

Ketty La Rocca: Word, Image, Body.

Introduction

From her early collaboration with the visual poets of the Florentine Gruppo 70, to her later conceptual art that brought her to the attention of leading international feminist critics and practitioners, Italian visual poet and artist Ketty La Rocca (1938-1976) has left behind a body of work that spanned media (linear and visual poetry, collage, performance, photography, video and conceptual art) and genres. Yet, she neither belongs to the canon of the Italian neoavanguardia nor is she a well-established figure in the history of Italian art of the 1960s and 1970s. This is of course entirely unsurprising; women artists are still underrepresented in the art world as the work of the feminist activist artists Guerilla Girls sharply attests.¹ As Lucy Lippard highlighted in her seminal book *From the Centre* (1976) in the 1960s and 1970s women artists were at a considerable disadvantage in accessing art circles, unless they were creating mainstream art, and were often met with a negative reception because of their perceived ‘lack of compliance with the evolutionary mainstream’ of the art world.² Susan Rubin Suleiman used the metaphor of the ‘double margin’ to discuss the place of women of the avant-garde whose role was inextricably linked to the position of women in society and ‘woman’ in the cultural imaginary, reinforcing their marginal position twice over.³ Cornelia Butler, citing La Rocca as a case in point, has also noted the privileging of Conceptual Art in the art historical narrative, which resulted in overlooking other practices especially by feminist artists.⁴

The past two decades have seen a number of contributions that have refocused attention on La Rocca’s work, showing how she often anticipated the work of other feminist artists and drawing attention to her pioneering work in Italian video art.⁵ The international reception of her work remains however affected, as Helena Reckitt has observed, by the

¹ Guerilla Girls, *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?*, 1989, Tate Modern, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/guerilla-girls-6858> [accessed 19/09/2018]. See also <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/> [accessed 19/09/2018].

² Lucy R. Lippard, *From the Centre. Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: Dutton, 1976), p. 122. In *Six Years*, Lippard noted the difficulty of women artists when they are measured again ‘the Greenbergian standard of “advance” in art, Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (London: Vista, 1973), p. 6.

³ ‘It has become increasingly clear that the relegating of *women* to the margins of culture is not unrelated to the place accorded to “woman” by the cultural imaginary’. Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender Politics and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 14.

⁴ ‘In examining the 1970s, many institutions have tended to privilege Conceptual art, sometimes overlooking the debate around feminist art that still brackets Conceptualism. Part of what makes historicizing the 1970s so complicated is the overlap of feminist practice with other current impulses’. Cornelia Butler, ‘Art and Feminism: an Ideology of Shifting Criteria’, in *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, cat. of the exhibition, Los Angeles, The Museum of Contemporary Art (London and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2007), pp. 15-23 (p. 22).

⁵ Lara Vinca Masini curated the first retrospective solo exhibition since La Rocca’s death: *Ketty La Rocca*, cat. of the exhibition, Florence, Galleria Carini, 1989. Lucilla Saccà curated a major retrospective: *Omaggio a Ketty La Rocca*, Rome, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, 15 marzo-16 aprile 2001; Monsummano Terme, Museo di arte contemporanea e del Novecento, 7 aprile-17 giugno 2001. Saccà also edited La Rocca’s writings: *Ketty La Rocca. I suoi scritti*, ed. by Lucilla Saccà (Turin: Martano, 2005). Elena de Becaro, *Intermedialità al femminile: l'opera di Ketty La Rocca* (Milan: Mondadori, 2008); Francesca Gallo and Raffaella Perna, *Ketty La Rocca 80. Gesture, Speech and Word*, cat. of the exhibition, Ferrara, XVII Biennale Donna (Ferrara: Cartografia artigiana: 2018).

dearth of translations and dissemination of ‘Italian feminism’s rich literature’.⁶ This lack of contextual reading furthers the sense of isolation of her work and is often the path to marginalization for women artists.⁷

The hybrid nature of La Rocca’s work and her distinctive commitment to interartistic and intermedial explorations, which are the focus of this article, have also added to her difficult reception. The act of crossing media boundaries and interrogating the role and signifying power of media for artistic practice are at the core of La Rocca’s work. Her materials are both traditional (paper, paint on canvas, pen and ink) and new media (videotape). Her poetic work included linear, visual and concrete poetry. Performances, *azioni* [actions], body art and video art were also part of a distinct phase of her work in the 1970s, in line with what Lippard termed at the time the dematerialization of the art object.⁸ What remained constant in her oeuvre was La Rocca’s sustained epistemological exploration of language and communication (from verbal and visual to gestural) in mass industrialised society and the particular role that it had in shaping ideology, normative femininity, subjectivity and identity.⁹

From her early intermedial experimentation with collage and word and image relations, to her increasingly fraught relationship with language, which is increasingly seen in this period as deeply implicated in patriarchy, to her later ground-breaking use of videotape and feminist action, the work of La Rocca not only calls for revaluation but also offers a novel lens through which to rethink the work of the Italian neo-Avant-Garde, Italian feminist art, and the import of those artists and creative works that consciously operated outside established boundaries. After all, as Aldo Rossi noted, in the analysis of the work of La Rocca’s fellow visual poet Lamberto Pignotti (1926-), when it came to reading the work of Gruppo 70: ‘della parola si occupa la linguistica, dell’immagine la critica d’arte’.¹⁰ The boundary between the two disciplinary fields was (and still is) more often than not rather impervious to acts of medial and artistic boundary-crossing. This had a significant impact on the disciplinary pigeon-holing of phenomena of syncretism, hybridization, and experimentation which were left in a disciplinary no-man’s-land, leading to further marginalisation with consequences for the shaping of the canon, both in its literary and

⁶ Helena Reckitt, ‘Generating Feminisms: Italian Feminisms and the “Now You Can Go” Program’, *Art Journal*, 76.3-4 (2017), 101-11 (p. 102).

⁷ Lippard: ‘much women’s art, forged in isolation, is deprived not only of a historical context, but also of that dialogue with other recent art that makes it possible to categorize or discuss in regard to public interrelationships, aesthetic or professional’. Lippard, *From the Centre*, p. 5. This echoes what she wrote to Ketty La Rocca about the idea of isolation. She then explains what she means by isolation: not so much that women were not aware of ‘the artworld art’, but that male artists were not aware of women’s art, hence the lack of a contextual reading. Lippard, *From the Centre*, p. 5.

⁸ Lippard originally wrote about the idea of dematerialization in 1967: ‘for lack of a better term I have continued to refer to a process of dematerialization, or a deemphasis [sic] on material aspects (uniqueness, permanence, decorative attractiveness)’. Lippard, *Six Years*, p. 5.

⁹ In 1993, on the occasion of a touring exhibition of La Rocca’s works, Judith Russi Kirshner noted that ‘La Rocca’s work speaks to contemporary feminist artists as more than archaeological evidence. Its power lies in the authenticity to represent subjectivity and identity’. J. Russi Kirshner, ‘You and I: The Art of Ketty La Rocca’, *Arfforum international*, March 1993, 80-83 (p. 81). The 1992 exhibition was held in Geneva at the Centre d’Art Contemporain, and then travelled to Amsterdam in 1994. Russi Kirshner credits these exhibitions with bringing La Rocca’s work to the attention of a new generation of artists.

¹⁰ Aldo Rossi in *Lamberto Pignotti*, with a preface by Aldo Rossi and Gillo Dorfles (Rome: Beniamino Carucci Editore, 1975), p. v.

artistic configurations, in a cultural operation which continues to see distinct spheres of competency for literary studies, art history and criticism, and media studies.

The work of Ketty La Rocca, in its creative and theoretical challenge to the arts, media and disciplinary discourses, speaks powerfully to the need to reconfigure boundaries (and the acts of crossing them) in ways that overturn received notions of creative forms and disciplinary borders. In this article La Rocca's work, in its distinct phases, is seen as a lense through which to rethink the impact of media and disciplinary/critical boundaries on the evaluation of her work. Language, as we shall see, was of crucial import for La Rocca, as it was the clearest manifestation of the constraints imposed by patriarchy and the art mainstream on women artists. It was also central to her intermedial experimentation, a field ripe with creative and activist potential. This article focuses on the intersection between La Rocca's intermedial experimentation and her critique of media. It starts with her verbo-visual work; it considers her progressive move into the intermedia fields of concrete poetry and verbal objects; and finally considers her exploration of gesture in search for a space of self-expression and experimentation less bound by societal and gender constraints.

Visual Poetry: Word and Image in Mass Society

In the preface to the 1957 edition of *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes positioned the starting point for his interest in semiology as the ‘impatience at the sight of the “naturalness” with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history’.¹¹ A decade later, Umberto Eco’s volume *La struttura assente* lucidly summed up the aims of semiology as: ‘la ricerca semiologica (quale la proponiamo) si affanna a mostrare come ogni nostro atto comunicativo sia dominato dalla massiccia esistenza di codici—socialmente e storicamente determinati. E sembra sempre voler affermare che noi non parliamo il linguaggio, bensí *siamo parlati dal linguaggio*’.¹² For Eco semiology was the vehicle for a critical understanding of the limitations and boundaries within which language speaks through us via historically codified conventions.

These same concerns with the ideological abuse of what-goes-without-saying and the illusory authenticity of language as a mode and channel of communication underpin La Rocca’s early work at the time of her close association with Gruppo 70.¹³ Her collages in the 1960s used the words and language of commercial media to undermine conventional meaning and to debunk the ideology underpinning it, especially in relation to the social construction of woman, the role of patriarchy, Catholic morality, and the colonial discourse. Her collages in the mid-1960s ridicule the stereotypical and normative mediatic representation of womanhood. The beauty industry and the domestic role assigned to

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, selected and translated by Annette Lavers (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972). The selection and translation is from the original 1957 *Mythologies* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1957), p. 11.

¹² Umberto Eco, ‘Introduzione’, in *La struttura assente. Introduzione alla ricerca semiologica* (Milan: Bompiani, 1968), pp. 7-12 (p. 10).

¹³ Giuliana Pieri and Emanuela Patti, ‘Technological Poetry: *Impegno* and Gender in Gruppo 70 (1963-1968)’, *Italian Studies*, 72.3 (2017), 323-37.

women come under attack in her exploration of the conditions imposed upon female self-perception within the mass media.

Her collage *Dal potere al controllo al lavaggio*, 1965 (Mart, Museo di arte moderna e contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto, Archivio Tullia Denza) (Fig. 1) is a striking example of her aesthetic language and her subversive intent. Precariously balanced on a cut-out of a portion of a woman's face (complete with rouged lips and a rose), a lipstick takes centre stage in the composition. A blue balloon adds an element of apparent playfulness and lightness which contrasts with the words on the left-hand side of the composition, 'power' and 'control'. La Rocca's customary excoriating wit is at play here: the control needed to balance the omnipresent trappings of normative femininity, as propounded by the beauty industry, is revealed, on the right hand side of the visual poem, to extend only to 'lavaggio' [washing], which stands for the entire realm of domestic labour. Similar references to domestic chores punctuate La Rocca's collages at the time; in another work of the same year, also in the collection of Mart and part of the Tullia Denza archive, titled *Trazione anteriore – Sono Felice* (1965), 'I piatti/il bucato/i lavori/domestici...', arranged in quatrain form, stand for the received idiom of female fulfilment. The phrase 'dal potere al controllo' reflects her critique of patriarchy and the nexus power-control over women's physical and political bodies. La Rocca plays with her viewers who are confronted with materials, format, and size (45 x 30 cm) which recall and mimic openly the press and magazine advertising. The familiar is defamiliarized, uncovering the verbal/visual mechanisms that channel and constrain communication. The language of patriarchy is the constant target of these years in a trajectory that will lead her, as we shall see, to an epistemological critique of both verbal and visual language as a means to reject the authority of logocentrism and its inextricable link with Western thought and patriarchal domination.

So far art critics have focused exclusively on La Rocca's practice, a position I also support since the 'widespread tendency to separate theory from creative practice [...] reiterating the centuries-old hierarchy between logos and techne',¹⁴ easily results in the undermining of the theoretical import of practice. This needs to be framed within a centuries-old tradition which placed art making (and craft in its delicate and contested relationship with the former) in a hierarchically inferior position to writing on art. The separation and implicit marginalization of practice over theory loomed large for those artists who either did not engage in self-commentary and theorising or, more importantly, did not receive the same amount of critical attention as others. La Rocca's work (and that of other female artists of her generation) was often marginalised because it was not channelled through a body of written theoretical texts which instead characterised the outputs of other members of the Italian neoavanguardia.¹⁵ Contemporary assumptions about the relation between episteme and techne, with the implicit superiority of the former over the latter, are central to La Rocca's work. Her progressive disenchantment with the art world and verbal/visual language is grounded in her critique of the construction, through language, of the female

¹⁴ Pieri and Patti, 'Technological Poetry', p. 337.

¹⁵ Whilst this body of work was contested and critiqued at the time, it did leave a more tangible trace which, I would argue, has helped to keep the work of male artists of the neoavanguardia more visible. The first major retrospective of visual poetry, *La poesia visiva, 1963-1979*, curated by Luciano Ori (Florence, Sala D'arme di Palazzo Vecchio, December 1979-January 1980), whilst paying homage to the role of women artists, did not have a single critical intervention by a female visual poet, creating a disquieting verbal silencing of female voices. The story of the movement at the time was significantly told by Gillo Dorfles, Vittorio Fagone, Filiberto Menna, Ermanno Migliorini, and Luciano Ori.

subject as ‘other’. Language and the Western ‘scholarly mode of privileging the verbal text’,¹⁶ with their links to the imperial and colonial position of the writing subject, are presented by La Rocca as necessarily bound up with the marginalization and subjugation of women in Western society. Female artists, and those like La Rocca who did not join feminist collectives, needed the support of critical voices who would ‘translate’ their work into the language of art mainstream with its related guarantee of access to exhibition spaces and the art market. Yet this act of translation was also one of silencing of the female voice; it was one of the many instances of speaking *for* women rather than allowing female voices to speak. Whilst I intend to privilege *techne* over episteme/*logos* in this essay, I am struck by the fact that the small body of theoretical interventions by La Rocca so far have not received critical assessment despite their relevance in relation to both her work and contemporary semiological debates.¹⁷

Her 1966 article in *Letteratura* is particularly interesting in this respect.¹⁸ In it, La Rocca takes on the debate over *incomunicabilità*, one of the buzzwords of 1960s Italy, and focuses on the supposed crisis of communication, allegedly brought about by mass media society. She considers language as ‘una realtà in movimento’ (p. 116) in which past and present coexist: ‘anziché di linguaggi in crisi parleremo quindi di segni, morfemi, sintagmi, strutture vecchie e di segni, morfemi, sintagmi, strutture nuove: di un linguaggio che vive senza soluzione di continuità perpetuandosi per rigenerazione’ (p. 116). The idea of the perpetual regeneration of language, of its being simultaneously old and new, ‘of the past’ and ‘of the future’, is interesting. It shows, during this phase, a fundamental optimism in the ability of language and the artist—through his/her manipulation and critique of language and the aesthetic message—to have an impact on society, in keeping with the political role and militancy of the artist of Gruppo 70.

Rather than a crisis of incommunicability in contemporary society, La Rocca focuses her attention on the ‘subcomunicazione’ (p. 116) brought about by consumer society and the mass media. If we accept that language is both ‘of the past’ and ‘of the future’, communication is either reactionary or ‘aperta’ (p. 116). The latter is the aim of the visual poet. Whilst La Rocca is careful to point out that the idea of language as movement does not imply a teleology or value judgement, i.e. it is not linked to an idea of progress, one detects in this text and in her collages in the same years a belief in the ability of the artist to create the conditions for a new form of communication, which critically embraces the language and channels of communications of technological society. The caustic critique of the myths of contemporary Italy, whilst not devoid of cynicism, does still signal a belief in the role of poetry and poetic language: ‘un tratto di linguaggio che significhi le esperienze presenti della società presente; tratto tanto più poetico anzi quanto meglio sappia anticipare i futuri segni dei futuri significati; d’un tratto di linguaggio tecnologico che precorre la sempre più

¹⁶ Rey Chow, ‘Translation as “Cultural Resistance”’, in *The Rey Chow Reader* (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 162.

¹⁷ Elisa Biagini, in her reappraisal of La Rocca’s work, is oddly dismissive of the two essays published by the artist in the journal *Letteratura*. Elisa Biagini, ‘L’ossessione del linguaggio: le prime opere di Ketty La Rocca’, *Italian Culture*, 19.1 (2001), 111-26, (pp. 117-18).

¹⁸ Ketty La Rocca, ‘Crisi dell’arte e poetica nostrana’, originally published in *Letteratura* (new series), 82-83 (July-October 1966), 127-30. Reproduced in *Ketty La Rocca. I suoi scritti*, pp. 114-19.

tecnologica natura della comunità umana'.¹⁹ This is however no easy acceptance of 'technological' language. Her intention is to engage critically with the language and ideology of contemporary society in order to expose the wounds inflicted by the dominant official culture. Although her poetics never turned into nihilism or critical laisse faire, in the late 1960s we can see a distinct shift. From the freeing up of language from its codified meaning, via defamiliarization in the playful but always mordant use of word and image juxtapositions, La Rocca developed an increasingly critical stance towards the ability of language to perform its communicative role. This is where her work, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, anticipates much feminist theoretical work on the manifest 'otherness' of language.

Word as Image/Object

La Rocca's collages, at the time of her close collaboration with Gruppo 70, did not open up the exhibition circuit for her. Their link to the neoavanguardia and association with literature and poetry acted as a disciplinary barrier which denied her access to mainstream art. Whilst collage was of course a medium traditionally associated with the avant-garde, the work by La Rocca that was more readily accepted by the art mainstream used traditional artists' materials and genres (painting and sculpture) despite remaining inextricably linked to her previous poetic work. In La Rocca's 1967 canvas *Verbum Parola Mot Word* (1967, priv. coll.) the four words of the title appear in sans serif capitals in yellow against a blue background. Russi Kirshner describes the painting as 'a simple canvas that makes the word the subject of the artist, and invites the viewer to fill in its meanings'.²⁰ The same could be said of her other canvas *In principium erat* (1967, Carmignano, Archivio Galleria Schema) in which we are invited to complete the biblical text, whilst pointedly the missing element is 'verbum' itself. Another canvas of the same period entitled *ma ... ma ...* (1970 priv. coll.) focuses on a minimal language component—the conjunction 'but'—which invites us again to fill in meaning. These canvases are the first steps in La Rocca's experiments with the reification of linguistic signs which echoes the work of contemporary concrete poets.

La Rocca's first solo exhibition *Le presenze alfabetiche*, was held in 1970 at the Palazzo dei Musei in Modena. It consisted of three-dimensional letters and punctuation signs which were turned into PVC sculptures—the material itself an insight in her sustained engagement with contemporary technological culture. Achille Bonito Oliva, introducing her work, noted how: 'il linguaggio ha subito, accanto al progressivo processo di mercificazione, un parallello fenomeno di cosificazione'.²¹ Renato Barilli, in the catalogue of her second solo exhibition in Bologna in 1971, perceptively noted that her sculptural letters in PVC aim to: 'riportare la parola al suo stato iniziale e originario [...] la parola-evento fisico che come tale occupa uno

¹⁹ In the same essay, she makes explicit reference to John Dewey's definition of poetry in *Art as Experience* (London: John Allen and Unwin, 1934) and comments: 'siamo in presenza di un discorso poetico ogni volta che è stata intensificata la funzione idealizzante (ovvero significante) assolta dai segni nel linguaggio ordinario', p. 117.

²⁰ Judith Russi Kirshner, 'You and I: The Art of Ketty La Rocca', *Artforum international*, March 1993, 80-83 (p. 82).

²¹ Achille Bonito Oliva, *Ketty La Rocca*, Modena, Palazzo dei musei, 1970. Quoted in Biagini, 'L'ossessione del linguaggio', p. 120.

spazio tridimensionale [...] torna a prevalere sulla parola segno'.²² Barilli's emphasis on the corporeality of language chimes with La Rocca's own comment on her preference for the letter 'i/j': 'perché le i? Ho semplicemente affidato una corporeità ad una lettera che come forma fosse assimilabile alla figura umana e allo stesso tempo presentasse elementi componibili'.²³ The passage from the two-dimensional character on the page to concrete space can be read within her progressive search for the autonomy of language and freedom from codified meaning. The isolated three-dimensionality of the characters and punctuation marks are fragments or traces of language; they are in a state of freedom prior to combining with other characters to form words, and signal her move beyond verbal language as the privileged mode of communication around 1969-1970.

Beyond Word and Image: Language Gesture Communication

Since verbal and written language were too implicated with the oppressive patriarchal system, the body and in particular gesture became La Rocca's way to access a more authentic individual expression. Her exploration of gesture and the use of the artist's body did not lead her down the path of much feminist body art of the time; whilst she was interested in *azioni* and performances, already at the time of her involvement with Gruppo 70, her exploration of gesture came via a further crossing of art and media boundaries: the use of the popular contemporary technological medium, the photographic image, so central to the language and strategies of communication of mass consumer society, and itself a highly codified language in particular in relation to the way it constructed normative femininity.

In a letter to Lippard, reflecting on her photographic work in which images of the artist's hands (sometimes captured with other male hands) were inscribed with the artist's delicate handwriting, La Rocca identified different phases in her exploration of gesture and communication. The first phase is when: 'cerco di focalizzare l'attenzione sia sui gesti delle mani che sull'astrattezza e ambiguità del linguaggio articolato e sulla parola e sul pericolo del parlare'.²⁴ Hand gestures are presented as an alphabet of emotions and a way to articulate a language of emotion and communication outside the confines of verbal language. The second phase consists in 'la delusione dell'immagine' when the artist realises that the image representing a gesture is not free from language: 'la convinzione che anche l'immagine subisce un esaurimento da parte della parola, una specie di espropriazione'.²⁵ Her solution to the power of the word over the image is a reappropriation of the artist's gesture via handwriting and the use of a particular type of text which she describes to Lippard as: 'un mio testo senza senso, una specie di paradosso del linguaggio, un'esemplificazione abnorme', (p. 143). This is a reference to *Dal momento in cui*, a deliberately unintelligible but grammatically correct text, which punctuates her work and reappears under many guises: as a paragraph of text next to a single photograph of hands; alone printed onto canvas; inscribed in the artist's own handwriting over parts of

²² Renato Barilli, *Ketty La Rocca*, Bologna, Galleria Duemila, 1971. Quoted in Biagini, 'L'osessione del linguaggio', p. 120.

²³ From the private archive of Michelangelo Vasta, quoted in Biagini, 'L'osessione del linguaggio', p. 121.

²⁴ *Ketty La Rocca. I suoi scritti*, p. 143.

²⁵ *Ketty La Rocca. I suoi scritti*, p. 143.

photographic images; and voiced in performances. As the extract below shows, this is a text that plays with the boundaries of cognition. Syntax and a decidedly intellectualised language are *prima facie* the initial barrier of communication which is however shown to be illusory as one is lost in the progressively labyrinthine syntactical structures:

Dal momento in cui qualsiasi procedimento presuppone da un punto di vista pratico un'esigenza di carattere concreto accettabile nell'ambito di una prospettiva disgiunta da considerazioni parziali in un campo così vasto che inevitabilmente trova un'affermazione non del tutto pertinente e specifica tanto che in una visione di aspetti non immediatamente rilevabili finanche ad un'osservazione attenta di imponderabili fenomeni che dilatano una visione talvolta resa parziale ad un'effettiva impossibilità di verifica attinente ad un ristretto campo di considerazioni consequenziali e contraddittorie che determinano atteggiamenti ambigui [...]²⁶

Francesca Gallo sees it as 'a further indicator of a certain pessimism not only towards the possibility of transmitting one's ideas but in general towards the ability of verbal languages to work as an interface'.²⁷ This also seems a further example of her wry critique of female silencing and gender relations. By appropriating the language of the establishment, in the jumble of mock intellectual speech fragments, La Rocca intimates that the female artist's channel of expression in the art establishment is not her own. She is not given an authentic platform to express herself; the words that she uses are fundamentally alien and alienating to her. Hence the only stance she can take, in order to express herself more authentically, is to subvert mockingly this same language and lay bare our reliance on inauthentic language to represent reality.

In La Rocca's seminal artist book, *In principio erat* (1971), the opening of John's Gospel—'In principio erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat Verbum'—is a clear reference to the primacy of verbum/logos in Western society as well as a powerful reminder that logos and patriarchy are fundamentally tied together. If verbum/logos is at the roots of language and communication and of Western Christian culture, it is easy to see her critique of the fundamental entanglement of word/language with the dominant patriarchal and Catholic culture and hence the necessary alienation of woman from verbal language. The aim of *In principio erat*, in the words of the artist, is: 'richiamare l'attenzione su quella gestualità perduta che l'uomo "occidentale" (e cioè della società altamente tecnologizzata e industrializzata) ha avuto da sè, per trasferirla, appunto, nelle tecniche di comunicazione'.²⁸ Her reference points are tribal communities who enrich communication via the body (she uses the word 'potenziare' which suggests also a sense of potential

²⁶ *Omaggio a Ketty la Rocca*, p. 75.

²⁷ *Ketty La Rocca 80*, p. 47. Casavecchia sees it also as a an example of another target: 'Art criticism, so full of dogmatic and self-referential inanity',

https://amandawilkinsgallery.com/usr/documents/exhibitions/press_release_url/36/2014_ketty-la-rocca.pdf
[accessed 18/09/2018]

²⁸ Inedito M.V. 1971, p. 125-26. This is the text for her book *In principio erat*, which was launched in 1971 at the Galleria Flori in Florence, *Ketty La Rocca. I suoi scritti*, p. 125.

empowerment); bodily communication does not simply have a supporting role but, as she points out, it provides the ‘contenuto emotivo del messaggio’ (*ibid.*, p. 125).

La Rocca reflects on the loss of balance between body and mind which has caused the privileging of verbal communication. She is aware that gestures can be viewed as a regression to a pre-verbal phase but she also sees in them a rich source for contemporary artists; they are a means to strip away the layers imposed by civilization and culture on communication. It is thus a conscious choice which sees her in the act of ‘recuperare la potenzialità del gesto delle mani’ (*ibid.*, p. 125). This is not a form of archaism or primitivism (though her reference to anthropology is of its time and potentially problematic in its assumptions) but a means to reach out for the aesthetic potential of this lost form of communication. It is a means to free and expand communication outside the boundaries imposed by codified communication which, if it is mainly conceived as verbal communication, is contained within lexical and grammatical constraints, as well as ideological ones. She is not looking for a universal language of communication; she is aware that gestures are also codified within different cultures but her interest is in gesture as a potentially richer and more authentic means of communication because, she suggests, less directly conditioned by society and its ideological strictures.

In her collages La Rocca made a conscious choice to distance herself from the artistic gesture, the possessive individuality of marking the paper. Her work aimed at eliminating the physical presence of the artist—via taking away the act of appropriation of the art work by marking it—preferring instead to rely on language and images as the physical traces of mass communication. In the early 1970s, we witness a process of physical re-appropriation of the art work through the gestural marking of the work itself. After the phase in which language was exclusively mediated by the printed press, handwriting resurfaces as an important component of the art work alongside the re-introduction of verbal language. La Rocca also introduced a new element: the obsessive recurrence of the English word ‘You’, handwritten on her images. ‘You’ is symbolic of language itself, pointing to its fundamental ‘otherness’—this is ‘you’, not ‘I’—but also its potential dialogic nature.²⁹

Her handwriting often became a way of marking the outlines of her images, pointing to the centrality of the concept of border in her work.

What is a border or boundary? It is, first of all, the line that is drawn, let us call it its ‘ridge’; its significance is one of definition. This boundary, this line, always has two sides. If I trace around me a closed contour, I keep myself in and defend myself against. One side of the line protects me, the other side excludes others.³⁰

²⁹ Gallo refers to the obsessive repetition of ‘you’ in her photographic work as an example of how language had become ‘repetitive and insignificant’. Francesca Gallo, ‘Gesto e parola nel lavoro di Ketty La Rocca/Word and Gesture in the Work of Ketty la Rocca’, pp. 13-26; English version, p. 45-51, in *Ketty La Rocca 80*, p. 45. Rorro notes that it ‘appears as a reappropriation of the self but also as a delineation and summons of the other: the man, who constrains and limits the movement and space of the woman’s hand, but also the viewer as witness and prosecutor of his or her own existence’, Angelandreina Rorro, ‘Ketty La Rocca. Reduction of Language’, in Gabriele Schor, *Feminist Avant-Garde. Art of the 1970s*, Vienna, The Sammlung Verbund Collection (Munich; London; New York: Prestel, [2016]), pp. 145-52 (p. 143).

³⁰ Michel Serres, ‘The Geometry of the Incommunicable: Madness’, in *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, ed. by Arnold Davidson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 42.

Michel Serres, considering the symbolic and physical signification of boundaries, helps us to think through the most significant series on which La Rocca worked around 1974-1976, the *Riduzioni*. They consisted of a single photographic reproduction—archive photos, press photographs, pictures of art works, film posters, or images of La Rocca's own hands—which was progressively transformed by the artist: the initial image is the starting point for a triptych and polyptych in which successive pen and ink drawings by the artist reduce the photographic reproduction to its outlines in a process of progressive stripping down in which only the linear skeleton of the original remains at the end.

A considerable number of the *Riduzioni* focus on icons of art history, especially art works of the Florentine Renaissance, a particularly powerful signifier of mainstream art, the Western (male) tradition and the discipline of art history in the Vasarian tradition. The appropriation of these images by La Rocca through the act of forgetting the meaning of the original image and looking for its traces in personal memory involves a reworking of the image outline/boundary via drawing, in itself highly significant in the Vasarian tradition. Drawing in the Western academic tradition was foundational; a highly codified language which was imparted by the master through rigorous training and involved a progressive move to different levels of complexity with the human body and narrative painting designated as the culminating point of this trajectory. For centuries women artists were denied access to life drawing, barring them thus from the only route into professional art. In the *Riduzioni* La Rocca is literally retracing the master narrative of Western art with its implied denial of the role of female artists.

The *riduzione* of Palazzo Mannelli Riccardi (1974, Archivio Michelangelo Vasta, fig. 2) exemplifies her modus operandi and her polemical intent. The starting point is a photograph of a window of the piano nobile of the 16th-century palazzo, located in Piazza della Madonna degli Aldobrandini, in Florence. The window is an example of the Renaissance re-appropriation of the classical language of architecture: the ornate architrave, curved pediment and scrolls frame the aperture; the window sits above a frieze complete with triglyphs which alternate with medallions and fleur-de-lys motifs. The first stage of the *riduzione* shows La Rocca's carefully tracing over the ornamentation ensuring the readability of the image (this is a still a classically designed window). The result is a complex iconotext: the handwriting functions as a drawing device—following the main lines and curving around the smaller decorative details—but is also a text calling to be read. Yet the act of reading is doubly unfulfilled: the writing can only be properly read if one is able to turn the paper following the direction of the lines of text which are often turned sideways or upside down; getting closer to the image one is confronted with fragments of text which are phrases from La Rocca's *Dal momento in cui*, ensuring that the potential intelligibility of the fragment is ultimately negated. Yet, the writing supports the reading of the image, in an interesting inversion of the primacy of the word over the image.

Talking to Lippard about the process of the *Riduzioni* La Rocca explains: 'tento di volgarizzare al massimo le immagini dei gesti rendendole ordinarie attraverso le fotocopie e a questo punto le riscatto. Come? Dimenticando il significato e segnando solo la traccia che questo passaggio sulla fotocopia mi lascia: una vaga memoria di tutto il processo

precedente, una traccia di informazione'.³¹ The unlearning of meaning—conventional codified meaning—is the first step in a process of retrieval of a more authentic meaning which is triggered by the trace left by the image as it moves from material to a progressively immaterial state, via technological reproduction. This progressively fainter trace (from photograph to photocopy to the graphic appropriation of the image by the artist) is the physical recording of the loss of meaning of the image, and language more widely, but this same trace is also a way to reconnect with something more authentic and personal, in La Rocca's words 'una memoria personale' (*ibid.*, p. 143). Her use of the cheapest form of mechanical reproduction of the photographic image—the humble photocopy—is also highly significant: her 'vulgarization' of the image is used here in the Latin sense; it is a commonplace, popular, and everyday means of reproduction, as opposed to the medium of photography with its association with art as well as technology, in another instance of her conscious use of media and their own codified languages.³² The graphic trace in the *Riduzioni* is the vehicle to re-appropriate, however imperfectly and with full awareness of the loss implied, the meaning of the image.

Hands and gestures were the subject of La Rocca's pioneering videotape *Appendice per una supplica* (1972), which was presented at the 36th Venice Biennale in the performance and videotape section curated by German filmmaker and television art pioneer Gerry Schum.³³ As Gallo points out, this work is a 'milestone in the history of Italian video art' and 'the first use of electronic media by a female artist' in Italy.³⁴ The video was shot in black and white with a fixed camera. Against a dark background we see a sequence in which the artist's own hands perform a number of gestures, and at times are shown as they interact with male hands, sometimes assuming repressive attitudes. The word 'you' appears on the hands, tattoo-like, allowing for a contextual reading with La Rocca's artist book *In principio erat* (1971) which was also presented at the Biennale. The word 'you' was often also used like a line of text to outline the images in the *Riduzioni*. Russi Kirshner sees the process of outlining and inscribing the image using the word 'you' as a way to signal: 'the self defined by the other',³⁵ and points out how 'the word becomes a kind of boundary or border defining for the viewer, and *through* the viewer, the edges within the images. That handwritten edge is a protective or self-defensive skin, setting limits on the self' (p. 83). The act of tracing the boundary is also a marker of the corporeality of the artist: hands, gestures, handwriting, and, towards the end of her career, voice, were central in La Rocca's performance pieces and video art.

³¹ *Ketty La Rocca. I suoi scritti*, p. 143.

³² Photography in the early 1970s was undoubtedly also associated with popular culture; developing and printing film was within the reach of the masses. Polaroid made instant colour film a reality in 1963; less than a decade later, in 1972, the fully automatic SX-70 Land camera with self-developing film was launched. See: <https://www.polaroid.com/history> [accessed 18/03/2019]. Yet, to this day photography remains firmly linked to a distinguished art tradition, a privilege that is not shared by other reproductive means of the time. The potential political significance of this distinction was not lost on La Rocca.

33 Tess Takahashi, 'Experimental Screens in the 1960s and 1970s: The Site of Community', *Cinema Journal*, 51.2 (Winter 2012), 162-167.

³⁴ F. Gallo, 'Word and Gesture', p. 46.

³⁵ Russi Kirshner, 'You and I', p. 82.

Daniela Palazzoli, in her early attempt to systematise the use of new media, highlighted the role of videotape in recording and holding up a technological mirror to society.³⁶ In the same volume, Pio Baldelli, in his critique of the homogenization and ‘conforming’ function of official mass media,³⁷ sees videotape as a potential means to escape the confines of mass culture, in line with other commentators at the time who viewed videotape as an easily accessible instrument to provide counter-information.³⁸ La Rocca’s fundamental scepticism about the ability of any medium to free itself from societal constraints underpins her challenge to the way information is presented for consumption. Her epistemological exploration of language and communication is a constant questioning of the role of the medium itself; if the medium is the message, in the way it frames and constructs meaning via its particular language and metalanguage, then it is inextricably implicated in the oppressive system that leaves only a thin margin for authentic expression.³⁹ Whilst her critique does not end in nihilism, her interest in what we can call the ‘materialities of communication’,⁴⁰ underpins her exploration of the impact of intermediality and remediation on meaning construction.⁴¹

In the *Riduzione, Il mio lavoro* (1973, Archivio Michelangelo Vasta, fig. 3) the triptych starts with a photograph of La Rocca preparing the set for shooting *Appendice per una supplica*. The videocamera on a tripod is in the foreground next to a male figure with his back turned towards us. In the middle image, La Rocca’s handwriting traces carefully the boundaries of the objects and figures framed in the initial photograph. In the final ‘reduction’ only a linear outline remains: the male figure towers over the composition, the silhouette still allowing us to read it as a male figure; the videocamera is also still a legible trace and seems to blend with the figure of the artist, barely recognizable since her corporeal presence is only an undulating line which traces the head and part of her back. It is difficult not to frame the interpretation of this work via La Rocca’s feminist aesthetics and her critique of the subordinate position of woman and the female artist. As La Rocca pointedly remarked in her correspondence with

³⁶ ‘Il videotape non è solo la registrazione di queste azioni, ma diventa in un certo senso uno specchio tecnologico attraverso il quale conoscere se stessi’. Daniela Palazzoli, *Fotografia cinema videotape. L’uso artistico dei nuovi media* (Milan: Fratelli Fabbri Editori, 1976), p. 114. This volume is part of a series edited by Maurizio Calvesi entitled ‘L’arte nella società’.

³⁷ Pio Baldelli, ‘La funzione del videotape’, in Palazzoli, *Fotografia cinema videotape*, pp. 108-09, ‘la radio e la televisione di Stato hanno fornito per anni notizie, divertimenti e spettacoli a senso unico, confezionati dall’alto, calati verso i “sudditi”, conformati e conformanti secondo modelli prefigurati’, p. 108.

³⁸ ‘nei confronti della televisione, il videotape può costituire una profonda modificazione dell’informazione. La televisione ufficiale ha una gestione centralizzata, limitata a pochi, mentre il videotape va usato da tutti verso tutti’, Baldelli, ‘La funzione del videotape’, p. 109. Baldelli also reminds us of the new media landscape of mass communication: ‘film, televisione, radio, bande magnetiche, videotape, istruzione programmata, laboratori linguistici, mezzi elettrici della visualizzazione, ordinatori elettronici, stampa e immagini strip e successive generazioni composite di mezzi, televisore portatile, lezioni registrate, minibiblioteche che trasmettono notizie e documenti nelle reti di comunicazione elettronica a canali multipli puntano verso l’“informazione” di massa’, Baldelli, ‘La funzione del videotape’, p. 108.

³⁹ “The medium is the message” because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action. The content or uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association. Indeed, it is only too typical that the “content” of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium’. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 3rd edn (Berkeley: Gingko Press, 2013), e-book (chapter 1, location 171-73).

⁴⁰ Christian J. Emden and Gabriele Rippl, ‘Introduction: Image, Text and Simulation’, in, C. J. Emden and G. Rippl, *ImageScapes: Studies in Intermediality* (London: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 1-18.

⁴¹ The term ‘remediation’ was coined by Bolter and Grusin as another way to think about the ‘repurposing’ of media. The concept was a way to negotiate ‘the apparent contradiction between our two logics of mediation’, namely immediacy and hypermediacy. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1999), p. ix.

Lippard: ‘ancora, in Italia almeno, essere donna e fare il mio lavoro è di una difficoltà incredibile’.⁴² What is particularly interesting here however is the way in which the artist alludes to the complex intersection of different media: photography, videotape, the endless mechanical reproduction of images and texts available via photocopy, verbal language through the materiality of handwriting with its real or perceived connection with the authentic expression of the individual hand that traces it, and finally drawing. The interaction of these media, which are signs and carriers of other signs, echoes theories of ‘intermedia’ prevalent in the 1960s especially among the artists of Fluxus. Dick Higgins, co-founder of the movement saw ‘intermedia’ as a new focus on the dissolution of the borders between the arts and the concomitant expansion of the liminal spaces between traditional ways of making art and artistic media.⁴³ In the Intermedia Chart (p. 50), Higgins visualised intermediality as a circle which contains other intersecting circles, some clustered and forming thicker networks of intersections—as in the case of poesia visiva [Italian in the original], visual novels, object poems, sound poetries, concrete poetry. Intermedia is envisaged as a free space that falls ‘conceptually between media that are already known’ (p. 52), pushing against the media separation which in his view is linked to a fundamentally feudal conception of society, carefully stratified and codified in order to impede mobility and preserve the status quo.

In 1975, La Rocca worked on the *azione*, entitled *Le mie parole, e tu?*, represented at the Galleria Nuovi Strumenti (Brescia), Galleria La Tartaruga (Rome), and later at the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Florence. In the *azione*, La Rocca sat at a table reading from her unintelligible text *Dal momento in cui*, surrounded by other people reading passages from the same text; the voices reading the extracts were misaligned creating a confusing cacophony out of which at times the word ‘you’ seemed to emerge. A photographic recording of the event was published in the influential contemporary art journal *Flash Art*, accompanied by a short text, laid out in poetic lines, in which La Rocca’s critique of language remains unwavering. She speaks of her performance as ‘un totale asservimento/al linguaggio’, and a dramatization of her relationship with her chosen medium.⁴⁴

Whilst La Rocca’s critique of language is often universalist in nature, in this *azione* La Rocca’s vocal appropriation of this alien language is particularly interesting in relation to Adriana Cavarero’s theorisation of the politics of voice. For Cavarero ‘the voice is the sonorous material of logos, understood as a system of signification’.⁴⁵ The singularity of the voice, the embodied uniqueness of the speaker, as it is manifested through the speaker’s voice, is a way to recuperate the bodily and individual in the name of the universal. Cavarero tries to overturn the traditional subordination of speech to thought, building on her reading of Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*. For Arendt, what matters in speech is not so much signification or communication but the fact that ‘in acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in

⁴² Ketty La Rocca. *I suoi scritti*, p. 143. Lippard was also very clear about the constraints that art making placed on the artist and the intrinsically political nature of those constraints: ‘the way artists handle their art, where they make it, the chances they get to make it, how they are going to let it out, and to whom—it’s all part of a life style and a political situation’. Lippard, *Six Years*, p. 8.

⁴³ See Dick Higgins and Hannah Higgins, ‘Intermedia’, *Leonardo*, 34.1 (February 2001), 49-54. The article contains two texts by Dick Higgins related to his initial (1965) and later (1981) conceptualization of ‘intermedia’.

⁴⁴ *Flash Art*, 58-59 (October-November 1975), 43.

⁴⁵ Adriana Cavarero, ‘A Politics of Voices’ in *For More Than One Voice: Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 53.

the human world'.⁴⁶ In La Rocca's *azione* the embodied singularity of the speaker emerges no matter what she says but the alienating function of logos remains. The sonic immersion in the absurd rhetoricity of *Dal momento in cui* is a means to question the artist's relationship with her chosen medium—'il mio rapporto con il mezzo'—as well as a declaration of the failure of language to enable communication.⁴⁷ In La Rocca's mordent critique of the over-intellectualization of language one might detect an implicit reference to the art mainstream dominated by its male voices, be they artists or art critics.⁴⁸ There is also an interesting parallel with Carla Lonzi, who, in 1975, after her intense work with Carla Accardi since the foundation of the collective Rivolta Femminile in 1970, 'renounced feminist leadership [...] instead of seeking greater recognition from women within the art world, she renounced that system and its means of attributing value altogether'.⁴⁹

Conclusions

Lea Vergine, in her influential study, *Il corpo come linguaggio*, located La Rocca's work among 'the artists who have worked with their bodies but who cannot be reduced to the label of "body art" since their primary interests are fundamentally cognitive'.⁵⁰ She also linked La Rocca's work to a wider 'state of anguish for the *being-in-the-world*, and likewise the pain that results from the impossibility of finding a real relationship with the world'.⁵¹ As we have seen in the analysis of some of her works and artistic phases, La Rocca's sustained exploration of media, language and communication was both of its time and intensely personal, whilst always being political.

Reflecting on her work, in an unpublished note in her archive, she noted: 'io sto facendo vedere quali sono le piaghe [della società]'.⁵² La Rocca's creative practice called for a deep engagement with society's ills, confronting critically the dominant official culture. Gruppo 70's complex relationship with consumer culture and the marketization of the art work were only the starting point for La Rocca's aesthetic experimentation which is rooted in the upturning of the myths of mass consumer society, a critique of logocentrism, and the search for genuine female agency. Her attempt to expose the wounds of society is testament to her

⁴⁶ Hanna Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958), p. 179.

⁴⁷ I borrow the term rhetoricity from Gayatri Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation', in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 179-200. The rhetoricity of the language relates to its history, social customs, and cultural traditions and has thus a particular significance for the female subject.

⁴⁸ La Rocca's solo shows were possible thanks to the support of a number of highly influential figures who dominated the art world in Italy at the time: Achille Bonito Oliva, Renato Barilli and Gillo Dorfles were the master interpreters of contemporary art in Italy in the second half of the twentieth century.

⁴⁹ Helena Reckitt, 'Generating Feminisms', p. 101.

⁵⁰ Lea Vergine, *Il corpo come linguaggio. La 'Body-art' e storie simili* (Milan: Gianpaolo Prearo Editore, 1974), p. 9. Vergine describes the body art movement as 'an attempt to eliminate culture—which is to say the whole nexus of cultivated ways of living [...] the collective formation of social groups within institutions that define and condition them', p. 3.

⁵¹ Vergine, *Il corpo come linguaggio*, p. 13. It is interesting to note that, in an article in *Letteratura*, La Rocca in her critique of incommunicability declared her interest in phenomenology, especially Heidegger's concept of Being and Time, developed in *Sein und Zeit* (1927), which underpins our essential being, the Being of our being ('l'essere dell'"esserci"), p. 115. 'Crisi dell'arte e poetica nostrana', now in *Ketty La Rocca. I suoi scritti*, p. 115.

⁵² *Ketty La Rocca. I suoi scritti*, p. 141.

open dissent and her militancy. The corporeal fissure evoked by her words is especially resonant in the context of the development of feminist body art, which often openly engaged with the physical re-enactment of the injuries inflicted by society on women.⁵³

La Rocca wryly observed the workings of gendering; how it was internalised through language, images, and media; and how it naturalised male-dominated society and its language. The path to finding her own voice went through a critique of the medium as message. Her exploration of different media underscored their reliance on highly codified verbal and visual languages, which fundamentally implicated them in the process of denying agency to women. Counter-hegemonic agency lies in the constant process of debunking the way communication is channelled: both the medium and the message need to be interrogated and critiqued in order to go beyond their myth-making function.

Intermediality, in its hybridity and lack of clear codification, provided La Rocca with a freer in-between space for experimentation. If ‘language is where the often perilous crossing of epistemic thresholds leave their material trace’,⁵⁴ La Rocca’s practice and theory-in-practice is one such trace: her work continues to speak powerfully of the need to interrogate language and the media that support it, and to question and extend the boundaries between media, as well as exploring the liminal space therein.

⁵³ Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*, intimating the condition of proximity to physical wounds of woman, was first performed in New York in 1964. Gina Pane, among others, would later explore the physical laceration of the body in her performances. See Lucy Lippard, ‘The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women’s Body Art’, *Art in America*, 100.11 (December 2012), 131-139.

⁵⁴ Rey Chow and Julian Rohrhuber, ‘On Captivation: a Remainder from the “Indistinction of Art and Nonart”’, in *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*, ed. by Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 45.