the Ketty La Rocca show at Geneva’s Centre d’Art Contemporain, Judith Russi Kirchner said she saw in the artist’s images “a heartbreaking quality… and it has to do with their unusually direct, sometimes raw mode of communication, their tone of supplication and call for attention and self-affirmation.”[8] Several times in her piece the art critic stresses the artist’s vulnerability and the pleas articulated through her works. As I visited *Dal momento in cui…* at Fri Art, I had less a feeling that La Rocca had made art out of a desire for attention and more the conviction that she did what she did because of a need – urge, even – to conquer a language that did not

represent her. Everywhere in her work we find humor, play, and a form of rhetorical facetiousness through which she reappropriated a vocabulary and syntax that were isolated in their elitism and misogyny. That ubiquity makes it impossible, in my mind, to see in La Rocca the figure of a pleading victim. Even more, the Fri Art show offers us the image of an artist who utterly masters her identity, which she leverages creatively to practice an art that springs from taking control of language. Maybe my sentiment is due to the fact that another show is running at the same time, the first exhibition in a Swiss art institution of the artists Dorota Gaw?da and Egl? Kulbokait?.[9] These two artists have made a name for themselves over the past years as the founders of the Young Girl Reading Group, a performative mobile platform devoted to reading feminist texts since 2013. Both theoretical and fictional, the texts are in search of the genealogy of a different language, history and human experience rendered invisible by the primacy of men over the Academy and language. The untimely death of Ketty La Rocca meant these two generations of feminist artists would not meet at Fri Art for the simultaneous opening of their respective shows. They all converge nonetheless in the eyes of the public.

[1] Fri Art has published a French translation of the text on its Instagram account, 27/03/2020.

[2] “Relaxed nerves / NEW HYDROLASTIC SUSPENSIONS.”

[3] Roland Barthes, “La rhétorique de l’image,” Communication, 4, 1964, 40-51.

[4] “This is what it is needed FOR YOUR PRECIOUS ‘PIECES.’”

[5] “DIARY OF the active woman. I have to shave every day.”

[6] See Lucia Re, “Language, Gender and Sexuality in the Italian Neo-Avant-Garde,” MLN, 1:119, 2004, 135-173.

[7] Barbara Casavecchia, “Ketty La Rocca,” Tutto. Perspectives on Italian Art, ed. Ingvild Goetz, Leo Lencsés, Karsten Löckemann, Letizia Ragaglia, Berlin, Hatje Cantz, 2018, 185.

[8] « There is a heartbreaking quality to Ketty La Rocca’s images, and it has to do with their unusually direct, sometimes raw mode of communication, their tone of supplication and call for attention and self-affirmation. » (Judith Russi Kirchner, “You and I: The Art of Ketty La Rocca,” *Artforum* (March 1993), 80-83.)

[9] Dorota Gaw?da and Egl? Kulbokait?’s show titled *Mouthless* closed early on 15/3 in the wake of the preventive measures taken to stop the spread of COVID-19.

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