

Then I would like to make a happy end for once
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There was a time when I could not sleep. Like most people who cannot sleep and have a lot of time at their hands while the others are sleeping, I started to research the Internet on the topic of sleep and, instead of sleeping, I became an expert on sleeplessness. Unsurprisingly, and through the logic of the Internet, I also re-encountered Sigmund Freud, and his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*. I decided, in one of those sleepless nights, to look for it on my bookshelf. I couldn't find it, but found another book of Freud's, which was: *The joke and its relation to the unconscious*. So I started to read, and on that evening I mainly read the jokes that are in it. Freud in this book first makes jokes, then explains each one and argues how the specific joke functions and then how jokes function more generally, but I didn't get that far that evening. I only looked for and read the jokes. What surprised me most was that I had to laugh while reading some of them. I found it absolutely miraculous how something would, from reading, go through my whole body and produce a reaction. I was laughing. Some idea had gone from the text directly into my body.

I found that quite fascinating, but more than that, it also made me sleep. And this is why I became interested in comedy.

At the same time, I moved to Rome. And while in Rome I somehow naturally was interested in the art scene there. Art has a much higher status in Rome than in any other city, I know. Which makes it a very happy place for artists. Everyone loves artists, thinks they are necessary and valuable, and you therefore never have to explain why you are doing art. There is a reason for this love of art . . . everyone somehow senses this. It is most probable that the whole city (which was, besides the Vatican, a unhealthy swamp village during the middle ages) would not exist as it is today, was it not for the art produced there centuries ago, as well as the subsequent artists going there into this then-abandoned small town to see it. Out of this Grand Tour that, since the beginning of the 18th century, had led European artists, then aristocrats, then everyone to Rome, tourism evolved, and this is one major basis for the average Roman's income.

The Rome art scene—in the last century—was especially interesting after the Second World War, and when you look into this period, you will very easily encounter the names of Carla Lonzi, and Carla Accardi. Carla Lonzi used to work as an art critic, and in the art world is especially known for her book *Autoritratto*—a collection of interviews, in a very special, very intimate style, that she conducted with main protagonists in the art scene at the time.

So I went into a bookshop to buy a book by Carla Lonzi. My Italian is theoretically ok, but I found out on that occasion that something was separating me from an easy access to this book. And this was my inability to pronounce the letter R. As would have been necessary in Carla. I couldn't say her name in a way that would have been understood. I had to write down her name in order to get the book.

This impossibility to say a rolling R (an Italian R) disturbed me. The rolling R is formed by loosening your tongue and letting it flutter briefly so that the R starts to roll. There is a lot of advices on the Internet, as to how you can learn this R, but at their very bottom is the advice that you have to let loose. You have to loosen the control over your tongue.

This would have been a bodily movement of loosening control over myself, which I couldn't do and I was quite angered by the barrier my body posed between Carla Lonzi and I.

These two observations—the laughter, rolling through me, started by a text, by something outside of me, and the barrier my body was contributing to something, and more so, the impossibility of losing control for a moment—was the beginning of this specific research. In the course of this talk I would like to talk about how it is mostly not an intellectual endeavour that makes you start to work on a specific topic (neither in art, nor do I think in any other field), but it is a bodily, more subconscious impulse, something that is more sensed than thought. It is the performativity of a concept that you notice before you see, get into, or develop the concept behind it. Research is very much embedded in a sense, a sensing, a sensation.

There is a third thing for this work at the beginning that I also *consider* very important to *consider*. And this is the notion of jealousy. It is known that the artist David Hockney did most of the steps in his painting career out

of a certain notion of being jealous about praise attributed to something (for example, realistic painting done by Renaissance painters, etc.), that he thought could be governed by him as well.

This is one well-known example but it is not far-fetched. Almost everyone knows the bodily sensation of seeing something done, and already feeling inside yourself that you could do that, feeling a latent potency and that you would only have to try it out. This is something especially linked to sports, but it exists in art as well.

In my case this happened in Rome as well. Rome has, since the 18th century, a relatively stable (in numbers) community of international artists, who live there for some time, forming a somehow extra-Roman artist community that you get to know when you yourself are there for the same reasons. This comes with the big academies there, the Villa Massimo, where the Germans are, the Villa Medici, for the French, the British School of Rome, the American Academy, and so on to the Romanian, the Egyptian, the Japanese Academies, that have all more or less been established in the 19th century, and normally have something like a Prix de Rome (this is for the French) connected to them, as a sort of—yet moribund—apotheosis of an artist's life.

So while there, as one of these extra-Roman artists, you are invited to a lot of studios, and when I came to see the studio (within the Swiss Academy) of the artist Stefan Burger I was very astonished as to how similar it looked to my own studio. He was also carrying flowers and plants, leaves, branches, and grass into his studio, as did I, because it was high spring, and everything was just so *there*. I soon found out, that contrary to me, he was photographing all of them. I shared the studio with another photographer, Verena Kathrein, and here I saw that she did more or less the same as I did—walking through Rome—but she came back every day with images, with photos. I somehow only had memories and was left wondering what to do with all of these. So, I wondered if I had overseen something, had been blind to something very obvious—the very ready availability of images—and it struck me somehow, in a real fit of jealousy, that I had never thought about the availability of images through photography.

I had thought about photography for most of my life, but I always had considered it a very arbitrary medium. It never was clear to me why you would

take a picture of a specific cadre, and also why you would take it at the moment you did. It seemed as if you could have taken one just next to this, or you could have also taken it two minutes later, or five days later, or from the backside, or a year later.

But now, I had to admit that photography needed a sort of audacity, a quick wit, a sort of confidence in your decisions, and also what may be just called bravery, to decide on an image in the moment. And I felt that this decision making, based on self-confidence, this sort of presence of mind, of being in touch with your surroundings, was something I was looking for, a sort of connectedness to the sub-consciousness, like a reflex to what you see, and again, a moment of loosening control and some very basic trust in your own abilities.

Stephan Dilleuth, an artist and art professor here in Munich, had once talked about how the academy in Munich was introduced into academic research. He said that it consisted of four main questions:

Do I / we have a problem?
What is my / our problem?
Do I / we have the means to tackle this problem?
What are these means?

Indeed, I had found out that I seemingly had something that was troubling me. Putting it all together, I saw that I was looking for a sort of quick wit, a sort of more impulsive reaction to my environment, and it seemed there were barriers in me to get the things I wanted and they had something to do with a sort of rigidity. In short, I was looking for a sort of quick wit, a comedian element in seeing the world and interpreting it.

I had seen that there were means, or I had identified means, but they were not mine. They were someone else's. But in both cases, Verena Kathrein's and Stefan Burger's, they came out of this very similar situation. They were photos taken in a very similar situation; they were another person's narrative of this situation. And maybe, I thought, I could look at them and find something in them describing my situation, and then if it answered questions for both their and my own narrative, then it would eventually describe something far more structural.

This attempt in developing a common narrative is also what a famous concept of Italian feminism is proposing. The concept of *Autocoscienza*. *Autocoscienza* was the name for a method and concept to collectively develop a narrative, a story, by accepting that every individual story, every feeling one had so painfully seen as singling themselves out, making one strange, was in truth structural, part of the same structure. Carla Lonzi had written: "Primo era la risonanza. Di Sara in me, di me in Sara" (first there was resonance, of Sara in me, of me in Sara). So, *Autocoscienza* in this way started to resonate in us, that whatever Verena would photograph could resonate in me, and whatever I would draw, write, or paint could resonate in her, and we would find out that these were images of a structure, not of personal experiences. And this could make these images less subjective, less closed, and more universal, so that they could resonate in others as well.

So, this was how Verena and I started to work together.

I finally managed to buy *Diario di una femminista* by Carla Lonzi, and there were two main sentences that struck me, and which I now cite out of memory.

One was:

"In reality I always wanted to be happy, but the circumstances and situations always alienated me to an extent, that I couldn't . . ."

and:

"Feminism next time won't be a tragedy but a comedy."

There is a very common notion that you will still find everywhere—even when it is very contrary to what people may experience on a daily basis—and this is that women are not funny. This is now and again discussed, and here one can say, performed, because without this ongoing reminder in public discussion, nobody would ever think or care about it alone. Thus, that it is so often said is something that can make you very angry; when without your choosing, you are sorted into the category of women, and thus into the category of not being funny.

This in a shortened image describes the concept of separatism: the second important concept in Italian feminism, and seminally designed by Carla Lonzi.

Separatism talks about how a concept—something that may also be called science—inherently describes differences. For example, the difference between men and women, the difference between black and white, the partition into sanguine, phlegmatic, and so on types of people, and the division of people according to the star signs, or the difference between Jewish and Aryan, etc. You can very much see that these concepts of differentiation are very much based in their time. The same concept, or science, then attributes characteristics, virtues, and defaults—and it is the same concept that also gives value to these categories. This also works interdependently, the other way around: the concept (or science) also takes the characteristic and defines upon this the differentiated person. It not only says women are not funny, it also says that funniness interdependently is something done by men, and if a woman would be funny, she would only be so, as if she was, or was nearly, like a man. We could break this down through lots of other historical and actual attributes: a quasi-natural rhythm and dance with blackness, greediness with Jews, homeliness with cancers, love of food with phlegmatic persons, collecting with anal characters, and so forth, but we don't have the time here.

In this context, it is—but—necessary for us here, to look into the concept of art. Carla Lonzi pointed out that as long as she was working in the field of art, she was part of its very same logic. The logic included that whatever art was, it was something that over centuries officially was not done by women. Which also meant that if it was done by women, it was not art (but, for example, only a hobby, the education of a beautiful soul, or merely house decoration). But she, Carla Lonzi, was, without her asking by the way, defined as a woman by rules, which came out of the same logics, which in their conception excluded women as well. So she knew, that the same system (of science, of society, of media) that had declared her a woman, had already beforehand declared that women were not the ones who made art, and it was furthermore explained that if they made good art, they were said to be nearly as good as men (and that happened, even when there was a whole system of becoming an artist that they were not admitted into, the workshop and the academy, and motherhood was declared as incompatible with artistic creation, while ridiculing women who were not mothers as old spinsters). So, art, as she explained, was more and more showing itself

to be a system that had had centuries to define and fine-tune itself, always on the grounds of excluding women. In her time, people like her, who the concept into which she was born would see as women, were starting to get invited into this field, but it was a field constituted through centuries, along lines that had never cared for her or noticed her absence or, more than that, had always hindered her. So, in a way, the invitation now was not an invitation to alter a field, but—she felt—more a sort of test, if not a trap, where she would have to prove from the beginning that she was not what she was not (and here I am taking very consciously the words that Gabi Ngcobo was using as a motto for the preparation of the last Berlin Biennial, because it triggered the same questions).

So in a sort of self-regulation, she, Carla Lonzi, was—in proving that she was not a woman—looking into what could be the most male-like thing, so that nobody would see her as a woman (and alas someone who would have to prove that she could also make art, or be funny). So she studied what was meeting with other male-attributed categories: dialectics, or abstraction, for example . . .

Let's assume this was not very liberating.

She writes that even when she had thus passed all of the watchdogs who were patrolling the gates to the field (of art), she felt as if she only proved something to someone.

Therefore:

“Actually I was a happy person, and I always wanted to be happy, *but* . . .”

This discourse seemingly has not really moved in the last 50 years. While I was writing that paper, a discussion stirred up in the German art world about an international survey show where the two male white curators had managed to include only one female position and one collective position in a list of 33 artists. What the controversy was actually about was their argument in defence of their curatorial position, which was actually not so surprising in itself. They wrote: “We would have been more than happy to make a female-only show if they had provided the better works than their male counterparts.” What they didn't even notice was that they had written better, not comparable!!

And this was the main argument already then in Italian separatist feminism: first the field gets defined by a group of people in an exclusive setting, then the formerly excluded are invited to pass but only if they exhibit more bravado than the ones trained within the system. It is well known that the same happens in the education system, where children from poorer backgrounds have to perform better in order to be the same. And this old description reminds us of recent discussions of how black people feel in the art world or in academic systems.

Separatism now takes the bravery of the witty argument and says: so let's just leave.

In a very well-argued text, Fulvia Carnevale, an Italian theorist, and part of the artist collective Claire Fontaine living in Palermo, writes about the year 1974 in Italy. The text is called *The feminist leaves*, and it describes the moment when the Italian feminists left everything. They left art, they left the communist party, they left the parliament, they left the psychiatric society, and they left the family. They left to start again with a redefinition. A redefinition of many and different fields: a redefinition of psychoanalysis without the penis envy, politics without the patriarchal system of leadership, and a field of creation without a system of exclusion.

Many years later—now—the historic problems of autonomy discourses are known, and the violent backlash of the system of art is also known, which just too readily dropped the people who left at that time like Charlotte Posenenske and Chris Reineke. We can discuss art theoretician Helmut Drexler's argument in the book *The driftage of a wish*: that the desire to leave is part of the same systemic thinking, which has the illusion embedded that we *can* leave, which actually makes us only reinforce it.

But then I was pointed to another book. The art historian Toni Hildebrandt had given me the then-recently published book *Pulcinella ovvero divertimento per li ragazzi* by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, which is based on the figure of Pulcinella, starting from the frescoes and drawings by Gianbattista and Giandomenico Tiepolo, which are now in Venice, depicting the life and death of the figure of Pulcinella.

I opened up the book and read, something like:

“My friends know that I am actually a happy person, and I always wanted to be happy, but the times in which I was subjected to live, may have given my work a somehow dark notion . . . ”

It struck me that there was again someone who considered him or herself a happy person, but a happy person who was hindered by his or her situation in which he or she was subjected to live, and this notion of failed happiness automatically linked the two books.

So, in this research that we, Verena and I started, there has always been a sort of dialogue between Carla Lonzi and Pulcinella. It was about their common wish to just be, as they were, the one as a happy individual, the other as something with very basic needs and joys, and their circumstance to live in an estranged environment, and their clear wish to find a way out, their basically very profound wish to find a way to leave a drama that they had not started.

So, who is Pulcinella? Pulcinella is a figure in the Italian commedia dell'arte. And like all other figures in the commedia he stands for a city, and Pulcinella stands for the city of Naples. He is the only figure in the Commedia who doesn't have a gender. He was born out of an egg. We do not know whether he is male or female, we only know that he is half human and half poultry, born out of an egg, maybe a turkey. That he doesn't have a gender is also shown in the name. Pulcinella is a female ending in Italian, but he looks more like a man (and is played by male actors, meanwhile the commedia dell'arte was the only theatre where women would always be on stage equally). He is also the ancestor of many more prominent figures. He is a forefather of Donald Duck, and Donald Duck shares another feature with him. They both talk with a sort of animal voice. This is done—when Pulcinella is played on stage—by inserting a metal feather into the throat so that the voice gets distorted as the one of Donald Duck in the early Disney films. He is also one origin of Punch, the English, and Kasperl, the German, figures who both have a quite similar role in the theatre, but he is also the father of the jester or fool in Shakespeare's dramas, and of what is now called the comic relief (mostly the gay best friend) in Hollywood rom-coms.

What we immediately see when we look at him/her, is that he/she is ugly. One somehow wants to overlook this, while one reads the book of Agamben, because one wants it/him/her to become a hero, while reading. But his ugliness is a very important feature. He is the one who is born as a stranger into a strange environment. He is born this way. He sticks out, but without his choosing. Pulcinella already enters as Pulcinella. *He just is*. Agamben compares this theatre figure with dramatic heroes to show the difference. He argues that Hamlet and Antigone enter as undefined people. They become Hamlet or Antigone throughout the drama, through their actions. Pulcinella enters as Pulcinella, he doesn't become Pulcinella throughout the plays.

What Pulcinella really wants in the plays written around the figure, is to leave the soonest possible. The plays, the staged pompous dramas, are not Pulcinella's dramas, these are not his doings, but he is always called in (like in the German Kasperl Theater they always call for Kasperl), to solve something. Meanwhile, he/she just wants to save him/herself, and just wants to go somewhere where his or her needs, Pulcinella's, are met.

This figure, Pulcinella, for me stands at the very core of contemporary feminism. The impulse I could share; to leave a drama one had not constructed or started—patriarchy, the reasons for the #metoo debate, the absence in institutional representation—to leave, without having to solve the questions that had been built up by the very same system that had been constructed based on exclusion. And the threat one felt that one would not be left in peace as long as one was not answering questions, which would have never arisen if one would had been asked, and given the means to decide freely, before. And so I understand Pulcinella is giving in, into the necessity to solve the problems for the undeserving first, before one could finally leave.

One could sense that this concept, the concept of leaving, the Pulcinella concept—wanting to leave but of still having to solve things for others before one could eventually leave to be and live on happily—had the same value in other communities singled out as minoritarian. It helped me to understand Black pessimism better, but also Bersani's argument about gay communities (and it is no surprise that the comical sidekick, who has to solve the romantic crises or moralist tales his heterosexual film writers had conceived for their female characters, this descendant of Pulcinella, is mostly gay, and also enters the same way: as being gay)

So why did I need this image and this figure, besides that it structured the whole idea of a way out, through a previously invisible step, an unexpected movement?

Pulcinella also hints at several other notions. His typical disposition is to answer; he/she more or less answers with requests for food, sex, or other very basic needs. This was something I was looking for, something very bodily, as a sort of answer. Not an intellectual concept, but a sort of violent body, like the woman shouting from above at the child who kicked the flower-pots. A sort of self-indulgent joyful Anarchism. And naturally Pulcinella was also about **survival**, and he/she is, or as he/she is standing for Naples, the city, that, in its whole conception and its daily life, stands for survival. I was thinking of a sort of big laughter rolling through the whole gender theory, and Agamben was writing about this laughter.

He points out that one laughs when something is too funny to be said, and at the other side of emotions, people cry because it is too sad than can be said. He argues, this is why Pulcinella is wearing a mask. You can never see whether he/she is crying or laughing.

Too sad than can be talked about, and too funny, than you could talk about it, that was actually how I saw gender relations were. An exhibition with 32 male and one female figure. A curator who doesn't even notice or feels strange looking at this list. How should you talk about something like this? You can either cry or laugh. Income differences; ethics where a woman is not to be looked at; the name of the father; the causes, but also the reactions to the #metoo debate; feminicide; all of this is way beyond reasonable arguing. The only thing that might come into your mind when again and again you are subjected to comment on that is: When are we going to eat!?

I would argue with Pulcinella.

There is another interesting thing that happens in Tiepolo's frescoes. In *The life and death of Pulcinella*, and Pulcinella has to die many deaths, Tiepolo pictures a universe around him/her. Tiepolo gives Pulcinella (who is always so wrong and displaced in the world of male masters, who courts female servants in the world of beautiful ladies, and artful suitors, of scientists, mostly in the costume of doctors and patients), a place where we can see him/her in a multitude, within family-like environments, with small, and old Pulcinellas, which is reminiscent of a bit of Leo Bersani's images of the gay community, a community that is not held together by familiar ties of procreation.

How do you talk about something that is too funny to tell, and too sad to tell at the same time?

These were the main points that we had to look at when we started with the project, that would get the title: *Then I would like to make a happy end for once.*

END