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## Shelter in Two Acts

Mena Mitrano

### 1. Film still



Fig. 1. Still frame of Angela Putino from *Amica Nostra Angela*, dir. Nadia Pizzuti (2012). Courtesy Nadia Pizzuti.

The minuteness of her body and the expansiveness of her thought struck some as an odd contrast. In this still, her body crowded by the desk lamp, the large microphone, and the curtains that seem to drift toward her on the window's breeze, they fuse in one perfect moment (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Mid-February 1994, Rome. She is speaking at the Virginia Woolf Center of the International Women's House about the convergence of the practice of feminism and the insights of Michel Foucault. Critical of

the communion of the “we,” she is taking feminism in another direction, a more theoretical direction, some would say. Her face is lit with more than light (the artificial light in the seminar room and the light of day flowing in from the city outside): with scandalous accuracy, the still records the moment when emotion passes into concept. She pronounces words borrowed from Foucault and hesitates on the borrowings—saying, for instance, “power, let’s call it that way”—knowing full well that the other thinker’s words and insight are only “parts,” useful because they allow for the sighting of a different idea of the body: we touch power in our bodies.<sup>2</sup> Her lit face informs us that this touching has not yet been said, not enough.

The Italian feminist philosopher Angela Putino (1946–2006) intercepts Foucault because his thought, like feminist thought, starts from the self. In starting from the self, he finds that “power, let’s call it that way . . . consists in practices that have an effect on our bodies.”<sup>3</sup> The body is wrested both from any Oedipal order of the father and from any alternative symbolic order of the mother (as proposed by the feminism of [Luisa Muraro](#)). The symbolic revolution determined by the analysis of power entails the fall of any representational politics justified by identification, based on the being-with of relations among women. For Putino, experiential commonality is replaced by the sense of bodies in relation through a biological commonality which has become the “true continuum among women,” a biological being in common of which she was critical because women’s agency no longer seems gendered agency but genetic mimesis: “the uterus is the in-common because it reproduces a genetic formula” (*Amiche mie isteriche*, 58). The protection, vindication, and promotion of women’s lives can no longer be grasped in terms of a symbolic natality, in the order of a historical event; rather, the analysis of power opens to the horizon of life: “life takes on an aura that severs it from conceptuality and turns it into a conduit for the interests of power” (59).

Subjectivation matters because, by analyzing it, we can grasp the larger question of the care of life as “the government of life” (Putino, *I Corpi di Mezzo*, 104). In the process of telling about myself,

Putino teaches me, I learn about the government of the living, how the living are governed (biopolitics). A shift occurs, then, from the preoccupation with the gaze of the other to my own gaze on myself. As a living being, I see myself as the object of this governmentality, as the object of this care (119). Putino's aim is to understand processes of subjectivation in order to depart from them, to take leave of them.

She cites Foucault: "Nothing is more material, more physical, more corporeal than power."<sup>4</sup> His discourse helps her sight those other parts, "the non-domesticated fragments" that make the whole of a body. She is speaking about making place, about exerting agency on place—both through a tension with context and in the mind—by cutting oneself off, detaching oneself, separating, because only by uprooting oneself can one find those non-domesticated parts. But in her hands, Foucault is no longer the Foucault people know. He becomes an accomplice and silent witness to her spectacular withdrawals; he is now a *dispositif*, a semantic switchgear that enables her to activate an entire line of women thinkers, from Simone Weil to Maria Zambrano, who were for Putino the theorists of the "unthought along the rim of the Same," of the unforeseen and unexpected subjects (*I Corpi di Mezzo*, 105).<sup>5</sup>

Foucault helped Putino withdraw with Weil and philosophers that shaped Italian feminism, like Zambrano, in intimate conversations that forged her preference for the figure of Antigone and her warring sentences—sentences that carry no will to argue and no insistence on persuading, but are strung together by the same desire not to be governed in a certain way, at a certain price (146). *Just as encountering Putino can only happen in the private mode . . . this writing is not an argument, not an explanation, not a didactic moment; it is a murmur . . .* Putino's Antigone persists because she does not want the traces of bodies and histories to be erased and lost, even when lives are crushed by defeat and by the arrogance of the victorious: "she wants to love . . . what already does not exist." Antigone's appeal to unwritten laws is to be taken literally: the unwritten does not have a

specific content yet, hence cannot be the subject of writing yet. What is without content remains as such so that “everyone may find what he/she is looking for, may seek what he/she is seeking, may be in life” (147). A thought of the possible. Because power insists precisely on life, for Putino’s Antigone the desire for life and experience means resistance (148).

Even though Putino assays processes of subjectivation with unprecedented passion because her intent is to depart from them, her line of reflection does not stop at the indocility to be exerted against the government of the living. It opens to the problem of a self that comes to be in the sphere of pietas and empathy. The self that gazes upon itself from an utterly vulnerable position is the foundation of biopolitics. To know biopolitics, says Putino, it is not necessary to stray from the self, from myself: “All I need is to feel like a living without form; it is enough that I gaze at myself as something that does not now about itself, that harbors an obscure need for place(ment) (*collocazione*), for wanting to be something. . .” (109). The wound from which I gaze at myself is crucial. Restoring and repairing that gaze on myself marks the beginning of thinking of myself as an object of governmental care.

Two options are open to me: “I hold to the identity of a subject . . . who has a role because a series of practices give it a form,” or I am left with the “formless abyss,” the “darkness of undifferentiated living matter, of inert pure and uncertain organic matter . . . a zone of life without value” (109). On the one hand, there is what Putino, with Laura Bazzicalupo, would call the anarchic background of contemporary eudaimonia: the chaos of financial and technological flows outside any law.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, there is “a shelter for the individual in the social protection afforded by roles and identities” (Putino, *I Corpi di Mezzo*, 109). Putino’s theory of biopolitics thus acknowledges the importance of shelters, of taking shelter in social identities. It helps us pause exactly on this moment of thought: the practice of the act of taking shelter (*la messa in atto del ripararsi*).

The stake of biopolitics is the living in a despoiled state, in all its poverty. If, given this stake, it is not credible for morality, law, and forms of civilization to offer points of resistance, Putino begins with the unsheltered condition of the “pure biological datum” (119). Keeping to the lesson that there is always “a relation to the self which resists codes and powers,” she chooses a philosophical poetics of poverty that valorizes the unthought (*impensato*): what one does not possess as thought (116, 119). Thus it is necessary to start with bodies, in their extreme poverty, without preserving anything, neither the clothing of identity nor that of opinions. The nakedness that Putino champions here is of course conceptual; like Jean-Luc Nancy, she believes that, despite all the talk about it, the body has in fact been ex-written, buried under signs.<sup>7</sup> We do not know what a body is. The poverty she advocates is a prelude to a rethinking of the body. Such a rethinking does not mean an evacuation of the body from the visual realm but poses a challenge for visual representations of the body and of bodies. An undoing to the extreme: “Nothing but bodies naked and poor, where something that might be called “biological,” but only in a new way, offers lodgings to the unthought, form still wrested from codes” (119–20).

*This is why upon first approaching the most recent wave of theory—it’s been called “Italian Theory” and the name of Putino is nowhere mentioned—I feel disoriented, pulled back into the quicksands of a wilderness that I thought I had left behind. I drive around with a copy of my friend Roberto’s [Terza Persona](#) sitting in the back of the car; the sun beats on the rear window glass, season after season, until the cover curls, the pages turn yellow and crack. I am astonished by the figure of the impersonal peering from it, the third person that is the main sign of so-called Italian Theory. It is enigmatic, eccentric: the impersonal understood as pure biological datum, as a kind of preindividual or transindividual biological substance . . . flagged like a badge of difference. It pulverizes the Anglophone theory where I come from, with its saving faith in the mansion of language. It is like experiencing the sense of entering thought, only to be pushed back again before its threshold. Fear and trembling. But the impersonal is aggressive and aesthetic, it is exhibited as*

a dandy exhibits his elegance, it is served like an idea sealed in encaustic; before its eccentricity the Anglophone assimilation of chunks of national traditions (German, French, Italian Theory) loses its sense, reduced to a procession of men. But with Putino, one remembers the feminist origins of “Italian” theory.

## 2. Less



Fig. 2. Carla Accardi, *Tenda* (1965-66). Varnish on sicofoil, 215 x 220 x 140 cm. Photo Attilio Maranzano. Courtesy Archivio Accardi-Sanfilippo.

Power paralyzes the body. Hence other gestures are needed that might feel like the opposite of seizing, being seized. The artist Carla Accardi once said: *Togliere, togliere, togliere.*<sup>8</sup> Less, less, less. Cut, depart, strip down. Lightness. Like the lightness achieved in the act of stilling the screen, when, pausing on the image of Putino speaking at her seminar, “Corpo astratto, Corpi Concreti”

(“Abstract body, Concrete bodies”), the moment of thought taking flight also takes her away from the confines of a local feminist conflict to include her in a longer wave of theory.

Accardi was in conversation with the critic Carla Lonzi, who, before Putino’s poverty, theorized the act of “leave-taking from the culture of mastery.”<sup>9</sup> *Tenda* (1965–1966) came into being from a collaboration between the artist and the critic, when Lonzi shared with Accardi images from the museum of Krakow, showing beautiful Turkish tents that soldiers pitched along their journeys in times of war. The tents were, Lonzi told Accardi, a symbol of the resilience of the aesthetic in hostile environments:

The idea of the tent was solicited by a thought that came to me when you showed me those images of the Turkish tents from the museum of Krakow. The idea of those tents affected me; so beautiful, the Turkish soldier carried them on their war campaigns to pitch them at times that I imagined to be really hard. It seemed to me a pure aesthetic act. Therefore, the other day, when you came to my study, I said: “I’m just making an aesthetic thing.” (Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, 226–27)

Accardi called the useless, aesthetic thing an environment to mean a *different* environment. It was the first of several productions; the artist’s subsequent environments took the form of rolls of sicofoil, a transparent kind of plastic, stood on the ground. She wanted to act on and in place; to make a place for ideas to come. She took leave from the canvas just as Lonzi took leave from established art criticism to become a feminist philosopher. Lonzi’s version of the feminist philosopher recalls the dandy, both of which think and write through their body and their presence, acting in and on space, marking space and preparing a place for different ideas with their person. And like Lonzi’s feminist philosopher, and also like the dandy, Accardi’s useless things do not ask for attention, but nevertheless receive attention.

Before she made her transition from art criticism to feminist philosophy, Lonzi practiced the former unorthodoxly, withholding the judgment of the work of art and opting rather for a dialogue with the artist. This marginal yet contiguous position allowed for a confusion of tongues between art practice and thought. Lonzi favored an art of collaboration between critic and artist which she called “intromission”; “the only thing from which the critic benefits,” Lonzi told Accardi, “is the act of intromission, from being able to exert it” (34). Visual spectatorship unfailingly seems to precede an inclusive thought that does not make you see yourself as “a person at the border who has not entered the country” (31). *Tenda* is the outcome of the beneficial intromission of the critic. Lonzi’s gift of those images of tents amounted to a request for Accardi to unmoor herself, to set her work afloat. Accardi responds by abandoning the canvas, the wall, the creeds and beliefs of the art scene of her time. The artist’s dialogue with Lonzi enables her to experience her unmooring as other than fateful marginalization at a border. *Togliere, togliere, togliere*. Accardi takes leave from art-making understood as the frenzy of leaving signs of our passage in the world, as an activity finalized to the prescribed pursuit of forceful innovation and generational competition; as she observed, “nothing seemed to happen, if I compared myself, for instance to a young, upcoming artist who has been researching for a while on something I had not thought about.” By “losing [herself] in plastics”—the only member of the Italian neo-avant-garde to experiment with that support—she reaches the still point where “nothing seems to happen” (226–27).

At the still point, what appears is the question of dwelling, the difference between home and shelter, and the celebratory possibility of other ways of taking shelter. Accardi paints both the interior and the exterior of her transparent refuge with sensuous fluorescent signs in bright varnish colors, like so many remnants of a secretly affirmative, irrepressibly vital code. Like the asemic practitioners of whom Natalie Ferris has written [on these pages](#), Accardi gives us signs that “exist on the edges of illegibility.” Yet, they do not engage in an adversarial vision of meaning; their irrepressible vitality is rather a *liberation* from meaning, not a challenge, not a combat, not a duel, not an agon. *Tent*



does not offer thought to the illusory pretense of one's being spoken by the work of art; its transparency does not make possible any dark cavity from which the (philosopher's) thought might do justice to the agency of things. Instead, the aim is to be free from the fear of "translating emotion into intellect."<sup>10</sup>

That is why, as its maker insists, *Tent* is not an object of design, but a concept, playful and dreamlike. Lonzi's intromission is in full view. From the vantage point of the art of collaboration, thought is the dream of a continuous ekphrasis; thought is always thought in translation, pouring abundantly from the position at the limits of the image. For Walter Benjamin as for Lonzi, visibility promises a resistance to mastery (the professional mastery of the meaning of the work).<sup>11</sup> Accardi's wavy, enticing signs conjure into the field of vision other codes and ways of being in the world.

In her still(ed) moment of thought, Putino carries on the legacy of the Lonzi/Accardi dialogue, but she does so by questioning any and every enticing shelter. Her turn to the biological datum, in open dissidence with a feminism of communion and of counter-symbolic orders, is her way of pursuing other ways of being in the world by withdrawing from being governed. Through the analysis of processes of subjectivation, she would go on to illuminate the precarity and temporariness of all shelters, in the company of Foucault but also of extreme thinkers like Weil, whose decreation—*less, less, less*—accompanies Putino's feminist departures. It is in departing from her earlier feminist legacy that Putino can create the conditions for her legacy, its generative and ongoing work. *When I look at Putino now, I see how her questioning continues to circulate under the strange, English name of Italian Theory.*

### **Captions:**

Figure 1. Still frame of Angela Putino from Nadia Pizzutti, dir., [Amica Nostra Angela](#) (2012). Courtesy Nadia Pizzutti.

Figure 2. Carla Accardi, *Tenda* (1965–1966). Varnish on Sicofoil on perspex structure, cm 215 x 220 x 140. Photo Attilio Maranzano. Courtesy Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo.

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<sup>1</sup> Angela Putino, Still from Nadia Pizzuti, dir., *Amica Nostra Angela*, 2012. Dedicated to Putino, this documentary is edited by Sara Pazienti, with music by Stefania Tarantino. I thank Nadia Pizzuti for making the video of the film available to me.

<sup>2</sup> Angela Putino, *I Corpi di Mezzo: Biopolitica, differenza tra i sessi e governo della specie (In-Between Bodies: Biopolitics, Sexual Difference, and Governmentality of the Species)* (Verona: ombre corte, 2011) 107.

<sup>3</sup> The words Putino speaks at the moment represented by the still from *Amica Nostra Angela*.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*, ed. C. Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 57–58; cited in Putino, *I corpi di Mezzo*, 105.

<sup>5</sup> Angela Putino, *Simone Weil e la passione di Dio. Il ritmo divino nell'uomo* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1997); Angela Putino, *Simone Weil. Un'intima estraneità* (Troina: Città Aperta, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Laura Bazzicalupo, "L'economia come logica di governo," *SpazioFilosofico* 1 (2013): 21–29, 27.

<sup>7</sup> See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Carla Accardi in conversation with Carla Lonzi, in Carla Lonzi (1969), *Autoritratto* (Rome: et al./edizioni, 2010), 227.

<sup>9</sup> Federica Giardini, "Muoversi su un altro piano – Il tempo della politica," [Taci, anzi parla](#): Carla Lonzi e l'arte del femminismo, Casa internazionale delle donne, Rome, 5–7 March 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Carla Accardi, *Segno e Trasparenza*, ed. Luca Massimo Barbero (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana, 2011) 46.

<sup>11</sup> See Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1932–1940*, ed. Henry Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), 291.