

Giving it Time: Thoughts on the Feminist Duration Reading Group

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My talk focuses on the Feminist Duration Reading Group which has gathered since March 2015 to discover and discuss under-known and under-valued texts, ideas and struggles from outside the Anglo-American feminist canon.

The series started in March 2015 at Goldsmiths, where I teach, with a focus on Italian feminisms. Focusing on texts from the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, readings highlighted interlocking strands from Italian feminisms, including: the practice of consciousness-raising, or *autocoscienza*; tactics of emotional and professional withdrawal; and the politics of non-assimilation.

The name of the reading group, Feminist Duration, borrowed art historian Amelia Jones's account of the durational work of maintaining queer feminist histories, which, she writes, "reactivates them by returning them to process and embodiment — linking the interpreting body of the present with the bodies referenced or performed in the past [...]". The notion of "duration" highlights the ongoing work of caring for feminist pasts, by curating, archiving, writing about and in other ways perpetuating those histories and records.

Most of the texts we read had recently appeared in the French/English journal *May Revue*. The issue was edited by Fulvia Carnevale, who works with James Thornhill as the 'readymade' artist collective Claire Fontaine. Italian feminisms have informed Claire Fontaine's practice in key ways, contributing to her formulation of the Human Strike, which draws on tactics of affective resistance to perform a protest without fixed goal or mission. Resonating with Melville's figure of Bartleby, and his declaration "I would prefer not to," as well with the Italian feminist political principle of starting from the self in order to depart from the self, Human Strike resists conventional social roles and expectations. It practises negation in order in order to

activate subjectivity and produce socio-symbolic change.

I had first encountered Italian Feminisms in a talk given by Fulvia in Toronto, during an exhibition called 'Getting Rid of Ourselves,' on subjective refusal, anonymity and delegation that I organised in 2014. Particularly compelling to me was Fulvia's account of the movement's grounding in concrete practices of relations, coupled with its critique and rejection of the very terms under which cultural work occurs, based as it is in assumptions about male artistic transcendence, and female immanence and complementarity.

Italian Feminisms Reading Group

To bridge the texts from the 1960s, 70s and 80s that we read - by Carla Lonzi and Rivolta Femminile (the collective she formed with artist Carla Accardi), Lea Melandri, Antonella Nappi and The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, we read Fulvia Carnevela's recent essay 'We Are All Clitoridean Women' on the legacy of Carla Lonzi. In *Vai Pure*, her account of the dialogue between herself and her lover, artist Pietro Consagra, Lonzi announced the termination of their relationship: one of several renunciations Lonzi staged by Lonzi throughout her life (from art criticism, where she was a prominent figure, patriarchy through her work of stepping aside to focus her energy on autonomous feminist collective activities, and – fearing that her position in the movement was becoming ossified - feminist leadership. We weren't able to read the book itself, however, as it, amongst numerous other germinal works of feminisation (including Lonzi's experimental work of art writing based on interviews *Autoritratti*) have never been translated into English.

Even when translated, Italian feminist articulations of 'sexual difference' have often been dismissed as essentialist by Anglophone commentators. Italian feminists' rejection of equal rights and assimilation, as well as the links it forges between theory and practice, have troubled Anglo-American readers, posing "a radical challenge to feminism as the struggle for equality with men, and to the notion of politics understood as the struggle for power," according to political theorist Susanna Scarparo.

Feminist Duration in Art & Curating

This initial reading group informed a two-day research symposium, *Feminist Duration in Art and Curating*, at Goldsmiths, later in March 2015. Following this I called a meeting in which myself and six other women who had participated in the group (Angelica Bolletinari, Guilia Casalini, Laura Guy, Diana Georgiou, Irene Revell, Amy Tobin, a mixture of London-based MA and PhD students, artists and curators) agreed to maintain the reading group, and position it outside academia, moving it to SPACE in East London, where it has met on the first Tuesday of the month since August 2015. We also decided to collaborate on producing a public events series in London later that year, inspired by Italian feminisms, which we called *Now You Can Go* – after Lonzi’s book.

The subtitle “A Reading Group on Feminisms, Consciousness-Raising and Leave-Taking,” we dropped after a year or so, as the group’s range broadened to include more non-European and intersectional emphasis.

The group attracted people beyond the Goldsmiths network: political activists, writers, people with education and psychology backgrounds, as well as a large constituency of artists, curators, and MA and PhD students in these and related fields. Participants are very intergenerational. There are women my age and older who were part of second wave women’s liberation. Some men and transgender people. But it mainly comprises younger women in their twenties and thirties.

I begin meetings by asking people why they are here and what they hope to gain. Feminists who remember the dark days of the late 1990s/early 2000s, when feminism really felt like the F word and we struggled to find support for our projects, appreciate the intergenerational conversation, the sense that feminism still matters. We value the chance to look beyond feminism’s “usual suspects” to under-known feminisms, and to challenge and decenter our own feminist lineages. Younger participants often speak about their lack of knowledge about feminisms. They have a hunger for it, a desire to know these histories and perspectives. But they aren’t exposed to it consistently at college or elsewhere. With the precarity of today’s economy, which is exacerbated by student fees and debt, they seem to crave the kind of collectivity and solidarity that feminist spaces, ideas, and tactics can offer.

Reading Together

While I circulate readings in advance, rather than expecting everyone to read them, and putting pressure on their-already burdened schedules, we soon adopted a strategy of reading out loud together, paragraph-by-paragraph, one person at a time, as we make our way round the room. This introduced a new spirit of vulnerability and openness, one stimulated more by curiosity and excitement, than expectation or duty. Participants are encouraged to focus observations on the text, not in a conservative return to formalism, but to remove the idea of “experts” v. “novices.” Putting aside time to think together as feminists and see where discussions lead, rather than performing our knowledge or mastery, has a levelling effect, the sense that we are in it together. As the host of a recent meeting at which we performed the parts of various women who contributed to a dialogue between feminist-identified artists in Australia published in 1980 put it afterwards: “I found it super useful to hear the text read aloud by the group, it animated the transcript in a way that allowed me fresh insight to the original seminar's voices and was a very pleasurable research methodology.” Questions about something that someone doesn't get, or disagrees with, often provoke the most productive discussions. At the same time, we benefit from the insights of participants who are familiar with these ideas, and who help us to grapple with them collectively.

Programming Arcs

Programme announcements invite people to email if they want to propose a forthcoming meeting. If they haven't attended the group already, I encourage those interested in leading a session to come, so that their proposed focus resonates with the group's ongoing concerns. In addition to programming some evenings myself I invite people who I'd like to give space to. Currently I am in conversation with people about leading sessions on feminisms in Japan as well as Egypt.

SPACE gives us the room and covers social media promotion. But the group operates without funding. No fees are paid, although I do take guest facilitators out for a drink or meal afterwards. On occasion people have turned down invitations to lead sessions, explaining that they are usually paid to run this kind of event. Which is

fine, of course. Sometimes I contribute my funds towards screening fees or expenses. I have also put up out-of-town people in my flat.

Various programmatic threads have emerged over the two years. The first, most fully delineated, concerns critical, political and creative genealogies of, inspired by, or in affinity with, Italian feminisms. Several events have focused on the Milan Women's Bookshop collective, including reading/writing exercises developed by the Berlin-based artist Alex Martinis Roe, whose feminist research practice stages a debt to the Milan group and the lineage of new materialist thought from which it grew.

The Milan collective's practice of 'affidamento,' or entrustment, has been of particular interest. Rather than follow feminist understandings of relations between women as horizontal and equal, affidamento acknowledges the disparities and differences between them. Entered into conscious relationships of affidamento with one another, members of the group aimed to free up one another's desires, realize their potential, and engender self-actualization within a collective context. As examples, the group looked to affidamento relationships between female literary characters and women writers, such as that between HD and Bryher who tells HD, "without hesitating, to 'Go ahead.'"

Adriana Cavarero's essay 'On The Outskirts of Milan,' which we read in the group, describes an affidamento relationship between two women, Emilia and Amalia, who met at a feminist class for women without high school education. During class, Emilia constantly tells her life story in a fragmented and disordered way. Amalia, a gifted writer, frustrated with Emilia's inability to narrate herself, does it for her. She pens a beautiful and coherent account, which Emilia carries with her constantly in her bag, weeping as she re-reads it: a response to the gift of recognition and authority provided to her by her friend.

Our best-attended meeting in Summer 2015 focused on Wages for Housework, with texts by Silvia Federici, and Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James. So many people that we had to break into two groups.

Another, on the 1975 Icelandic Women's Strike, took up adjacent tactics of refusing work in order to highlight women's undervalued roles. 90% of women participated in the strike, bringing the country to a temporary standstill as schools, shops, nurseries, fish factories shut down or ran at half capacity, while caring and domestic labour was performed by men. Considering the mass appeal of such a protest, our discussion reflected on whether feminist demands that women's labour be recognized were watered down as the strike was presented as an occasion for celebration rather than resistance. Or whether this was a canny move to appropriate pre-existing national traditions in pursuit of radical feminist goals.

Other programme arcs have broadened and contested the historic feminist understanding of gender binaries, including meetings on transfeminisms in Spanish and Serbian contexts.

We have challenged the dominance of the white feminist canon with meetings on intersectional black/Hispanic border feminisms and Arab world/Islamic feminisms. For the September session earlier this month, artist Cinzia Cremona in collaboration with queer feminist activist Whiskey Chow foregrounded feminist and LGBT activism in China. The meeting took place the night before Cinzia left for a teaching job in China, where the word 'feminist' is automatically censored on social media, LGBT matters are silenced under pornography laws, and grassroots dissent and organisations are feared, silenced and suppressed by the state.

Occasionally we look at texts **from** the Anglo-American feminist tradition that have been marginalized. This summer we explored *Right-Wing Women* by Andrea Dworkin – a writer I vowed never to read again, after her writing on violence and pornography caused such havoc within the so-called pro-sex feminist communities that I was part of. Reading Dworkin afresh and in a group context, I was fascinated by her chapter on how conservative evangelical Christian ideology interpellates women, mobilizing the figure of Christ as a love object. Dworkin's insistent rhetorical style, informed by an underlying sense of lived – perhaps intergenerational – trauma, resonated with today's atmosphere of emotional politics, no-platforming and call out culture.

Politics of Translation

From time to time, our frustration with the lack of resources available has prompted members to produce informal translations of as-yet-unpublished Italian feminist texts. At the same time, we are wary of too-easy a notion of translation. A session led by Laura Guy focused on Gayatri Spivak's *The Politics of Translation*, where she warns, "If you are making anything else accessible, through a language quickly learned with an idea that you transfer content, then you are betraying the text and showing rather dubious politics."

Film screenings

Some of our most resonant sessions have revolved around screenings. Artist Rose Gibbs screened a 1983 film from the Cinenova archive called 'Scuola Senza Fine' (School Without End), directed by Adriana Monti. It was made as part of the 150 Hours Schools, experimental education programmes for adults who had not completed high school education that became vibrant sites of feminist pedagogy and political awakening for working class, rural, older women and housewives.

A screening of the 2014 documentary '**Feminism Inshallah**: A History Of Arab Feminism' (directed by Feriel Ben Mahmoud, 2014) proved more contentious, due to its very westernized, French idea of female emancipation. It suggested a rather too easy equivalence between female visibility and liberty, and also lacked any deep attention to feminist ideas that emerged from more indigenous debates. While I found the screening awkward, not least because only two people present identified as having Arab or Islamic backgrounds, the discussion that followed was nonetheless important. I would say in these cases that my consciousness about the limits of my own perspective and ideology comes sharply, sometimes painfully, into focus.

Giving It Time

While revisiting earlier feminisms for tools that can be used in contemporary contexts, and juxtaposing earlier efforts with current feminist expressions and urgencies, we nonetheless try to resist being constrained or predetermined by earlier

positions. In *Italian* feminism, for emphasis, an emphasis on class, education and regional difference came at the expense of nuanced articulations of other forms of difference or inequity stemming from race or ethnicity.

Emilia-Amalia

Beyond the friendships and collaborations that have grown amongst London-based participants, we have forged international connections. We've borrowed from the archive of Arab feminist thought developed by the Beirut-based cultural organization 98 Weeks. In Paris, the 'ecstatic feminisms' of Claire Fontaine, is an important ongoing source of challenge and inspiration, and Fulvia Carnevale a vital interlocutor and figure of *affidamento* for me. Last year Fulvia hosted a public meeting at La Monnaie in Paris with several contributors to *Now You Can Go*. It coincided with a new issue of *May Revue* she'd edited, which included essays by programme participants and a reflection by her on its laboratory-like spirit.

Following *her* participation in *Now You Can Go*, in 2016 the curator and art historian Gabby Moser set up the Emilia-Amalia Feminist Working Group in Toronto, with artists Annie MacDonell and Cecilia Berkovic and curators Leila Timmins and cheyanna turion. Their name, of course, draws from entrustment relationship between the women described by Adriana Cavarero. After the London group's screening of 'School Without End,' Emilia-Amalia showed the film in Toronto where, it emerged, its maker, Adriana Monti, now lives. Attending the screening, Monti updated the group on her current work with elders in the city, where she uses Italian feminist tactics of *autocoscienza* - consciousness-raising - and starting from the self.

Gabby presented a session in London on questioning through writing, inspired by Kyla Wazana Tomkins's 2016 essay 'We Aren't Here to Learn What We Already Know,'. In discussing the article the group considered the usefulness of Wazana Tomkins' proposal that, when studying texts, instead of asking "the "what about" question: e.g., what about the people who are excluded from this theory?", a more productive way of opening up conversations entails asking:

how do the exclusions at the heart of this work facilitate certain conclusions, problems or paradigms, what are these paradigms and what happens when we consider this theory in a broader context? What would this theory look like if re-written from a different point in history, different assumptions about political economy, etc.?”

Following an Emilia-Amalia meeting on Wages for Housework’s activities in Canada earlier this month, which I initiated, in November artist Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen (who has work in the extratextual show that just opened her at Calgary Contemporary) is leading a session with me on the campaign. We will read out loud from a transcript of a CBC programme from the 1970s called Confrontations that Jacqueline sourced from a national archive in Canada. A panel of self-identified capitalists, conservatives and anti-feminists confront Wages for Housework’s Judy Ramirez. While Ramirez holds her cool and keeps her line, antagonists bait her with arguments including that women *not* being paid for their household labour represents the “last bastion of sanity”.

Conclusion

The reading group’s monthly commitment signals the value of putting time and space aside for feminism, and giving time to work as feminists together. This emphasis on temporality evokes the latent potential of earlier feminisms that were overlooked, under-valued, or stereotyped when they first emerged. I see this as an embodied practice of citation, where citation is understood in relation to who and what we reference and acknowledge, as well as where we put our energy: a form of friendship as a lived condition, as artist Celine Condorelli describes it, “wherein one befriends ideas and issues as well as people, and which has its own responsibilities and demands.”

Under the atomized conditions of digital neoliberalism, in which FOMO meets the demand that we perform our networked relevance and popularity, the group reflects a desire to assemble in conditions that are not recorded, streamed, or retweeted. These forms of gathering can offer a sense of collective sustenance that contrasts

with the competitiveness and individualism provoked under late capitalism.

I do have some reservations about this turn towards discursive and ephemeral arts programming – what’s been called the paracuratorial turn. As Gabby Moser and I wonder in a conversation between us that was published last year, is it easier for institutions to support low-budget, one-off feminist events, rather than those requiring sustained financial resources, and which include lasting documents, like exhibition catalogues, which enable feminist practices and modes of thinking to be transmitted to subsequent generations?

Yet despite these reservations – and the times that my unpaid work on the group resembles my day job as a university lecturer – I cannot deny the reading group’s value for me. At least by challenging institutional resources (library loans, photocopiers, scanners, office time) towards feminist ends, I can put my academic position to more collective use. It has also resulted in less anxious, more open teaching style for me. Italian feminisms have offered me language and tactics with which to articulate my complicity with academic and art world systems that celebrate high status cultural production while simultaneously disavowing the feminized labour and collective efforts that sustain it. Looking outside and interrogating Anglophone traditions, the process of maintaining the group has helped me and other participants find the energy that we need to support feminist values, generate feminist cultures, and imagine feminist futures.