

**Chiara Fumai Reads Rosalind Krauss:
May the spectator who wants to witness a miracle please step forward**
Francesco Urbano Ragazzi

1. Introduction

Chiara Fumai was born in Rome in 1978 but lived in Bari until she was eighteen. After a prolific career as a DJ under the pseudonym Pippi Langstrumpf—which lasted from 2003 to 2007—she became one of the most relevant Italian artists of her generation. She did so with uncommon speed, in the mere decade that separated 2007 from 2017, the year of her tragic but intentional death.

Fumai rose to international fame with her participation in the thirteenth edition of dOCUMENTA in 2012.¹ Here, in the Staatspark Karlshausen in Kassel, the artist presented her performative project *The Moral Exhibition House*, contributing to the renewal of the language and format of the performance lecture.² Before and after this date, her work was displayed at various museums and events, framed within a broad spectrum of critical debates whose themes ranged from the legacy of punk aesthetics, to feminism, to forms of immaterial labor and art production.³ In Italy and abroad, Chiara Fumai's work was awarded significant recognition: the 9th Furla Prize for Art,⁴ the 7th Fondazione VAF Prize, a Dena Foundation for Contemporary Art Fellowship and the 14th New York Prize—the latter three all awarded in 2016. Chiara Fumai always defined herself a feminist.

Even after her death, interest in the artist did not wane. In 2018, under my supervision, the Castello di Rivoli Research Center (CRR) completed its purchase of a significant portion of the Fumai archive: the performer's entire library and record collection, as well as a nearly complete collection of her props and stage gear. *LESS LIGHT*, the artist's first solo exhibition in the USA, was inaugurated the following year.⁵ Also in 2019, works by Chiara Fumai—most of them never previously exhibited—were presented alongside the work of Enrico David and Liliana Moro in the Italian Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, curated by Milovan Farronato.⁶ In 2020, the survey

¹ See the catalog of dOCUMENTA(13) (Kassel, June 9–September 16, 2012), published in three volumes: Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Bettina Funcke, eds. *dOCUMENTA(13) Catalog 1/3: The Book of Books* (Berlin and Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012); Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Bettina Funcke, eds. *dOCUMENTA(13) Catalog 2/3: The Logbook* (Berlin and Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012); Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Bettina Funcke, eds. *dOCUMENTA(13) Catalog 3/3: The Guidebook* (Berlin and Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012).

² For a better idea of the impact Fumai's work has had on the development of the performance lecture, consider that a still from her video *Chiara Fumai reads Valerie Solanas* (2013) was chosen as an image of communication for *Lecture-performance: New Artistic Formats, Places, Practices and Behaviours* show held at MUSAC—Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León from October 18, 2013 to July 6, 2014. See also the exhibition catalog, edited by Manuel Olveira: *Conferencia performativa: Nuevos formatos, lugares, prácticas y comportamientos artísticos* (Madrid: This Side Up, 2014).

³ The most important include those at: Fondazione Antonio Ratti (Como); Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo (Turin); Museo del Novecento (Milan); Museion (Bolzano); Museon Arts Park (Moscow); Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo (Madrid); SongEun ArtSpace (Seoul); Villa Medici, MAXXI—National Museum of 21st Century Art, 16th Art Quadriennale (Rome); Bozar (Brussels); De Appel (Amsterdam); Whitechapel Gallery, David Roberts Art Foundation, Delfina Foundation (London); CONTOUR 7—Biennial of Moving Image (Mechelen); MACBA (Barcelona); Pivrot (São Paulo); Futura – Centre for Contemporary Art (Prague), National Gallery of Art (Vilnius). For an overview on Fumai's career, consult the website *The Church of Chiara Fumai*, the institution now assigned to managing the artist's archive and estate: www.chiarafumai.com. See also the chronology published in the present catalog, prepared by Sara De Chiara.

⁴ Chiara Bertola, ed., *Add Fire: Premio Furla 2013* (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2013), catalog of the 2013 Furla Prize exhibition (Bologna, January 26–February 3, 2013).

⁵ *Chiara Fumai: LESS LIGHT*, curated by Francesco Urbano Ragazzi and Kari Conte, ISCP—International Studio and Curatorial Program, New York, USA, February 12–May 17, 2019.

⁶ See the catalog of this exhibition (Venice, May 11–November 24, 2019), edited by Milovan Farronato: *Né altra né questa. La sfida al labirinto/Neither Nor: The challenge to the Labyrinth* (Milan: Humboldt Books, 2019).

exhibition documented in this catalog, titled *Poems I Will Never Release: Chiara Fumai 2007–2017*, opened at the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève. The show is scheduled to travel, in 2020–2021, to the Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, in Prato, Italy; La Casa Encendida, Madrid; and La Loge, Brussels.

Despite the fact that Fumai's work continues to resonate widely in the world of international contemporary art, little has yet been done to rigorously study its content, evolution and scope. This catalog is the first systematic study of the work of Chiara Fumai: it includes an accurate reconstruction of her career, not forgetting her time as a DJ, and proceeds through a series of theoretical analyses of key issues such as her relationships to feminism, writing, music and performance. The essay that follows below deals specifically with the latter aspect. In particular, I aim to interpret the performativity on which the artist's entire practice was based as an attempt to deconstruct both the modern idea of linear historical progress and the postmodern notion of *pastiche*.⁷

To start this interpretative hypothesis, I want to focus on one specific aspect. I want, that is, to describe and comment on the relationship between text and image in the artist's audiovisual production. In doing so, I will resort to a sort of triangulation, attempting to read the words and images produced by Chiara Fumai through the theories contained in another text: "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," written by Rosalind Krauss and published in the journal *October* in 1976.⁸ As is well known, this essay provided the framework for the study of video art when it was still a field of nascent experimentation.⁹ What I hope to demonstrate here is that Fumai, in her works, accepts and at the same time ironically perverts the archeology of mediality proposed by Krauss, producing a dialectical sublation of it.

One last note before proceeding: those familiar with the texts I wrote for Chiara when she was alive may be surprised to hear me use such an academic tone. In contact with her incendiary work, even writing came alive. I believe, however, that the time has come to cool the spirit. What matters now is to construct as precise a memory as possible of a performative practice that always aspired to be hermetic and volatile. Ungraspable, despite the extreme rigor of its premises.

2. Bodies of the text

Giving a new image to texts written in the past that had been censored or forgotten was a mission Chiara Fumai pursued with absolute conviction throughout her career. Understanding the essence of the relationship between word and vision in the artist's work therefore offers a valuable key to understanding the fundamental reasons behind her research. To grasp clearly what I am saying, suffice it to consider that only two of Chiara Fumai's performances involved the reciting of texts she herself had written. Nearly all the words the artist employed in her material and immaterial works were citations of words written by others, including Carla Lonzi, Ulrike Meinhof, Rosa Luxemburg and Valerie Solanas: all authors variously associated with expressions of radical feminism.

The work she dedicated to Valerie Solanas, the playwright who shot Andy Warhol in 1968, provides an exact photograph of how, and to what extent, other women's discourses traversed the

⁷ For a definition of "modern" and a critique of the same that reflects this analysis, see the exhibition catalog: Nicolas Bourriaud, ed. *Altermodern: Tate Triennial 2009* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009). For another analysis of temporality in the work of Chiara Fumai, see the text by Mara Montanaro in the present catalog.

⁸ Krauss, Rosalind, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October*, no. 1 (1976): 51-64.

⁹ The immediate and long-lasting success of Krauss's article is attested to by its inclusion in the following anthologies: Gregory Battcock, ed., *New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1978), 43-64; John Hanhardt, ed. *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1986), 179-91; Tanya Leighton, ed., *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 208-19.

performer's body to the point of coinciding with it, being incarnated in it. *Chiara Fumai reads Valerie Solanas* is an installation composed of a video surrounded by a wall drawing.¹⁰

The wall drawing in the work is a diagram of black arrows and writings that sum up the structure of the celebrated *SCUM Manifesto*, the manifesto for the elimination of men;¹¹ the video instead is a fairly dry montage of footage that shows Fumai reading parts of the text. The words “*A MALE ARTIST IS A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS*,” the umpteenth quotation taken from Solanas's pamphlet, stand out on a white wall behind her.

The fact that the video is an integral part of the wall drawing suggests the total fusion of the arguments animating Solanas's invective with the figure of the artist, who becomes a vocal condenser of the written text. But that is not all. For there also appears a less direct citation that reinforces the thickening bond between words and image in the work. In *Chiara Fumai reads Valerie Solanas*, Fumai plays her role seated behind a desk, staring into the camera, brandishing a dagger. This vision, so frontal and belligerent, was intended to recall two other videos that defined contemporaneity: on the one hand, the proclamations transmitted by the *Al Jazeera* satellite network in which Osama Bin Laden justified the collapse of the Twin Towers, and on the other, the election campaign ad in which Silvio Berlusconi announced his “entering the fray” in 1994.¹² In both of these cases, the power of what is being said is inextricably linked to what is transmitted on the screen. In both cases, the orator's vocality supports and sometimes even precedes the meaning of the words recited.

Lastly, a third element corroborates the alliance between the text cited and the artist's mediatic body. The video-installation dedicated to Solanas was, in fact, further translated by Chiara Fumai into a live performance that consisted in little more than a *ready-made*.¹³ During the performance, Fumai did nothing other than close her audience in a room and oblige them to listen to a reading of *SCUM Manifesto* from the first page to the last. This action, which for most of the spectators was minimal but exhausting, represents the essence of the process of incorporation enacted by the artist. Although Fumai and Solanas remain two separate entities right from the work's very title, the latter's words are incarnated in the presence of the former, in her orality. In this gesture of appropriation and brute repetition, it is not so much the two women who identify with each other rather, Solanas's incandescent writing identifies with Fumai's body, which lends itself to enacting it. Whether recorded or live, Chiara Fumai makes herself present in the performance and becomes a sign, substituting the body of the text written by Solanas with her own physical body. In this way, the message comes literally to equal the medium that gives it expression, the performer who appropriates it in order to reproduce and multiply it.

3. Vito A.

The ambiguous relationship between text and image is present in one way or another in all of Chiara Fumai's production. At the same time, the definition of the nature of this relationship in the art of video seems to be the main concern and driving force behind “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” the Rosalind Krauss essay I want to draw into the discussion.¹⁴ Before embarking on

¹⁰ Chiara Fumai, *Chiara Fumai reads Valerie Solanas*, single-channel video installation, 10' 34", color, 2013. The work was first presented at the ex-Ospedale degli Innocenti in Bologna on the occasion of the 9th Furla Prize for Art, January 26–February 3, 2013.

¹¹ Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (1967; London: Olympia Press, 1971).

¹² For a reading of the relationship between Chiara Fumai's work and the aesthetics of *Berlusconismo*, see Emily Verla Bovino, “Berlusconismo in the Lecture Performances of Chiara Fumai,” *Frieze*, December 17, 2013, <http://wowa.artlinkart.com/en/top/detail/d97cttsi.html>.

¹³ The performance, also titled *Chiara Fumai reads Valerie Solanas*, was first presented at Karlin Studios, Prague, December 19, 2012.

¹⁴ As is widely known, Krauss's theory has been variously and, at least to some extent, rightly criticized. For a different interpretation of video art, see David Ross, “The Personal Attitude,” in *Video Art: An Anthology*, ed. Ira Schneider and

what I have referred to as a triangulation between Fumai's practice and Krauss's writing, it is only fair to clarify the historical circumstances that frame this juxtaposition. Even though Krauss's essay is an authentic classic of contemporary art criticism, there is no documentary proof that Chiara Fumai ever read it or was familiar with its arguments. Never during the long task of cataloguing that I led at the Castello di Rivoli Research Center, and which involved both the artist's library and her email accounts, did I find any trace or clue that could help me.¹⁵ Despite the lack of any historical confirmation for my premise, one aspect encourages me to continue bringing Fumai and Krauss together, at least from a theoretical perspective. I might define this aspect as the sharing of a critical horizon—one impersonated, so to speak, by the same male counterpart. Indeed, in both Fumai and Krauss, an open and ambivalent confrontation with the performative practice of Vito Acconci takes center stage.

In "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," Rosalind Krauss begins her analysis precisely with a description of a 1971 video work by Acconci, titled *Centers*.¹⁶ The work consists of a continuous close-up of the artist pointing his index finger at the center of the frame. This operation, lasting around twenty minutes, is enabled by the performer's "using the video monitor as a mirror."¹⁷ Acconci, that is, looks at his own image transmitted by the TV screen in the very moment in which he is being filmed by the camera. It is precisely this loop between the camera and the monitor, in the middle of which the artist finds himself, that allows him to control—second by second—the precision of the gesture as the work is being made.

Rosalind Krauss interprets Acconci's pointing as a parody. For the American theorist, this pointing to the center of the image is, in the video, an ironic reference to a cliché of the previous decade's art criticism. Indeed, emphasizing the point of intersection of a painting's axes of symmetry was considered, in the most common analysis of abstract painting, as one way to point to the material structure of the object-canvas.¹⁸ If the purpose of symmetry in painting was, for the art critics of the 1960s, to reveal the illusionistic apparatus underlying every figuration—which also loaded it with an ethical-pedagogic value—Krauss ascribes an entirely different meaning to Acconci's pointing at the center of the image. What *Centers* highlights is not the technical apparatus that enables the vision of the figure through the monitor, but rather the performer himself in his cathodic presence. Doubling himself in the two terms of a tautology, the artist does not draw attention to the work's material apparatus but instead to himself looking at his own reflection transmitted by the screen. This operation of mirroring, Krauss declares, "typifies the structural characteristics of the video medium."¹⁹

In the work of Chiara Fumai, Vito Acconci likewise represents a paradigmatic reference point. Without entering here into a detailed examination of the role this artist played in Fumai's performative practice, I will focus only on the work in which she cites Acconci openly: namely, *The Return of the Invisible Woman (also known as the wonderful journeys of Vito A. in the Land of Whip)*, a series of ten collages plus a wall drawing made in 2014 for a show at De Appel in

Korot Beryl (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), and Cristina Albu, *Mirror Affect: Seeing Self, Observing Others in Contemporary Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016). Of concern in this essay are not Rosalind Krauss's ideas but the parodistic use that Fumai's work makes of the stylistic traits that the theory describes—which have become, in certain respects, the symbol of a specific way of understanding video performance.

¹⁵ Shortly after submitting this text, I had a private conversation with Gea Politi, editor-in-chief of *Flash Art*, who confirmed the hypothesis at the origins of my essay. Politi remembers that between 2007 and 2008, Chiara immersed herself in a feverish reading of certain classics of contemporary art criticism. Among the authors she mentioned, Chris Kraus and Rosalind Krauss stand out in particular. Politi is a reliable source because she was at the time in close and frequent contact with the artist—a relationship that also led to a few collaborations. It is therefore at least highly likely that Chiara studied "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism" during her formative years.

¹⁶ Vito Acconci, *Centers*, single-channel video, b/w, 22' 28", 1971.

¹⁷ Krauss, 50.

¹⁸ Consider for example Jasper Johns' *target paintings*, which depict the center of the canvas as a bull's eye. Further on in her essay, Krauss also uses Johns as a touchstone for Acconci (Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," 56).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

Amsterdam.²⁰ Although this work is the only direct reference to the performer in all of Fumai's production, we can identify at least two clear signals that Acconci was a crucial parameter for her. In the first instance, the American conceptual artist is the only living person Fumai ever explicitly mentioned in her work. Secondly, Fumai herself described her collage series as "a love declaration to the most extreme aspects of Acconci's performance art."²¹

The subject of *The Return of the Invisible Woman* is *Ballroom*, a performance that the New York artist gave in 1973 at the Schema gallery in Florence and that would be the last of his career.²² Both the performer's action and the surprise occurrence that drove him to permanently abandon this specific art form are illustrated in the first seven collages of Fumai's series. In a text embroidered in red thread, the artist recounts how the Schema gallery was set up with chairs and tables as though to recreate the atmosphere of a nightclub. In this setting, Vito Acconci pretended to dance with two invisible women, Nancy and Kathy, simulating indecision as to which one to woo. At times during this action, Acconci would approach a random woman from the audience and invite her to dance, alluding to the possibility of having sex with her, there and then, on the stage. It is precisely on one such occasion, however, that a woman from the audience responded with unexpected and passionate enthusiasm to the artist's profusions, obliging him to escort the woman back to her seat and resume performing as if nothing had happened. Acconci viewed his inability to respond to the irruption of reality into his performance as an insurmountable failure, to the degree that it imposed a definitive change in his artistic practice.²³

If these first seven collages in Fumai's series appear to maintain an objective viewpoint on the occurrence, the last three finally reveal the identity of the voice narrating the writing embroidered on them. The teller of the tale is none other than the woman Acconci refused, who, as consolation for the rejection and for her own personal pleasure, imagines a different conclusion to the evening. What the final three panels present to us as fanfiction, as the spectator's amateurish erotic story, is however nothing other than a quote from Pauline Réage's *L'histoire d'O*. (*The Story of O*, 1954), a timeless classic of sadomasochistic literature.²⁴ The reference to Réage's book produces another reversal of gender and position: in the way the text is transcribed in the collage, Vito Acconci assumes the role of the *submissive*—which the book instead grants to its female protagonist—while the woman assumes the role of the *mistress*, the implacable and heroic dominatrix.

For both Chiara Fumai and Rosalind Krauss, Vito Acconci is paradigmatic in symbolizing a certain way of making art somewhere between video and performance: an approach that was born in the 1970s but that also constitutes one of the roots of the multimedia art to come. Both women, nonetheless, acknowledge this role critically. Krauss, as we will see, identifies in the mirroring loop between camera and monitor activated by Acconci the form of that narcissism she will claim to be

²⁰ Chiara Fumai, *The Return of the Invisible Woman* (also known as *the wonderful journeys of Vito A. in the Land of Whip*), wall drawing and embroidery on ten collages (47.5 x 39 cm each), variable dimensions, 2014. The work was first presented in a group show on the influence of psychedelics in contemporary art curated by Mark Kremer, *When Elephants Come Marching In: Echoes from the Sixties in Today's Art*, De Appel, Amsterdam, September 27, 2014–January 11, 2015.

²¹ See her reference entry on *The Return of the Invisible Woman* in *Italian Area: Italian Contemporary Art Archive*, http://www.italianarea.it/opera.php?w=1462116733-90.JPG&artista=FUCH&let=#alfabeto_artists, accessed September 30, 2019.

²² Chiara Fumai used primarily two sources to research *Ballroom* and prepare *The Return of the Invisible Woman*: Vito Acconci and Gregory Volk, eds., *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969–1973* (Milan: Charta, 2006); Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

²³ O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin*, 106.

²⁴ Pauline Réage, *Histoire d'O*. (Paris: Pauvert, 1954). That Chiara Fumai's positioned her series of collages in the *fanfiction* genre is demonstrated not only by the text that can be read on one of the collages but also by a working title for the work that she later corrected: *The Return of the Invisible Woman* (*the erotic fanfic also known as 'Visites fantastiques de Vito A. au pays du fouet'*). This title was communicated by both the artist and me to the curator Mark Kremer in an email dated July 24, 2014.

the medium of all video art. Fumai, instead—as we can see in *The Return of the Invisible Woman*—emphasizes the contradictions inherent in Acconci’s performative model, and does so through a strategy that is as dialectical as it is parodistic. The performer’s failure in *Ballroom* to manage the irruption of an unexpected subject, along with other masochistic elements already present in his work—such as the self-inflicted burns in the series *Conversions* (1970-71)—are transfigured by Fumai into the fantasy of a mistress-slave relationship. The woman, who had been refused and relegated to anonymity, now ascends to the position of dominatrix and gains the power to rewrite history: the story of an evening in Florence in 1973, but also, implicitly, the history of art and performance.

If Rosalind Krauss describes the beginnings of that circularity between the body of the artist and its image—a circularity she believes to be foundational to video-recorded performance—Chiara Fumai announces its end, its failure, its self-contradiction, celebrating the gesture of the woman who breaks this circle. In an act of avowed love, Fumai positions herself in the tradition represented by Acconci while at the same time declaring her desire to pervert its forms and purposes, sadistically dominating its language. It is precisely this will to dialectics that brings the artist and Rosalind Krauss to an at least partial communion of intention.

4. Medium, media, medium

In Vito Acconci’s *Centers*, Rosalind Krauss sees an example, or perhaps more precisely a pattern, of the narcissism endemic to the nascent video art of the 70s. The pattern described by the American theorist takes the form of a closed circularity that, by entering through the camera’s lens and emerging onto the TV screen, departs from and returns to the artist’s body.

Although Krauss’s essay does not immediately provide a definition of narcissism, this does not stop her from hazarding a generalization from the very first page of the text: “In that image of self-regard,” she writes of *Centers*, “is configured a narcissism so endemic to works of video that I find myself wanting to generalize it as the condition of the entire genre.”²⁵ Because the terms of the discourse are introduced so peremptorily, without being adequately defined, Krauss’s entire argumentation is structured as a reply to the question “What would it mean to say, ‘The medium of video is narcissism?’”²⁶

In the paragraphs below, I will try to follow Rosalind Krauss’s reasoning and intuitions, showing the ways in which the work of Chiara Fumai seems to illustrate them literally. The question I will pose myself is therefore: must this literalism be taken at its word? Or can the artist’s work and practice be interpreted outside the critical lens of narcissism proposed by Krauss?

4.1. The medium, the Medium

Affirming that narcissism is the real medium of video art immediately creates a categorical problem. The term medium has traditionally been used to refer not to a psychological state but to the material support that permits the articulation of a specific language. The critic Clement Greenberg, for example, offers a reading of abstract painting through an exclusive analysis of the flatness of the canvas to which color is applied.²⁷ In Greenberg’s opinion, the abstractions of Pollock’s expressionism or Rothko’s color fields, with their emphasis on the flatness of the painting’s support surface, should be seen as a point of arrival in the unveiling of the illusionism of perspectival representation—which, codified by Brunelleschi, became *the* mode of Western

²⁵ Krauss, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” 50.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁷ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting” (1960), in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 4., ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 85-93.

representation. In the interpretation inaugurated by the Greenberg school, the path followed by the avant-gardes through to the postwar period amounted to a reduction of painting to its lowest common denominator: the flatness of the medium that characterizes every painting. According to Greenberg, such reduction would, like some sort of destiny, lead modern art to critically exhibit its material conditions of production, revealing the ideology underlying every representational process.²⁸ Narcissism, instead, seems to refer less to a certain material condition that limits or enables expressive choices than to the peculiarities of a particular psychological condition—the absolute opposite of the solid concreteness of an aggregate of physical properties.

At a first glance, Rosalind Krauss's thesis on narcissism may appear to imply that there exists a difference or rift between video art and traditional forms of art. More than a rift, however, Krauss imagines an expansion of the concept of medium, its further articulation. We might say, in fact, that the author's entire career was devoted to expanding the meaning of Greenberg's notion of medium, disconnecting it from the reference to material on which it hinged.

To begin with, the attribute "post-media," which Krauss used to connote the cultural climate that arose during the 70s concurrently with the rise of conceptual art, is now canonical.²⁹ For the American theorist, the pre-eminent form of the post-media condition is the installation, in which the purity of genres expected by the historical avant-gardes is wiped away and replaced by a promiscuity of non-hierarchical languages. The *anything goes* of installation is not, however, the only possible trajectory to which contemporary art may tend. As the title of an anthology of essays on this topic suggests,³⁰ there is more than one strategy for "reinventing the medium," beyond that of the post-mediality endemic to installation.

Krauss identifies at least two ways to arrive at the reinvention of the medium. First of all, she attempts to show how the material characteristics of a physical support can give rise to immaterial properties that are specific to it. The condition of possibility of Pollock's painting, for example, is given not so much by the flatness of the canvas as, according to Krauss, its orientation in space.³¹ If the artist had not laid his canvases horizontally on the floor, he would not have been able to execute the *dripping* that remains the distinctive feature of his Action painting. In asserting that horizontality is the condition for the existence of Pollock's painting, Rosalind Krauss attempts to disestablish the equivalence between the notion of medium and the notion of mere material support, extending the former's domain over the relational properties that emerge from the latter.

But Krauss also moves in another direction: she tries to broaden the concept of medium to the point of making it coincide with the concept of a general rule, habitus, grammar; phenomena she groups under the label "technical supports."³² The works that exemplify this second strategy are truly many in number and they pepper the entirety of her critical output. The most significant example is perhaps Marcel Broodthaers and his *Musée d'art moderne. Département des Aigles*, which Krauss cites as a symbol of resistance to the arbitrariness of installation.³³ This work, which has since been dismembered, appeared as a fictitious museum divided into twelve sections, each one containing findings, relics, artefacts and documents of various kinds—from the naturalistic to the political—all having something to do with eagles.³⁴ What interests Krauss in this case is the

²⁸ For a reconstruction of the Marxist climate in which Greenberg's theory was developed, see T. J. Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," *Critical Inquiry*, no. 9 (1982): 139-56.

²⁹ Rosalind Krauss, "A Voyage on the North Sea," in *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000).

³⁰ Rosalind Krauss, *Reinventare il medium. Cinque saggi sull'arte d'oggi*, ed. Elio Grazioli (Milan: Paravia Bruno Mondadori Editori, 2005).

³¹ Rosalind Krauss, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," in *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, ed. Pepe Karmel and Kirk Varnedoe (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 155-79.

³² Rosalind Krauss, "The Guarantee of the Medium," in *Writing in Context: French Literature, Theory and the Avant-Gardes*, ed. Arppe Tiina et al. (Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences 5, 2009), 139-45.

³³ Krauss, "A Voyage on the North Sea."

³⁴ For more detail on the work, whose sections were presented in different times and places between 1968 and 1972, in addition to Krauss, "A Voyage on the North Sea," see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. "The Museum Fictions of Marcel

work's meticulous mimesis with the grammar of the museum and the archive—a grammar that visually institutes a hierarchy among the objects and disciplines of knowledge. Another example Krauss held dear is certainly *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* by Ed Ruscha (1963), an artist's book comprising twenty-six black and white photographs of gasoline pumps. The shots included in the book were born of a rule Ruscha chose to impose on his work on the Oklahoma to Los Angeles stretch of a road trip.³⁵ The third and final case is the work of Sophie Calle, who combines texts and photographic images in compositions typical of a specific narrative form: that of journalistic reportage.³⁶

If Rosalind Krauss on the one hand emphasizes the relational properties emerging from a physical support and, on the other, extends the notion of support *tout court* to the semantic fields of rule, habitus and grammar, the reference to narcissism in her analysis of video art is configured as a third strategy for reinventing the medium in the wake of modernism. By placing a certain psychological condition at the center of the issue, Krauss seems to suggest that the canonization of performance and video as genres of visual art means that the medium has no longer to deal with just the inert materiality of the object in which it is individuated, but also the vitality of the subject producing the work.

In the potentially infinite circle that opens between camera and screen, the performer is at the same time the subject and object of their transformative action. Yet Krauss does not stop at the description of a banal dialectic between subject and object. The performer's body is not only considered a substrate from which the psyche emerges but also contextualized primarily as the conduit for the transmission of a message with which the artist identifies.

Rosalind Krauss develops her thesis in an entirely particular way. Instead of starting by laying out an argument, she asks us to draw inspiration from the secondary meaning of the word "medium." The theorist, that is, explains that the concept can be further expanded through a semantic slippage already present in ordinary language: that between medium intended as material support, and Medium intended as a person in possession of paranormal powers. Chiara Fumai's performative practice can be interpreted precisely as a parody of this shift in meaning. But first, here are Krauss's own words:

Everyday speech contains an example of the word "medium" used in a psychological sense; the uncommon terrain for that common-enough usage is the world of parapsychology: telepathy, extra-sensory-perception, and communication with an after-life, for which people with certain kinds of psychic powers are understood to be Mediums. Whether or not we give credence to the fact of mediumistic experience, we understand the referents for the language that describes it. We know, for instance, that configured within the parapsychological sense of the word 'medium' is the image of a human receiver (and sender) of communications arising from an invisible source.³⁷

Anyone aware of Chiara Fumai's work, even superficially, will have already discerned one of its fundamental traits in Krauss's words. At least as early as 2010, the artist began referring to her performances as the effect of demonic possessions, asserting that, during the moments of delirium that seized her, ghosts of women (but also of a few men) would take control of her body, obliging her to transmit messages of greater or lesser hostility. This was obviously a pretense, but a revealing one nonetheless.

Broodthaers," in *Museums by Artists*, ed. A. A. Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983), 45-56; Gloria Moure, ed., *Marcel Broodthaers: Collected Writings* (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, 2012); and Dirk Snauwaert, "Marcel Broodthaers, 'Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures,'" in *The Artist as Curator: An Anthology*, ed. Elena Filipovic (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2017), 123-38.

³⁵ Edward Ruscha, *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* (Los Angeles: National Excelsior Press, 1963).

³⁶ Krauss, "The Guarantee of the Medium," 139-45.

³⁷ Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," 52.

The first performance of this kind was *The Prodigy of Nature*, presented at Palazzo Mincuzzi in Bari during the 7th edition of the Gemine Muse Show.³⁸ Sitting on a stool, barefoot, wearing a white gown and a long fake beard, Chiara Fumai read a few love letters addressed to Miss Annie Jones, the “bearded lady” exhibited in P.T. Barnum’s American Museum shows in the mid-1800s. These letters were commissioned by the artist from friends, who were known to the art system to varying degrees. The work was therefore intended as a parodistic self-celebration that unmasked and distorted the link between the figures of the performer, the diva and the freak show attraction. *The Prodigy of Nature* was later included in *The Moral Exhibition House*, the performative project presented at dOCUMENTA(13), together with another performance, *Shut Up, Actually Talk*,³⁹ which I will discuss below. On the whole, the Kassel project amounted to a haunted house standing in a clearing in Karlsaue Park. There, welcoming a limited number of spectators, the artist twice daily performed what she defined as a genuine freak show.

To follow the Krauss quote above: when Fumai executes her performances, she is for all intents and purposes a Medium, or in other words, a medium. But there is more. Not only does the performer serve as a conduit for the expression of messages from the afterlife, she sometimes allows herself to be possessed by a spiritualist of the past: namely, Eusapia Palladino (Minervino Murge 1854–Naples 1918), an illiterate servant woman whose alleged paranormal powers, displayed ever since she had been an adolescent, brought her worldwide fame.⁴⁰ In certain of Fumai’s works, Palladino herself goes into a state of trance and is visited by still other ghosts.⁴¹ The effect of *mise en abyme* is at this point disorienting. The artist’s presence becomes a medium of a medium, or rather, a Medium of media. If we take Krauss’s metaphor literally, we can say that Chiara Fumai constitutes herself as a multimedial, hypermedial or meta-medial subject. Mediatic to the nth power.

The narrative expedient of possession that the artist uses as *trait d’union* for nearly all her works—and not only her performances—allows her from the start to comment on her role in the art system. By claiming to be possessed, Fumai refuses the active role of the artist as creator. Instead, she describes herself as the agent, or at times even the curator, of the ghosts that inhabit her.⁴² Insisting on this stylistic choice, the artist doubles her status within the work. On the one hand, she is recognizable as the performer directly involved in the action—Fumai never used other actresses or stand-ins—and on the other, she opens a space of critical distance for herself, an entirely impersonal space in which her will is no longer called into play.

³⁸ Chiara Fumai, *The Prodigy of Nature*, performance, variable duration, 2010. Paola Picca Garin, ed., *Gemine Muse 2010. Percorsi di giovani artisti nelle città italiane tra storia and arte* (Milan: Mondadori, 2010), 44-45.

³⁹ Christov-Bakargiev and Funcke, *dOCUMENTA(13) Catalog 3/3: The Guidebook*, 258.

⁴⁰ Eusapia Palladino was an illiterate servant woman from Puglia who pretended to possess paranormal powers, thus succeeding in acquiring a measure of international fame and travelling between Russia and the United States. The spiritualist was also the center of a heated scientific dispute among luminaries of the day, including Cesare Lombroso, Marie and Pierre Curie, Karl du Prel and Alexander Aksakof, private advisor to Tsar Alexander III. Fumai dedicated to Palladino her video installation *La donna delinquente (The Criminal Woman)*, 2011, presented at the 2nd edition of the Lum Prize, held at Teatro Margherita, Bari, October 8–December 2, 2011. The figure of Palladino is so central to Fumai’s work that it would be worthy of its own essay.

⁴¹ This is what happens in Chiara Fumai, *The Book of Evil Spirits*, single channel video, color, 26’ 24”, 2015, to which I will dedicate closer attention at the end of this essay, and also in Chiara Fumai, *Eusapia Palladino Reads Valerie Solanas*, c-print, 80 x 120 cm, 3+2 AP, 2013. The photo shows the artist impersonating Eusapia Palladino as she raises to her forehead a copy of Valerie Solanas’s *SCUM Manifesto* and causes the desk at which she is seated to levitate. Part of a series of six, the photo was intended by Fumai as a self-falsification of her performative work. See Francesco Urbano Ragazzi, “LESS LIGHT: The demon-possessed woman, in conversation with Francesco Urbano Ragazzi,” in the exhibition catalog for *Chiara Fumai: LESS LIGHT*, ed. Francesco Urbano Ragazzi and Kari Conte (New York: International Studio and Curatorial Program, 2019), 27.

⁴² This is suggested in the message with which Chiara Fumai explained the work she would be presenting at dOCUMENTA(13) to its director, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. The message was in the form of a letter dated February 23, 2011 and signed by Miss Annie Jones, which described Fumai as the bearded lady’s manager. The intent to criticize the institution was instead implicit in the association of the museum curator with the testamentary executor (in Italian: *curatore testamentario*) to which Fumai alludes.

The reflective space opened by Chiara Fumai through possession serves a specific purpose. “All my work,” she stated, “is based on the use of performative displays that we do not usually associate with classic contemporary performance.”⁴³ Questioned in another interview about her interest in archaic forms of entertainment and spectacle, the artist used the plural form to explain:

We like alternative histories related to performance practice, i.e., the historical counter-culture of performance art. [...] Besides this, from a strictly formal point of view, we have developed a sort of fetishism towards some performative formats that are not contemplated by contemporary art, for example freak shows or séances. If you pay attention, all those practices have a common denominator: they show the invisible but without using the rhetoric of Minimalism, the same rhetoric that gives value to absence, a concept that we consider highly overrated by Contemporary Art. Our formal choice is, in other words, a declaration of extreme love for every other form of Immaterial Art.⁴⁴

The declared purpose of Chiara Fumai’s performative practice is to rethink the history of performance in its bond with the broader history of entertainment and of the immaterial arts. What the artist proposes through her research is an alternative archeology of contemporary mediality.

This archeology, which draws on sources that at first glance do not appear to belong to art, can be made to play with Rosalind Krauss’s video archeology in at least three different ways. First of all, Chiara Fumai’s performance work can be invoked as a parody of the equivalence that “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism” takes as its starting point: namely, that between the medium of art and the Medium of spiritualism. As we have seen, nearly all of the artist’s production constitutes an all too literal, and therefore comical, embrace of this equivalence. It is in this way that Fumai posits herself as a multimedia subject.

Secondly, the results produced by both the performances and their documentation can be conceived as moving beyond Krauss’s theory. What the American theorist introduces in her essay through representation by semantic shift is, in the artist’s work, achieved through a precise analysis of real medianic practices. It is in the confrontation between these latter and the role of the performer in the system of contemporary art that the study of multimediality acquires, in Fumai’s work, an archeological, protomedial dimension.

Such sublation should not, however, be seen as an erasure or confutation. For, thirdly, we can note that there is a substantial overlap of intent between the artist and the theorist. Chiara Fumai conducted her research into mediality from the starting point of a precise array of modern forms of spectacle. Through a mimesis of their rules and grammar, she offered an alternative genealogy of performance: a genealogy that moves away from distinctions between high and low art in order to sink deeply into the unconscious of the positivist culture to which we think we belong. Constructing her own archeology of the spectacular, Chiara Fumai participates in that reinvention of the medium that Rosalind Krauss identified as the task of the avant-garde after the end of modernism. It is in this specific sense that Chiara must be considered an avant-garde artist, and it is from the starting point of this inclusion within the avant-garde that her work should be studied in years to come. She herself states as much, when she comments on her interest in Eusapia Palladino:

This is a surrealist strategy. I don’t believe in the division between true and false. I believe instead in the fact that logocentric and materialistic thought tends to reduce many subversive aesthetic experiences to the most meager scientific categories [...] Eusapia is described as a hysteric, a swindler; elsewhere, as a mystic with paranormal powers [...] In the context of my show, her abilities—medianic and otherwise—are acknowledged as those of a great artist, not a charlatan.⁴⁵

⁴³ This statement was released in the presentation video for the performative marathon *The Show Which Is Also Falsely Called Breaks*, MAXXI—National Museum of 21st Century Art, Rome, October 22–26, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpkCxBrefEU>.

⁴⁴ Urbano Ragazzi, “LESS LIGHT,” 27.

⁴⁵ Francesco Urbano Ragazzi, “Chiara Fumai. Follow This You Bitches.” *ATP Diary*, February 22, 2013, <http://atpdiary.com/exhibit/chiara-fumai-praga/>. This quote was taken from a dialogue published on the occasion of

4.2. Alter

The coincidence between medium and message, or between text and body of the text is not, for Fumai and Krauss alike, only a logical or semiotic fact. The equivalence exists for both in a form that takes place in time and has effects on time. When Rosalind Krauss writes

Configured within the parapsychological sense of the word “medium” is the image of a human receiver (and sender) of communications arising from an invisible source.

she also adds:

Further, this term contains the notion that the human conduit exists in a particular relation to the message, which is one of temporal concurrence.⁴⁶

In order to connote this particular type of synchronism, Krauss once again adopts the metaphor of the mirror, describing the circulation of the signal between camera and monitor as an instantaneous feedback. Curiously, however, the theorist chooses an auditory rather than visual example to illustrate the phenomenon she proposes to analyze: namely, *Boomerang*, a video born from a collaboration between Richard Serra and Nancy Holt, broadcast live in 1974 on a Texas television channel. In the video, which lasts around ten minutes, Holt is filmed as she speaks into a microphone while at the same time listening to her own voice, transmitted through a set of headphones. Isolated from the rest of the world, the artist is tasked with commenting on her sensations, moment by moment, as the experiment continues. Almost immediately, we perceive her difficulty in following the sentences echoing in her ears. Just thirty seconds into the video, Holt finds herself observing that the acoustic feedback “puts a distance between the words and their apprehension—their comprehension.”⁴⁷

While the images in *Boomerang* serve only to provide live documentation of what is happening in the loop between microphone and headphones, the audio’s return effect serves to demonstrate, by analogy, the functioning of the video signal. Richard Serra himself describes the work as a grammar of the televisual image:

[This] is a tape which analyzes its own discourse and processes as it is being formulated. The language of *Boomerang*, and the relation between the description and what is being described, is not arbitrary. Language and image are being formed and revealed as they are organized.⁴⁸

Rosalind Krauss takes *Boomerang* as an example, but she also reminds us that many other works made in the same period deal with the near synchronicity of audiovisual transmission. A mirroring effect similar to that of *Centers* is exploited in Bruce Nauman’s *Revolving Upside Down* (1968) and Dan Graham’s *Performer/Audience/Mirror* (1975), while Lynda Benglis’s *Now* (1973) is based on audio feedbacks similar to those present in *Boomerang*.⁴⁹ But the list could grow longer.

Fumai’s solo show *Follow This You Bitches*, curated by Francesco Urbano Ragazzi, FUTURA—Centre for Contemporary Art, Prague, January 30–February 24, 2013.

⁴⁶ Krauss, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” 52.

⁴⁷ Nancy Holt and Richard Serra, *Boomerang*, single-channel video, color, 10’ 27”, 1974.

⁴⁸ Richard Serra, “Richard Serra,” in *Video Art: An Anthology*, ed. Ira Schneider and Korot Beryl (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 114.

⁴⁹ Bruce Nauman, *Revolving Upside Down*, single-channel video, b/w, 1’ 00”, 1968; Dan Graham, *Performer/Audience/Mirror*, performance recorded on single-channel video, b/w, 22’ 45”, 1975; Lynda Benglis, *Now*, single-channel video, color., 11’ 45”, 1973.

Chiara Fumai starts by transforming these experiments into stylistic traits and then into clichés. Celebrating her background as a DJ, she modifies her voice with sonic distortions and feedbacks in many non-performative works. This is the case, for example, in *There Is Something You Should Know* (2011), where the artist's voice guides the spectators through an exercise in lucid dreaming in order to visualize an undocumented performance Jack Smith gave in Italy in 1981.⁵⁰ The same thing happens in *La donna delinquente (The Criminal Woman)*, (2011), where Fumai imitates five of the scientists who examined Eusapia Palladino's paranormal powers by reading texts they themselves wrote.⁵¹ But the work that expresses most clearly the artist's intentions in her use of reverb effects is *Shut Up, Actually Talk* (2012–2013), a video that re-elaborates the other performance presented in *The Moral Exhibition House* at DOCUMENTA.⁵²

Watching *Shut Up, Actually Talk*, we recognize Chiara Fumai framed from the waist up and surrounded by the gilded frame of a Rococo mirror. Behind her, a bright red background references the atmosphere of Dario Argento's horror film *Suspiria* (1977). Although the artist is perfectly recognizable, she appears in disguise, wearing a big curly black wig and a white tunic that, in its severe cut, recalls the dress worn by Annie Jones.

The performer's get-up is not, in effect, all that distant from the bearded lady's world. In subsequent works, the white gown and curly wig also stand as the distinguishing characteristics of a second American Museum attraction whom the artist allowed to possess her: the Circassian beauty Zalumma Agra.

Known also as the "Star of the East," Zalumma was described by P.T. Barnum as the purest example of the Caucasian woman. At once exotic subject and pure incarnation of the white race, the young woman was purchased, as a slave, from the harem of an Ottoman sheik. At least this was what the freak show audiences were told. Because the character was actually played by different actresses, hired as needed and chosen for the paleness of their skin, Zalumma was often presented as mute or unable to speak English—the pretense, otherwise, would have been much easier to expose.

A slave in the imagination of her creator and bound to silence in the reality of the spectacle in which she starred, Zalumma Agra becomes, in Fumai's conception, the figure of a twofold oppression. Born from obscene fantasies of racial purity, this woman deserves to be avenged. In her performance and later in her video, the artist chooses to give a voice to the mute Circassian beauty, and to make it a threatening one. Fumai's Zalumma reads, with aggressive vehemence, the whole of one of the most sublime invectives ever produced by Italian feminism: the *Secondo Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile*—also known as *Io dico io*—written by the art critic, and later activist, Carla Lonzi.⁵³ Moreover, Fumai spits on the ground at irregular intervals, evoking another one of Lonzi's texts: *Sputiamo su Hegel (Let's Spit on Hegel)*, (1974). The title of the video and performance, on the other hand, is borrowed from the title of an English translation of a third text that Lonzi published in 1978.

The reading of *Io dico io* is rendered all the more hallucinatory precisely by the reverb effect shared by Fumai's and Richard Serra's videos. We might explain this resemblance by once again recalling the artist's archaeological intentions. We might, that is, affirm that Chiara Fumai wanted to demonstrate how certain structural analyses of media carried out in the framework of Minimal and Conceptual Art had merged in time with expressions closer to the mass culture industry, thus emptying themselves of the reductionist rationalism that had once constituted their reason to exist. The references to horror and electronic music in *Shut Up, Actually Talk*, as in other of Fumai's works, must be interpreted in this sense.

⁵⁰ Chiara Fumai, *There Is Something You Should Know*, environmental installation and mp3 audio file, 24' 20", 2010.

⁵¹ Chiara Fumai, *The Criminal Woman*, installation video, b/w, 10' 48", 2011.

⁵² Chiara Fumai, *Shut Up, Actually Talk*, single-channel vertical video, color, 10' 31", 2013. The work's title is a translation of Carla Lonzi, *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una femminista* (Milan: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1978).

⁵³ Carla Lonzi, "Secondo Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile: 'io dico io,'" in *La presenza dell'uomo nel femminismo*, vol. 9, ed. Marta Lonzi et al. (Milan: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1977), 7.

Although this hypothesis strikes me as entirely correct, I believe it is no longer sufficient. What is lacking here is a specific analysis of the effect that the sonic alteration has on the text recited and on the time of its reading. In order to take a step forward, we must first note that the echo produced in *Shut Up, Actually Talk* mirrors the structure of the Carla Lonzi manifesto cited in the video. *Io dico io* is, in fact, a text in which there coexist at least two subjects with opposing attitudes. One of them—the one to whom Lonzi gives voice—accuses the other of assuming a partisan, passive and opportunistic position within the women’s liberation movement. This is made clear in the following passage from the text:

Who said that you do not know power?
“To occupy oneself with” is intellectual arrogance
The more you occupy yourself with women the more estranged you become from me.
Do you know what exposing yourself means?
You search for error without being prepared to risk anything.⁵⁴

The reverberation of the voice in *Shut Up, Actually Talk* echoes both the doubling of the artist’s personality in her guise as Zalumma Agra and the doubling of Carla Lonzi’s text, in which another woman places herself in opposition to the author as the figure of a guilty conscience. In this multiplication of voices and subjects, the distorted sonority of the signifier mirrors and replaces a meaning that reaches our ears disturbed, hard to understand, obscure.

From a certain moment onward, the altered reception of texts becomes the basis of Chiara Fumai’s performative strategy. In addition to the abovementioned works featuring reverb effects, we can also include in this group those in which different texts are remixed together, blending into a single stream of consciousness.

In the performance *A Gun Makes Its Own Statement* (2010), a museum guide engaged in an exhibition visit becomes possessed by the spirit of Ulrike Meinhof. The guide is repeatedly forced to stop and declaim excerpts of a pamphlet written by the German terrorist in an increasingly loud voice.⁵⁵ In *I Did Not Say or Mean “Warning”* (2013), the same guide loses control of her body during a visit to the Fondazione Querini Stampalia in Venice: using sign language, her hands spell out the anonymous message of a Red Brigade militant; without emitting any sound, her mouth contorts in exasperated grimaces that express the same message.⁵⁶ In *Black Pullet* (2015), a bourgeois gallerist gives a brief speech while her booth at the art fair is being set up by a group of

⁵⁴ Lonzi, “Secondo Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile,” 7. The conflict between two opposing attitudes in the self-determination of the female subject is a constant in Chiara Fumai’s work and returns at various levels. It returns in other texts: in Solanas’s manifesto, the women in the S.C.U.M. army oppose all the “daddy’s boys and girls”; in the letter from Ulrike Meinhof read during the performance *A Gun Makes Its Own Statement* (2010), the German terrorist picks an argument with Farah Pahlavi, third wife of the last Persian Shah. It returns in the dialogue between the characters in the video *Per Vas Nefandum* (2016), where the Preacher’s homophobic sermon is contradicted by the words of Annie Jones. It even returns in the titles of shows: *Follow This You Bitches* (FUTURA—Centre for Contemporary Art, Prague, 2013). The possibility of conflict with other women—and not only with the patriarchal order—is therefore a part of the position Fumai chooses to take on feminism. On the various feminisms evoked in Fumai’s work, see Giovanna Zapperi’s essay in this catalog.

⁵⁵ Chiara Fumai, *A Gun Makes Its Own Statement*, performance, 2010. This work was first presented in a show curated by Marco Scotini, *Learning Machines. Figures*, Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti, Milan, December 10, 2010–January 14, 2011. The writings of Ulrike Meinhof quoted in the performance are: “Open Letter to Farah Diba” (1967); “Setting Fire to a Department Store” (1968); “The Urban Guerrilla Concept” (1971); “Statement to the Red Aid Teach-in” (1972). All of the writings are published in Ulrike Meinhof, *Everybody Talks About the Weather... We Don’t: The Writings of Ulrike Meinhof*, ed. Karin Bauer (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008), on the following pages, respectively, 171–77; 244–48; 83–105; 183–85. The artist’s main source in preparing the work was Sarah Colvin, *Ulrike Meinhof and West German Terrorism: Language, Violence and Identity* (New York: Camden House, 2009).

⁵⁶ Chiara Fumai, *I Did Not Say or Mean “Warning”*, performance, 2013. The artist gave this performance as the winner of the 9th Furla Prize, Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venice, May 28–June 30, 2013. The militant’s message was taken from Ida Faré and Franca Spirito. *Mara e le altre. Le donne e la lotta armata: storie interviste riflessioni* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979).

armed, balaclava-clad women. The words she speaks, just before dying from drinking poisoned champagne, are an assemblage of sentences taken from Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho* (1991) and *The Theory of the Leisure Class* by the sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1899).⁵⁷ Lastly, in *Secreto Provato* (2016), Chiara Fumai herself receives a message from Club Maria, an underground Catholic feminist group founded in Russia in 1980. Communicated telepathically to the artist during a conference on medianic writing, the text is read by inverting the order of the letters, which makes it entirely incomprehensible.⁵⁸

The same process of altering the text's linearity is also used outside of the performance context. Fumai made many of her collages, for example, by vandalizing pages of books. In the series *With Love From Sinister*, a selection of writings by Julius Evola is made illegible by magazine cutouts and phrases sewn in red or black thread.⁵⁹ Hegel's *Early Theological Writings* and an anthology of academic essays titled *Studies in Hegel* end up the same way.⁶⁰

Even when the text's linearity is maintained, this is carried to such an extreme as to preclude its legibility almost entirely. That is true, for example, of the scripts of her performances, which Fumai often transcribed by hand in the style of medianic writing—without ever lifting pen from paper. Deciphering the long, unbroken lines that make up this particular group of works is a task only the most determined scholars may be willing to undertake.

Inserting elements of disturbance in the reception of a text is, as we have said, one of Chiara Fumai's most frequently employed strategies. Just as Holt exclaims when hearing her own voice in *Boomerang*, we can observe that Fumai's reverberations too have the effect of "put[ting] a distance between the words and their apprehension—their comprehension." It is therefore helpful to return to Krauss's text for a better understanding of the meaning of this strategy of disturbance, to which Fumai dedicates herself so insistently:

What Holt is describing in *Boomerang* is a situation in which the action of the mirror-reflection (which is auditory in this case) severs her from a sense of text: from the prior words she has spoken; from the way language connects her both to her own past and to a world of objects.⁶¹

According to the American theorist, the circularity of reverberation deprives its producer of a relationship not only with the world but also with their own personal history and history in general:

Most immediately, this sense of something having come before refers to the specific text for the performance at hand. But in a larger way it evokes the more general historical relationship between a specific text and the history constructed by all the texts of a given genre.⁶²

The interruption of the flow of the signified in the noisy circularity of the signifier, Krauss concludes, launches the experience of the text into a specific and ineluctable temporal dimension: "the prison of a collapsed present, that is, a present time which is completely severed from a sense of its own past."⁶³

⁵⁷ Chiara Fumai, *Black Pullet*, performance, 2015. The work was presented during the Artissima fair's Per4m competition, in Turin on November 7, 2015. Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991); Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1899).

⁵⁸ Chiara Fumai, *Secreto Provato*, performance and video projection, 2016. This, the last performance created by the artist, was presented only once, at the 16th Art Quadriennale in Rome on October 13, 2016.

⁵⁹ Chiara Fumai, *With Love from Sinister*, collage on paper (series of four), 39 x 25.5 cm each, 2013.

⁶⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings* (1907), trans. T.M. Knox and Richard Kroner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971); Alan Brinkley, et al., eds. *Studies in Hegel* (New Orleans: Tulane University Press, 1960).

⁶¹ Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," 53.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 53.

Unlike Nancy Holt, who speaks her own words, Fumai does nothing but literally quote phrases written by someone else before her. And yet, the temporal dimension opened by both seems to be the same. Listening to Lonzi's 1977 invective pronounced by Zalumma Agra, whose character was born of nineteenth-century fantasies, we cannot help but feel the suspension of any sense of history. If we take the analysis Krauss makes of video art through *Boomerang* and apply it to the work of Chiara Fumai, it becomes easy to position the latter within the confines of a specific genre: that of postmodern *pastiche*. The philosopher Frederic Jameson defines *pastiche* as that literary form in which past styles are cannibalized and become codes in a play of intertextual allusions.⁶⁴ Like Rosalind Krauss, Jameson sees in this particular genre the symbol of a social structure "bereft of all historicity, whose own putative past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles."⁶⁵

Situated somewhere between freak show and *séance*, Chiara Fumai's work appears easily reducible to postmodern *pastiche* and its spectacles. Yet something keeps me, again, from jumping to hasty conclusions. I want therefore to pursue another interpretative hypothesis that seems to me more productive. This hypothesis is, once again, that Fumai worked with the purpose of, among other things, parodying the stylistic traits described by Krauss, and so dialectically sublating the results. But what, then, would the suspension of the text's meaning signify in her works?

To answer this question, I would like to try to conduct an exercise in Chiara Fumai style. I would like, that is, to try to apply to Zalumma Agra the words Krauss used to describe Nancy Holt in *Boomerang*. As in a work by Chiara Fumai, I would like to have Zalumma recite Krauss's phrases and see whether or not this generates a surplus of meaning.

The American theorist says the following about Holt: "Because the audio delay keeps hypostatizing her words, she has great difficulty coinciding with herself as a subject." And because she is a subject, the artist is separated "from the way language connects her both to her own past and to a world of objects." What we witness is "an extraordinary image of distraction [...] Through that distracted reverberation of a single word—and even word-fragment—there forms an image of what it is like to be totally cut off from history."⁶⁶

What happens when we apply to Zalumma Agra these words conceived for Nancy Holt? If instead of referring to an artist of the 70s, the phrases I quoted are taken to refer to a mute slave, little more than adolescent, Krauss's statements take on a decidedly more dramatic tone. Being excluded from control over one's own subjectivity, perceiving one's own presence as objectified, feeling trapped in the prison of a present without history, become connotations that no longer describe an abstract, generic, grammatical situation but instead indicate the real condition to which women have been subjected over the centuries: oppression.

Chiara Fumai exploits the suspension of historicity that Krauss attributes to 1970s video art in order to turn it upside-down and transform it into a critique of the historical form in which the female subject has lived. It is precisely by means of this kind of re-signifying within the canon of contemporary art that the artist dialectically overcomes both the modern conception of linear history and the anti-historical temporality attributed to the postmodern. A third temporal form, charged with new narrative possibilities and new occasions of historicity, thus opens up for those who know how to see it.

Traversing the collapse of the past into the present, Chiara Fumai does not limit herself to describing a situation of historical exclusion, of social disadvantage. She does not accept the position of the victim for either herself or her ghosts; rather, she looks for allies in a declaration of war. The sound reverberation that in *Shut Up, Actually Talk* grants Zalumma Agra self-awareness of her own oppression is, in fact, one and the same as the reflective movement that allows her to pronounce Carla Lonzi's liberating words as though they were her own. Reverberation is what

⁶⁴ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 17-32.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁶ Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," 53.

allows her to feel herself as another and to keep united, without contradiction, the identity and the difference that bind her to other women.

Carla Lonzi and Zulumma Agra, Eusapia Palladino and Annie Jones, Valerie Solanas and Ulrike Meinhof, are all part of a revolutionary movement that travels through time while remaining outside history. Together, they break the flow of a narrative that has not, until now, provided for or understood them, but rather refused or exploited them.

Despite living in the rubble of a collapsed present—precisely that which Krauss and Jameson both outline—these women are not victims but collective subjects capable of forming new alliances, new guerilla tactics, new genealogies. Chiara Fumai's ghosts do not announce the apocalypse, do not speak of the end of history; they promise a new time, a new history. A time that Nietzsche would have named *Morgenröte*: daybreak.

4.3. Ego

Viewed in the light of Rosalind Krauss's thought, the work of Chiara Fumai moves in at least two complementary directions: one regards an archeology of Western mediality; the other is directed at constituting a new feminist genealogy. I have attempted to show the artist's dialectical position with respect to Krauss and the phenomena she describes: Fumai uses the latter's grammar and appropriates it in order to distort its meaning and produce leaps of signification.

We need now to give an answer to the fundamental question the American theorist poses in her essay: "What would it mean to say, 'The medium of video is narcissism?'" (Krauss 1976, 50). Translated for the purposes of this catalog, this question means: to what degree can we interpret the work of Chiara Fumai in terms of narcissism? Will we again find traces of dialectical sublation if we consider it from this point of view?

The first thing is to establish a shared definition of "narcissism." As we remember, for a good part of her article Krauss does not clarify the meaning she ascribes to the psychoanalytic notion, relying instead on that semantic slippage through which she will establish a relationship between the media of art and the medium of spiritualism.

Krauss uses the noun in Freudian terms. The narcissist is a neurotic subject who due to a trauma incurred in earliest childhood stops investing their libido in an external object and transfers it exclusively to the ego.⁶⁷ For the narcissist, the ego does not merely coincide with the subject motivated by one or another drive, but also represents the only love object they are able to recognize. Precisely for this reason, a subject of this type is incapable of any real relationship with the world.

According to Krauss, this kind of narcissism is exemplified in visual art by the process of mirroring that in *Centers* leads Vito Acconci to indicate himself while pointing his index finger at the lens. This closed reflexivity should not be considered accidental but rather constitutive of the *loop* generated by transmitting, in real time, an audiovisual signal from a camera to a monitor connected to each other.

Endemic to video performance, narcissism has a direct consequence on the classification of the arts: it creates a rift between this expressive form and all other media. Indeed, if the historic avant-gardes led traditional media to reveal their own conditions of production, in video art these same material conditions are relegated to second place:

the nature of video performance is specified as an activity of bracketing out the text and substituting for it the mirror-reflection. [...] For the double that appears on the monitor cannot be called a true external object. Rather it is a displacement of the self which has the effect-as Holt's voice has in Boomerang--of transforming the performer's subjectivity into another, mirror, object. [...] This is why

⁶⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Zur Einführung Des Narzissmus." *Jahrbuch der Psychoanalyse* 6 (1914): 1-24.

it seems inappropriate to speak of a physical medium in relation to video. For the object (the electronic equipment and its capabilities) has become merely an appurtenance.⁶⁸

The effect of this difference is the discovery that whereas traditional media are composed of asymmetrical elements—the two-dimensional support and the three-dimensional representation, the subject/creator and the object created, and so on—video art is instead founded on an equally radical symmetry: that between the performer filmed by the camera and the image reflected on the screen.

There is no denying that a certain degree of what Rosalind Krauss calls “mirror reflection” can be observed in Chiara Fumai’s work. Not only because the equivalence between mirror and screen is explicitly evoked in *Shut Up, Actually Talk*—where the monitor’s frame nearly coincides with the frame of a Rococo mirror—but also because the artist is always clearly recognizable whenever she appears in her works. Despite her variegated paraphernalia of wigs and stage costumes, no one would mistake her for someone else. As in the profile of narcissism outlined by Krauss, otherness seems to be only the parody of an external love object; a parody that precipitates instantly into the ego’s reflexive circularity.

The feeling of a gradual disappearance of otherness in Chiara Fumai’s work becomes discernible when we consider the entire temporal span of her production. It can be perceived, from the start, in the work that inaugurates the artist’s full maturation: *Chiara Fumai Presents Nico Fumai* (2008).

In this performance lecture, Fumai reconstructs the musical career of her father Nico: a crooner in the 1960s, a psychedelic rocker in the 70s, an Italo disco star in the mythical 80s, and in the end, a forgotten shooting star. Although the artist’s tale is corroborated by a display of vinyl records and mementos, by references to real biographical facts and even commentaries on his recordings, the performing career of Nico Fumai remains nothing but a carefully crafted fiction. The work does, however, have an implicit metanarrative purpose. It is a declaration of intent for the performative strategy that Chiara will go on to adopt in years to come. During her monologue, the artist explains that Italo disco hits were often not sung by the people featured in the video clips shown on television. On television, the real singers were replaced with good-looking youngsters lip-synching in playback. The singers’ names, almost always pseudonyms, sounded exotic, like Ken Laszlo or Den Harrow—a distortion of the word *denaro* (money). Even the songs’ compositional style diverged from the Italian singer/songwriter tradition. The beats, melodies and lyrics expressed the idea of disco music that might have existed in the heads of kids well cultured in music but raised in the provinces, with scarce means at their disposal.

An international phenomenon, but a poor one (at least initially), Italo disco was an irreverent celebration of the fake, the synthetic, the inauthentic, and displayed a confusion of authorship that is not so dissimilar to Fumai’s performances. In both cases, it is never very clear who the voice is, who the author is, and who the mask is. We might even say that it makes no sense to ask since, one way or the other, we move far beyond the categories of true and false.

In *Chiara Fumai Presents Nico Fumai*, the artist’s father is only a narrative device that camouflages, not even very effectively, the intentions and poetics that the show’s real star would develop in her practice over the following decade. The same mechanism, complicated by greater polyphony, returns in *The Criminal Woman*, the first work featuring the character of Eusapia Palladino, the illiterate medium from Minervino Murge.

Entering a dimly lit room, we see a large rectangular table and some wooden chairs floating in the air. It is immediately obvious that what stands before us is not a paranormal phenomenon of levitation, because the brackets holding the table and the nylon thread keeping the chairs suspended are clearly visible. Just above the table, a slideshow projects some ten or so vintage photographs documenting Eusapia’s alleged powers and the investigations into their authenticity conducted by famous scientists. The names of these luminaries are engraved, together with their dates of birth and death, on metal plaques laid upon the table as though to indicate the positions of lecturers seated

⁶⁸ Krauss, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” 55, 57.

around a desk. They are Charles Robert Richet (1850–1935), Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909), Filippo Bottazzi (1867–1941), Hugo Münsterberg (1863–1916), Luigi Barzini (1874–1947).⁶⁹ This academic conference atmosphere is emphasized by the spectral sound of voices engaged in pompous debate, offering scientific explanations of the phenomena manifested during the medium's séances.

In the video installation, everything is overhauled in Eusapia's favor. The professors' desk becomes a séance table. The orators' haughty declamatory style transforms into prosopopoeia, the rhetorical device by which deceased historical figures are imagined in the act of speaking. Under examination here is no longer the delinquent medium, but rather the structure of positivist discourse that turned her into an object of study.

As is typical of Chiara Fumai's works, the texts recited are real excerpts of articles and books written by the scientists in question. Although the various voices heard resounding in the room have very different tones and cadences, it is easy enough to intuit that the only voice involved is that of the artist, who imitates, in typically comical register, the polished language of a science that Eusapia knew how to seduce and deceive.

The academic debate animating *The Criminal Woman* turns out to be a monologue, a fiction not unlike the one that, in *Chiara Fumai Presents Nico Fumai*, masks the performer's biography behind the fictitious career of her father. Not all is yet lost, however. Both works seem to conserve a sense of otherness in their shared ironic aim: we can discern it in that patriarchal authority mocked by the artist and her alter egos, in those male subjects there to be ridiculed and cut down to size. Yet, in her productions after *The Criminal Woman*, something changes. Even this minimal form of recognition of the other seems to vanish, and an increasingly complex system of self-citations and self-references takes shape in its place.

A clear example of the metalanguage Chiara Fumai adopted with increasing frequency is the photographic series *Dogaressa Querini, Zalumma Agra, Dope Head, Annie Jones, Harry Houdini, Eusapia Palladino Read Valerie Solanas* (2013). The artist herself described this work as the self-forgery of one of her own performances, but the game is still more complicated. In the six photographs that compose the work, we see some of the characters played by Fumai during her career, all intent on reading Valerie Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto*: there is a different one in each photo. Just as in *Chiara Fumai reads Valerie Solanas*, the sentence "A MALE ARTIST IS A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS" appears, in black writing, behind each character.

An uninitiated spectator might find it impossible to interpret the six photographs. It is true that Fumai wears the same costumes she had previously used to characterize each of her alter egos: Zalumma wears a disheveled black wig, Annie a long beard, and so on. It is true that the artist adopts poses that reflect each role she plays, one by one: Eusapia raises Solanas's book to her forehead, as if she were reading it telepathically. It is true that the photographs are differentiated by the presence of objects owned by this or that character. And yet, despite all that, a spectator unfamiliar with Fumai's production from 2007 onwards would have trouble distinguishing this complex iconography. It would be a little like asking someone to identify a painting of Saint Lucia without knowing what was done to the martyr's eyes during her execution.⁷⁰

From 2013, this form of self-citation becomes more frequent in both Fumai's collages and her video works. The process of self-referentiality culminates in 2015 with *The Book of Evil Spirits*,

⁶⁹ Charles Robert Richet: French physician and physiologist, winner of the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1913 for his pioneering research in anaphylaxis. Cesare Lombroso: Italian physician, anthropologist and jurist, acknowledged by many to be the father of modern criminology; his theories were influenced by physiognomy and social Darwinism. Filippo Bottazzi: considered the leading pioneer of biochemistry in Italy. Hugo Münsterberg: German psychologist who laid the foundations for the development of industrial psychology. Luigi Barzini: Italian writer and journalist for the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper.

⁷⁰ In my opinion, this would be an interesting point from which to begin studying the relationship between Chiara Fumai and Catholic religion; more interesting than the one adopted by Alison Gingeras in "Chiara Fumai and the Dead Feminist Society," *affidavit.art*, <http://www.affidavit.art/articles/chiara-fumai>, an article that also contains some incorrectly verified information.

an installation first set up at the Contour Biennial and thereafter displayed in continuously differing versions depending on the occasion. All the versions feature a video, roughly thirty minutes long, that must be understood as the compendium of Fumai's activity, her definitive phenomenology.⁷¹

From the start of the video, we see the artist in the guise of Eusapia Palladino. Wearing a lace blindfold over her eyes, the medium is seated at a round table: one of her séances is about to begin. After asking for the room to be darkened, Palladino begins receiving messages from a sizeable group of spirits, first through medianic writing, then by entering a state of trance. There thus begin to appear on the screen, through various effects of superimposition, nearly all of the female characters played by the artist throughout her career. Some have evolved—Annie Jones, for example, is given the task of illustrating the medium's powers—while others only repeat what they did in previous works: Ulrike Meinhof continues railing against Farah Pahlavi, Zalumma continues quoting Carla Lonzi without being able to calm down, the anonymous Red Brigades militant does not stop using sign language to raise self-awareness. And so on, until the moment someone can be heard singing a melody, a sort of closing signature theme. The voice is that of the opium addict, Dope Head, who just like in the video *I'm a Junkie* (2007) sings “Είμαι πρεζάκιας,” by the Greek rebetiko singer and composer Roza Eskenazi.⁷² The song, an ode to heroin use composed in 1934, includes the lyric: “When you use it, you become a king, a dictator, a god, you become the ruler of the world.”

The pantheon reunited in *The Book of Evil Spirits* appears like the veritable culmination of a self-reflexive process in which Chiara Fumai's universe progressively implodes into itself. Spectators without a prior awareness of the codes of that iconography would be largely excluded from understanding.

Amid self-citations and self-references, the artist simultaneously plays herself and the roles of all the other subjects that appear in the work. In so doing, she obstructs a real confrontation with any type of otherness not presented in the form of parody. Or at least, that is how things seem. It is what we might conclude if we were to take literally the hypothesis of narcissism as the medium of video performance; in other words, if we were to take literally Rosalind Krauss's reasoning. But would this be a legitimate move?

I believe, yet again, that it would not. I believe that the congruences between Krauss's positions and Chiara Fumai's work must be viewed, in a dialectical sense, as the conscious act with which the artist appropriates a language in order to vandalize it, pervert it, bend it to new and unexpected aims. Chiara herself defines the entirety of her adventure in art in the following terms: “Our main job is making one thing appear as if it was something else, and making this experience pleasant for the most prepared audience.”⁷³ Beneath and beyond the appearance of narcissism, a different form of reflection must be revealed, a form more suited to interpreting Fumai's performative practice. But which?

There is, in fact, a form of splitting of the Ego that despite being, like narcissism, a psychological condition does not coincide with it: the split personality.⁷⁴ Without going into the specific field of psychology, this existential mode can be illustrated by an image Immanuel Kant introduces at the start of *Critique of Pure Reason*: that of the courtroom in which the philosopher imagines summoning Reason as both the judge and the accused in a trial against itself.⁷⁵ The

⁷¹ Chiara Fumai, *The Book of Evil Spirits*, single-channel video, color, 26' 24", 2015. This work was presented at Contour 7—A Moving Image Biennial, Mechelen. It also garnered a Special Mention at the 7th VAF Prize, Macro Testaccio, Rome, April 13–May 29, 2016.

⁷² Chiara Fumai, *I'm a Junkie*, single-channel video, color, 3' 07", 2007.

⁷³ Urbano Ragazzi, “LESS LIGHT,” 30.

⁷⁴ The two texts that introduced the concept of splitting in psychoanalysis are Sigmund Freud, “Trauer und Melancholie,” *Internationale Zeitschrift für Ärztliche Psychoanalyse*, no. 4 (1914): 288-301, and Melanie Klein, “Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms,” *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, no. 27 (1946): 99-110.

⁷⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

purpose of the philosopher's imaginary trial is to establish the limits of the rational faculties of the human mind through the use of those very faculties. Just as in the case of Krauss's narcissism, the subject here reflects itself, observes itself, scrutinizes itself; this time, however, it does so not to mirror itself symmetrically in its own image but to break apart, acquiring within itself a critical asymmetry that enables a self-evaluation of its relationship with the world.

In Kant's image, reason—at once the judge and the accused—splits in two in order to be able to see itself as the object of its own self-consciousness. Exactly as in the philosopher's courtroom, Chiara Fumai doubles or even multiplies her Ego in order to activate a critical form of thinking. But unlike Kant, who conceives of the intellect as a transcendental structure, the artist views subjectivity as always gendered and historically determined.

Now, if we rethink the constantly increasing self-referentiality of Chiara Fumai's work not in terms of narcissism but in terms of splitting, we can conclude by identifying the real terms of Fumai criticism. Firstly, the exclusion of the male subject, which we had interpreted as a closure to otherness, must be conceived as the opening of an autonomous space for the determination of feminist subjectivity. And so we discover that it is not Chiara Fumai or her works that have a narcissistic personality structure but rather the patriarchal subject, who believes himself at the center of every discourse even when the discourse does not regard him at all. In the artist's own words:

We don't quite know at what point this kind of art actually addresses men, since we usually embody female figures. It's likely that in some countries men feel called into question by our artworks, as men are culturally more used to expressing opinions, even disagreement, and feeling like protagonists even when they're not supposed to.⁷⁶

In this sense, *The Book of Evil Spirits* and Fumai's work in general are perfectly described in Rivolta Femminile's political agenda:

We unify the situations and episodes of the historic experience of the female subject: in it, woman manifested herself by interrupting for the first time the monologue of patriarchal civilization.⁷⁷

The monologue of patriarchal civilization having been interrupted, the dialogue among women can begin—a dialogue that carries with it also the right to conflict, dissent, incoherence. Zalumma Agra is not Carla Lonzi and she is not Chiara Fumai, even if the one speaks with the voice and body of the others and identifies with them. The ongoing question as to what keeps them together and what sets them apart, the need to distinguish what each one is saying on her own behalf through the words of others, is the feminist core of Chiara Fumai's work. Articulated along this trajectory is the idea of an anarchic and queer feminism, a feminism that does not propose to synthesize or recompose the essence of female identity but that celebrates singularities in their constitutive difference. In this sense, perceiving oneself as an autonomous totality acquires greater value than the logical need to avoid contradictions.

This creation of an intricate network of self-references is not aimed merely at providing the definition of a queer feminism. It also allows Fumai to assume a critical position that is as much against performance, understood as the myth of presence, as against the reduction of the work to the stability of its material connotations. This much emerges from the statements made by the artist regarding her intentions of self-forgery:

There's no space for proper documentation in our practice because we don't love tautologies, but, on the other hand, we love to put into circulation several material forgeries of live performances. Such operations, which we call post-performative, require the audience to pay a lot of attention, precisely

⁷⁶ Urbano Ragazzi, "LESS LIGHT," 30.

⁷⁷ Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel. La donna clitoridea and la donna vaginale and altri scritti* (Milan: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1974), 17.

because they play on the border between artwork and falsity, between the oral language of the performance and its echo, between the impossibility of transmitting the cognitive experience through an image and its own parody. There's a performativity even in this [...] the diffusion of a pseudo-documentation is an act that can destroy the idea of performance as an original, heroic, and historically unique act.⁷⁸

The continuous transit of a character or text from a performance to a video or to a collage, and vice-versa, demonstrates clearly how the work, for Fumai, is not identified with an object or an act with which to engage in a fetishistic relation. The work resides instead in the immaterial force that repeats itself, returns and gains strength at each stage of transit. Everything, in this sense, becomes performance, despite the performer's now irrevocable absence.

Lastly, in Chiara Fumai's artistic discourse, the mechanism of exclusion that arises from the difficulty of deciphering these continuous internal cross-references assumes a third function. It reveals the primary split around which Western spectacularity has always been organized: the distinction between performer and spectator, between those who have the right to speak and those who must only listen closely.

Instead of seeking consolatory forms of participation, Chiara always chose the opposite path. She sought to exasperate to the extreme the balance of power that bound her to her audience. Whether through live performance or material works, Chiara always placed those who came to see her in unpleasant situations of embarrassment, boredom, fear and even anger:

I want to cannibalize the victimizer in order to prompt (intelligent) spectators to stop observing and start "unworking." And if this proves impossible, I want spectators to intensely live and express the frustration aroused by this mirror reflection, even against me. This is my only wish.⁷⁹

What emerges in Chiara Fumai's performative work, as it does in Rosalind Krauss's definition of the avant-garde, is not the symmetry of narcissistic mirroring but rather a radical asymmetry between the terms that constitute a medium—in this case, the performer and the audience, who in their reciprocal opposition allow the show to go on. So if we have to identify the narcissistic subject in the system, it is not Chiara Fumai, but the frustrated spectator, the spectator who presumes to find in the artist a mirror capable of satisfying, maternally, his desires for gratification and entertainment.

Chiara Fumai countered the spoiled, lazy spectator with a strenuous exercise in attention, study, discipline, listening. She asked those of us who watched her for a moment of altruism in deciphering incorrectly understood words; words mistaken for dangerous aggressions. What we received from Chiara in exchange was an entire universe: her universe. A universe that was comical and tragic at the same time. A universe that my words will never be able to fully describe.

May the spectator who wants to witness a miracle please step forward.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Urbano Ragazzi, "LESS LIGHT," 32.

⁷⁹ Urbano Ragazzi, "Chiara Fumai: Follow This You Bitches."

⁸⁰ With this phrase, Chiara Fumai ended the interview later published in Urbano Ragazzi, "LESS LIGHT." I can only leave the last word to her.