

VUOTI

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I unapologetically become myself.

Fuck all this.

Sick and tired.

Senselessness.

I misbehave.

I will not be her.

I will not answer to him.

I refuse.

Stuck / unstuck / stuck / unstuck / stuck / unstuck / stuck / unstuck / Stuck.

unwanted self

the brutality of exposure

the self-contained

the self-contaminated

the self-destructed

the self-reconstructed

the self as plural

gratifying refusal

unstuck / stuck / unstuck / stuck / unstuck / stuck / unstuck / Stuck / unstuck.

Alessia, 2019

I know now that a studied evasiveness has its own limitations, its own ways of inhibiting certain forms of happiness and pleasure. The pleasure of abiding. The pleasure of insistence, of persistence. The pleasure of obligation, the pleasure of dependency. The pleasure of ordinary devotion. The pleasure of recognizing that one may have to undergo the same realizations, write the same notes in the margin, return to the same themes in one's work, relearn the same emotional truths, write the same book over and over again—not because one is stupid or obstinate or incapable of change, but because such revalidations constitute a life.

Nelson, Maggie. The Argonauts. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2016

epistemological priority . . . in the personal, the subjective, the body, the symptomatic, the quotidian, as the very site of material inscription of the ideological; that is to say, the ground where sociopolitical determinations take hold and are realized.

Lauretis, Teresa De. Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989.

PROCESS OF HEALING

My work relates to the process of healing from a past that shapes my present and my persona. Making art gives me freedom to think beyond notions that I have inherited from my Italian family and culture. My aim is to transform dominant ideas in my cultural background regarding class and gender. I commence by assessing the most rudimentary aspects of this cultural system, i.e. cultural traditions, divisions of class, and behaviors related to them. My research and art practice explore the dynamics of the Italian patriarchal family construction and definition from a standpoint of predominant traditional customs. Thus, my aim is to analyze and to give a new understanding of familial systems and their socio-cultural beliefs, which society universally perceives to be factual. But from my perspective, they are not.

As I react to the actual conditions of my country and family, I often experience conflicting emotions characterized by disdain for the politics of power and my affection towards my background and relatives. My mother's side of the family are rural factory-workers, while my

father hails from the upper class, also referred to as the new rich. Such class diversity in my family should give me a sense of satisfaction, as it points towards a new Italy. However, I still experience a burning desire to deconstruct the issues of gender and class, as well as synthesize new discourses regarding my identity. This fuels my persistence in questioning what it means to be an Italian woman from a family comprised of two distinct social classes, i.e. working class and upper class. Both lineages predominantly exemplify a patrilineal system, which has lasting consequences on all aspects of my experience.

I do not deny my own heritage, but I see it as a battlefield where the understanding of cultural identity and social structures face off against individual freedom and non-hierarchical communities. The futures of yesterday undergo perpetual reconstruction, and it is in this cycle that I see an optimal platform to synthesize new conceptions.

THE BODY

Traditionally, the human body, our body, not the stage, is our true site for creation and materia prima. It's our empty canvas, musical instrument, and open book; our navigation chart and biographical map; the vessel for our ever-changing identities; the centerpiece of the altar, so to speak. Our body is also the very center of our symbolic universe – a tiny model for humankind. . . -and at the same time, a metaphor for the larger socio-political body. If we're capable of establishing all these connections in front of an audience, hopefully others will recognize them in their own bodies.

"In Defense of Performance Art By Guillermo Gómez-Peña." In Defense of Performance Art.

In my practice, I use a variety materials and mediums — video, sculpture, performance and installation — to tell my story, to express my disappointment and the need to find new answers for what it means to be a woman within a culture that persistently attempts to classify us as outsiders, regardless of social class, education, and power. The body/my body constitutes the basis for developing and expressing my concerns and aversion towards systems of power that demean body types outside white, male and heterosexual classifications.

I perform endurance, and often violent acts, such as sanding away the features of a plaster mask with which I have covered my face (*Obliterated*, 2018), or stuffing myself with a considerable amount of raw meat (*Crude-le*, 2019). I endlessly repeat absurd actions, such as jumping into an empty swimming pool (Vuoti, 2019) or sawing tomatoes on my lap repeatedly (Tomato Sauce, 2017). I also engage in activities that transgress conventional behavioral rules, such as purposely talking with a mouth full of pasta (*Etiquette*, 2018) or standing naked and peeing. In these works, my body becomes an instrument and articulator of my dissatisfaction. I embody and expose elements of my personality confined by a cultural norm that imposes limitations on the female body. I juxtapose the specificity and contemporaneity of my own heavily tattooed and scarred body with my traditions and social class, which objectified the cleanliness of women's bodies as a signifier of purity and propriety. My corporeality is also opposed to the luxurious and decaying environments in which these performances often take place, to empathize the lifelessness and failure of those places.

HERITAGE

The Italian male, the head or heir of the family, is justly famous the world over for his manliness. He jealously defends his independence. No woman submits him to her will. His pride is clearly visible. Watch him promenade down the corso of any small town at sunset, or on Sunday morning after mass.

Barzini, Luigi. *The Italians*. New York: Atheneum, 1983.

I recall the peculiar feeling that struck me when my grandmother confessed to me that she does not know how to drive. Despite having a small body, she is a strong southern Italian woman who married at the age of fourteen. Her husband did not let her drive, because he expected her to stay home and take care of the house and the family. "This is what women did," she explained. She did not complain despite such significant restriction on her freedom, because she accepts the social norms that dictate she remain under male oversight, both in familial and personal relationships. Such submissiveness is not only evident in her, but also in other women of her generations, "No one wants to be an indecent woman, a bad wife or mother!" Thus, all she knows is that in order to be decent, a woman should be submissive.

Her capacity to endure such an unfair social system amazes me. In fact, she is not the only one, as generations of women continue to express a capitalist and patriarchal culture that forces women to be submissive. Even today, I still encounter institutions and individuals who expect me to do the same.

In order to take back the space denied to women, I analyze, question, and deconstruct the origins of my own beliefs, dogma, and traditions regarding gender, race and class inequality.

Parts of me question these roots and traditions through materials and techniques typically found in an Italian family. I use costumes, furniture, and tomatoes, together with my mom's and

grandmother's personal belongings in my installations. I dissect and then rejoin them in unconventional ways, in order to represent greater female cultural freedom.

Our heritage is our power; we can know ourselves and our capacity by seeing how other women, in the past and at present, have been strong or are strong respectively. Being able to relate with the strong and successful women of the past helps us to shape the mindset of women to make them victorious and independent. To reclaim our past proves that it became a part of human history. It is the task that lies before us. The future requires that women, as well as men shape the world's destiny.

Spretnak, Charlene. *The Politics of Womens Spirituality: Essays by Founding Mothers of the Movement*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.



My grandmother performing in tomato sauce video project. 2017, Ital

PROJECTS:

TOMATO SAUCE TRADITION

It is an Italian tradition that every late summer, female family members gather in the backyard to make that year's supply of tomato sauce for the entire family. For at least two or three days, the women peel, boil, press, and jar a massive amount of freshly picked tomatoes to make the famous Italian "salsa di pomodoro." This is what my grandmother has been doing for the past seventy years without failure. I have always wondered, "Why only the women?" "Where are the men in this tradition?" Alternatively, "What would happen if she refused to make the sauce?" I tried to ask her once, but the answer I got is "ma che sei mattà?" in a strong southern Italian accent, which translates to "are you crazy" in English. This answer reiterates the actuality that women bear the hefty burden of taking care of the family, and despite their commitment to this endeavor, they do not get the appreciation that they deserve. Due to this observation, I have developed a burning desire to respond to this cultural flaw, and restructure tradition to embody an impartial look. To realize this I chose to perform the sauce making ritual, with personal modifications that signify a new attitude and a greater degree of independence. This entails being able to define one's actions and behavior outside the confines of the traditional Italian culture. Of course, my grandma did not really understand the reason for such an absurd activity, but she had a lot of fun, and it confirmed her belief, which she suspected before, that yes, I am crazy, in her opinion.



Tomato Sauce video performance, 2017

TOMATO SAUCE, installation 2017

In this installation from 2017, I covered the floors of an entire room with tomato sauce. Viewers got invites to walk through the room, sloshing through the mess in the process. A three-channel video of three generations of women played on a loop. The women in the video are my mother, my grandmother, and myself. We sit on wooden chairs and sew together tomatoes in our laps. Then we project these images onto the seats of those same three wooden chairs in the installation. The lack of rational justification for sewing the tomatoes together undermines the deep subconscious connection with over-care and dedication to craft, and the need for gentleness in the sewing process. The mundane becomes dysfunctional. The action of sewing a tomato in a woman's lap also becomes a signifier of a visceral bodily rebellion against history and traditions. It is imperative to note that it is not the recipe or the process that I analyze in this piece of art, as my grandma's sauce is the best in the world; rather, the culture positions the practice as exclusive to the female gender.



Tomato Sauce installation, 2017

ETIQUETTE

code of behavior that delineates expectations for social behavior according to contemporary conventional norms within a society, social class, or group.

stay up until you are invited to sit down.

the fork is held in the left hand while eating, and the knife is held in the right.

during the meal, do not hold your hands in your lap, and do not even put your elbows on the table.

leaving a small quantity of food on your plate is acceptable but not too much.

never never speak with your mouth full

Casa, Giovanni Della, and M. F. Rusnak. Galateo, Or, The Rules of Polite Behavior. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.



Etiquette III performance, 2019

ETIQUETTE video performance, 2018

Etiquette is a series of performances in which other women and myself embody the idea of upper-class proper women at a dining table, who are breaking the typical code of manner often associated with that social class.

1ST PERFORMANCE



Etiquette I performance, 2018

In the first performance, I am sitting at a prepared table set with a pink tablecloth, a red table napkin, a wine glass and a decanter full of red wine. In front of me are a dinner plate full of spaghetti and tomato sauce awaiting consumption and, nearby, a smaller plate with a slice of chocolate cake for dessert. I wear an ivory sleeveless silk dress with a halter neckline made of delicate lace. The dress contrasts with my heavily tattooed arms. The video starts with me eating the pasta, violently filling my mouth with the food, until I cannot fit any more. With my mouth so full that some food hangs outside, I begin speaking, while I chew and subsequently swallow the food. Bits and pieces of spaghetti fly all over the table, my face, and my dress. I conduct the same activity repeatedly, until I finish the food. At completion, there are red stains and food

remnants all over my face. I take a minute to recompose myself, to adjust my posture and to clean my mouth elegantly with the table napkin. Then I take the decanter filled with red dark wine and I start drinking directly from it to completion. Most of it spills over my face and my dress. I take a moment, and then I delicately move the dirty plates over to my right and take the smaller plate with the chocolate dessert. Again, I begin to stuff my mouth, while talking at the same time.

2ND PERFORMANCE

“We are not alone in this”



Etiquette II performance, 2018

The second performance is a reenactment of the previous one, but with an additional four women at the table

3RD PERFORMANCE

“My dad and I”

The third performance is yet another reenactment of the first performance, but with the inclusion of my father, who stares at me while I loudly speak with my mouth full of pasta.



Etiquette III performance, 2019

In all the three performances, I develop images that defy cultural norms, by signifying behavior that undermines behavioral standards imposed on women in our social sphere. I consciously embody the idea of a proper, often white, woman, and then make a parody of it, underlining the absurdity and social construction of such a thing. By choosing to put excess food in my mouth, I question the consumerism and overproduction synonymous with capitalism, where the society keeps producing more, while there is already enough to consume. We are experiencing a society where people are unable to communicate, because of uncontrolled consumption. I intentionally

create these images of myself, as well as that of other women, in an art metaphor that comprehensively covers this social impairment. I choose to integrate my father in the final performance so as to capture his judgment, which is reminiscent of criticism that we fail to notice whenever we promote an unsustainable consumption culture. I misbehave, I break the rules, I persist, and I directly defy my internalized obedience and dare to transgress against the ones who taught me the rules. Those who once told me, "You need to learn how to obey, if one day you want to rule," are now witnesses to my defiant response that "I need to learn how to disobey, because what I want is to restructure the norm, hierarchy and the dissolution of power."

Women should fight to radically subvert the logic of patriarchal oppression where sexism, racism, economic exploitation, political oppression, and so on, reciprocally reinforce one another, although with different forms and modalities in different contexts. This holds even more so today, in a globalizing world where diverse forms of oppression and exploitation, whether based on gender, sex, race, or class, intersect with one another. Perhaps the greatest contribution of intersectional feminism has been showing that if by feminism we understand simply the fight for formal equality between men and women, we risk creating new forms of oppression. We run the risk that equality between men and women will signify only that women must take positions once reserved for white bourgeois males, thus further reinforcing mechanisms of oppression rather than subverting them.

Bottici, Chiara. "Bodies in Plural." Thesis Eleven 142, no. 1, 2017.

CRUDE-LE video performance, 2018

Crude-Le (2018) is a 10-minute video that begins with the image of a butcher wearing a uniform and a belt with knives. He is dancing with a hanged carcass of an animal in a slaughterhouse. In the next shot, the same butcher is dancing with me. I am wearing an elegant black cocktail dress, and I clumsily try to let him guide me, but it is clear that I do not know how to dance. In addition, my high-heeled shoes do not fit, which causes me to struggle to keep my posture. Other Images

of hanging pieces of meat move on conveyer apparatus throughout the duration of the video. In the final scene, I am wearing an elegant black evening dress and a diamond collar necklace, seated at the center of a round table in well-designed dining room. There two empty chairs on either side of me, and behind me is a fireplace. On the table, a series of different sized plates are placed strategically. The plates contain a variety of raw meat. The distinctly red part of the meat contrasts with the surrounding gray and blue architecture and furniture in the room. I suddenly start eating the meat with my hands, and I continue until most of the plates are empty. In this piece, I am embodying the idea of a proper, well-behaved woman, and then making a parody of it. This highlights the irrationality of the social conventions relating to women and food. I express my discontent and disappointment towards the very idea of class and privilege, and then stuff myself with it. I unapologetically consume the unwanted self. The red raw meat is lifeless in the hands of reality; it signifies nothing more than a trophy to celebrate fictional supremacy. It takes a strong stomach to be able to digest the norms dictated from wealth, class division and gender inequality within a capitalistic patriarchal society.





Crude-Le, 2018

A becoming in which one never becomes, a becoming whose rule is neither evolution nor asymptote but a certain turning, a certain turning inward, turning into my own / turning on in / to my own self / at last / turning out of the / white cage, turning out of the / lady cage / turning at last.

Nelson, Maggie. The Argonauts. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2016.

In my art, one could say that I am dismantling Italian traditions by smashing and sawing tomatoes (Tomato Sauce, 2017), confronting the gender norms of a privilege social class (Etiquette, 2018), and acknowledging and annulling a contaminated society determined by the logic of patriarchal oppression (Obliterated, 2018; Crude-le, 2019). These four projects were necessary to allow me to develop a conversation about the problems inherent to traditions that originate from a hostile and oppressive environment.



Vuoti, 2018

Vuoti, 2018

This is a two channel video performance shown in an endless loop, in which I wear my mother's swimsuit and my grandmother's pearl necklace. In it, I repetitively jump into an empty swimming pool screaming the Italian word *vuoti*, plural of the word empty. The two channels are placed one on top of the other while, they both show the exact same video, the lower one is a close-up view of the action with a few seconds' delay, creating an echoing sound effect. The pool is situated in what was once my grandfather's eclectic villa, which is now empty and decaying at a rate similar to that of the capitalistic legacy he has left behind.

Deleuze notes that the repetition of gestures leads to a form of automation and lack of meaning; similarly, the repetition of a sound or a proposal leads to a

dissolution of meaning.¹ However, the “dissolution of meaning” is not a complete absence of meaning. It indicates that an action or word loses its usual meaning and becomes something different. With the relentless repetition of my actions and the sound of the word *vuoti* I aim to enact a ritual or a mantra in which my body and my voice function with the emptiness of that conceptual and physical space. This action loses its initial meaning and turns into a reminder of the futility underlying capitalism and class.

Body fluids attest to a certain irreducible “dirt or disgust, horror of the unknown or the unspecifiable that permeates, lurks, lingers, and at times leaks out of the body, a testimony of the fraudulence or impossibility of the clean and proper.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2011.

¹ Deleuze, Gilles, “L’Épuisé”, in S. Beckett, *Quad et autres pièces pour la télévision*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit and Sfez, Geraldine. “ Bruce Nauman, Samuel Beckett : Le Corps mis à l’épreuve de la répétition”, *Limit(e) Beckett* n° 0, printemps 2010, p. 82-103.



In-Segnare, 2019

IN-SEGNARE 2019

This is a 3-minute video performance shown in a loop. It begins at the corner of a completely white space with eight different floor lamps lit in an Italian design that is typical of the '60s and '70s. I suddenly walk into the scene, unashamedly naked, my curly hair untied and messy, and my tattooed body contrasting with the clean and white background. I stop in the middle of the scene, facing the back of the room. I purposely turn my back to the camera, not as a way to cover my nudity but as signifier of my own agency and power in making my decisions. The lamps start to turn off and on without a clear rhythm. I stand still, slightly open my legs and I pee. The yellow/ red liquid spreads all over the floor and under the lamps right after I leave the scene. Here I am, standing and peeing, without shame and regret. Here I dare every sort of notion of "proper" class behavior and conduct that I have ever experienced. My beloved grandfather, the

first patriarch of the family, designed the lamps that I pee on, which is another symbol of defiance. I take ownership of my actions because I can, because the period of conforming to the conventional labeling of women has come to its conclusion. Now, I confront society without shame of exposure, and without confining myself to rules that prevent me from manifesting my true self. Thus, I attempt to put an end to my submission to rules and a misdirected construction of womanhood.

MORE THAN MISBEHAVING

Questionable behaviors involving the transgression and disobedience of my social background and family politics are protagonists in most of my work, but there is more, which entails complicity and collaboration. For example, my dad performing with me in a video that directly criticizes his social class, role and beliefs. There are also certain aesthetic choices in my works that resonate with the Italian design and art legacy that I hail from, that I do not reject but use subversively. For instance, I film most of my latest videos in my grandfather's house, portraying its decaying beauty. Perhaps my own complicity with the very system and power structure that I criticize gives me the space that I require to create and insert within them subversive ideas that will eventually resonate strongly with the audience.

The future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irrevocability the equivalent of. Destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural. Anticipation is imperative.

Cixous, Hélène, Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs* 1, no. 4, 1976.

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