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**“FROM WOMAN TO WOMAN”.  
EXHIBITING GENEALOGY – CARLA ACCARDI’S *ORIGINE*, 1976**

*Abstract:*

This paper reconsiders the so far undervalued importance of Carla Accardi’s solo exhibition *Origine*, mounted in May 1976 at a women’s cooperative co-founded by the artist at Via Beato Angelico 18 in Rome. At its all but neutral location, I argue, the self-curated exhibition, encompassing a larger display of Accardi’s work, rendered visible the private and political entanglement of her artistic practice, significantly expanding its potential meaning. In engaging with the exhibition’s precarious documentation and critical coverage, I will demonstrate that on this occasion, rather than providing a conventional overview of stylistic developments, Accardi temporarily staged, in Foucault’s sense, a context of origin for her becoming in the present: as woman and artist.

*Key words:*

women collectives, artists as curators, genealogy, solo exhibition, installation, photography, Sicofoil, feminism, historicization



Fig. 1: Carla Accardi, *Origine* at Cooperativa Beato Angelico, Rome, 1976, installation view, photo: Fondo Suzanne Santoro, Archivia, Casa Internazionale delle Donne, Rome

We are looking into an unpretentious interior supported by a rectangular archway [fig. 1]. The whitewashed wall and ceiling stand out brightly from the dark wooden beams and carpeted floor. A passageway at the rear hints at another room, apparently plastered white. Apart from six symmetrically suspended ceiling lights that – with the exception of one, turned off – appear hazy in the photograph, there is no furniture to be seen. Only at a second glance into the modest room does it become clear what was intended to be captured. On the two opposite walls, a transparent wall covering extends, shortened in perspective, structured into vertical, uniform stripes. Formally identical to its counterpart, the right paneling differs from the left in that it holds nineteen photographs apparently pinned to the wall in between the transparent stripes. Their subject is blurred and unrecognizable from a distance. This black and white view provides

an insight into Carla Accardi's (1924–2014) show *Origine (Origin)*, mounted at a women's cooperative at Via Beato Angelico 18 in Rome, before the exhibition opening on May 25, 1976. The use of photography in an installation stands out as unique in Accardi's oeuvre. And yet, the exhibition reviews are just as scarce as the installation shots.<sup>19</sup> The lacunary documentation and subdued public attention appear in contradiction to the fame that the artist had by then achieved in Italy and abroad.

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19 This article was first published in the journal *Palinsesti*, No 8 (2019): “‘Yet who is the Genius?’ Women’s Art and Criticism in Postwar Italy”, <https://www.palinsesti.net/index.php/Palinsesti/issue/view/9/showToc> (accessed 10/10/2023). I express my sincere thanks to *Palinsesti* editors Denis Viva, Giorgia Gastaldon, and Silvia Bottinelli for authorizing the text’s republication, and to Ana Ereš for enabling it. The research leading to this article was undertaken in the framework of my postdoctoral position at the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History (project number BH-P-18-26). I wish to particularly thank my colleagues of the “Rome Contemporary” research initiative for the productive exchange on Carla Accardi’s practice. Advice given by Francesco Impellizzeri and Laura Iamurri has been crucial for the retrieval and contextualization of relevant sources. All translations from Italian are by the author. See the photographs in “Cooperativa Beato Angelico”, Fasc. 11, Serie 4, Fondo Suzanne Santoro, Archivia, Casa Internazionale delle Donne, Rome; Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome; Folder “Carla Accardi”, Archivio Bioiconografico della Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome.

By 1976, the fifty-two-year-old artist could look back on a remarkable body of work spanning over three decades. Since co-initiating *Forma 1* in 1947 – Italy’s most prominent group of post-war abstract painters and sculptors who, referencing formalism and Marxism, refused to accept the dictates of Socialist Realism – Accardi’s tireless examination of the residual specificity of the painterly medium had contributed to the tendencies of *Informale*, environment, and meta-painting traversing Western art production in the post-war period. Generally committed to abstraction, her practice was mostly read through purely formalist lenses. By contrast, recent studies by Leslie Cozzi, Laura Iamurri, Teresa Kittler, and Giovanna Zapperi, among others, have suggested that Accardi was deeply concerned with the social significance of her art (Zapperi 2018; Iamurri 2016; Kittler 2017; Cozzi 2011). Her work from the 1960s and 1970s can convincingly be reevaluated in relation to the rise of the new women’s movement in Italy, within which separatist camp Accardi had played a foundational role. With the exception of Carla Lonzi and Annemarie Sauzeau Boetti, critics refrained from discussing Accardi’s work in feminist terms at the time (Gastaldon 2020). While Accardi publicly addressed gender imbalance in art and contextualized her practice in relation to sexual difference (Accardi 1977; Accardi 1976a, 156; Accardi 1975; Accardi 1966), at a later stage of her career she retrospectively nuanced this account, herself contributing to strengthening a formalist narrative.

Against the backdrop of this unsettled historiography, my paper reconsiders the so far undervalued importance of Accardi’s solo exhibition *Origine* at its all but neutral location, in engaging with its precarious documentation and critical coverage. I argue that, in the specific setting of the women’s cooperative, the self-curated exhibition, encompassing a larger display of Accardi’s work, rendered visible the private and political entanglement of her artistic practice, significantly expanding its potential meaning. I will show that on this occasion, rather than providing a conventional overview of stylistic developments, Accardi temporarily staged, in Foucault’s sense, a context of origin for her becoming in the present: as woman and artist.

### **Nuancing feminist separatism**

The fact that *Origine* has long remained a relatively inconspicuous episode in Accardi’s career is due to the context in which the exhibition occurred. A close-up photograph [fig. 2] depicts Accardi in oblique view, with her arms crossed and looking past the camera, while casually leaning against her installation. In addition to the unassuming configuration of the space captured by the installation shots, Accardi’s studied casualness reveals that this was not a conventional setting. Unlike the commercial galleries or public institutions



Fig. 2: Carla Accardi in front of her work *Origine* at Cooperativa Beato Angelico (detail), 1976, photo: Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome

where she would typically show her work, the Cooperativa Beato Angelico was a cooperative of female artists and cultural workers co-founded by Accardi in April 1976 (Almerini 2020; Almerini 2018; Seravalli 2013; Cozzi 2012, 164–199; Almerini 2007–2008). Quite accidentally, the initiative took its name from a narrow alley dedicated to the early Renaissance painter Beato Angelico (Guido di Pietro) in the historic center of Rome, where Accardi had rented a ground floor space. Besides her, the cooperative consisted of ten more women – eight artists and three critics – who worked in Rome, Milan and Turin: Nilde Carabba, Franca Chiabra, Anna Maria Colucci, Regina Della Noce, Nedda Guidi, Eva Menzio, Teresa Montemaggiori, Stephanie Oursler, Suzanne Santoro, and Silvia Truppi. Sprouting in the neuralgic center

of the new Italian women's movement, the Cooperativa Beato Angelico at once incorporated and shifted its tenets.

In the mid-1970s, especially in the course of the campaign for abortion rights, the multifaceted movement became increasingly unified, and encountered broader public acceptance – a phenomenon that would later be subsumed under the term *femminismo diffuso* (*widespread feminism*) (Calabrò 2004; Lumley 1990). The cooperative participated in this transformation, insofar as its profile softened the divisive conflict between feminist separatism and the art establishment. Accardi had co-founded the influential separatist group Rivolta Femminile (Female Revolt) in 1970, together with art critic Carla Lonzi and journalist Elvira Banotti, but left about three years later over tensions with Lonzi, who rejected the art field as a male-dominated realm (Zapperi 2017, 157–188; Iamurri 2016a, 146–166). Before this fracture, Accardi and Lonzi reflected on sexual difference over the course of their friendship and collaboration, foregrounding an existentialist quest for liberation as opposed to political claims for emancipation. Instead of demanding social equality for women at the political level, the separatist camp understood female subjectivation as a prerequisite for larger social transformations and sought to free it from male norms. Thus, Rivolta Femminile and like-minded groups refrained from direct political action. Instead, they practiced consciousness-raising (*autocoscienza*), encounters based on mutual identification and the expansion of self-awareness, thus investing the private sphere with a political dimension. In addition to Accardi, other members of the cooperative had participated in the women's

carabba accardi inilde carabba franca chialera annamaria colucci regia deliamore nida  
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La cooperativa nasce con il proposito di presentare il lavoro di donne  
artiste che operano e hanno operato nel campo delle arti visive.

A fianco di tale attività la cooperativa si propone di studiare, rac-  
cogliere e documentare tale lavoro e sarà quindi grata a chiunque vorrà  
aiutare in questo senso facendo pervenire materiali, libri, fotografie.

cooperativa di via beato angelico, 11 - al collegio romano - roma (italia)

Fig. 3: Cooperativa Beato Angelico's declaration of intent, printed paper, 1976, photo: Fondo Suzanne Santoro, Archivia, Casa Internazionale delle Donne, Rome

movement, yet not all of them conformed to a feminist position.<sup>20</sup> From 1976 to 1978, the eleven women ran the space as a self-organized gallery and archive. In taking on different roles of artists, curators, art historians, publicists, they cultivated horizontal relationships. Instead of rejecting the art establishment altogether – as Lonzi had been demanding, and Accardi refused to put into practice – what seemed at stake for the cooperative was precisely to address and distinguish the public presence of women *within* the art field.

This involvement notwithstanding, the space retained a relative autonomy. A concise statement published on the occasion of the opening on April 8, 1976 shows how the program was meant to unfold. Under a two-line letterhead, which listed the names of the participants in lower-case letters and alphabetical order, a declaration stripped bare of any political jargon reads [fig. 3]: “The cooperative was created with the aim of presenting the work of women artists who work and have worked in the field of the visual arts. Alongside this activity, the cooperative intends to research, collect and document this work and will therefore be grateful to anyone who wishes to help in this direction by sending materials, books, photographs.”<sup>21</sup> Rather than disclosing the art that would be exhibited,

20 Santoro and Colucci participated in the Roman group of Rivolta Femminile. Carabba was among the founders of the Libreria delle donne in Milan, where she was active in Rivolta Femminile and, together with Truppi, in the Cherubini collective among others. Oursler had taken part in the Black Panther Movement before moving to Rome from the United States (see Almerini 2018).

21 Invitation card “Cooperativa Beato Angelico”, Fasc. 11, Serie 4, Fondo Suzanne Santoro, Archivia, Casa Internazionale delle Donne, Rome: “La cooperativa nasce con il proposito di presentare il lavoro di donne artiste che operano e hanno operato nel campo delle arti visive. A fianco di tale attività la cooperativa si propone di studiare, raccogliere e documentare tale lavoro



Fig. 4: Carla Accardi, *Origine* at Cooperativa Beato Angelico (detail), 1976, photo: Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome

the declaration insists on the operations of making public and historicizing. The focus on women artists from past and present times was to be set through practices of “presenting” on the one hand, as well as “research[ing]”, “collect[ing]” and “document[ing]” on the other. In autonomously administering art by women artists and its documentation, the cooperative claimed historiographical agency. In so doing, however, the organizers did not seek to provide a systematic overview of women artists past and present, nor did they set explicit selection criteria. Rather, it was precisely the seemingly arbitrary character of the program that recast the relationship between women artists and the art-historical canon in non-compensatory terms, thereby distancing the cooperative from an imitation of implicitly masculine museal models. This free approach to

historiographical conventions emerged from the cooperative’s inception: at the opening, an original painting by Artemisia Gentileschi (*Aurora*, 1627) was installed on an easel, de-contextualized and thus exposed to a contemporary process of re-signification. Such anachronic operations, drawing unexpected relations between different times and artist positions, were repeated as the activity progressed. They seem mindful of the ways in which, in the context of Rivolta Femminile, Lonzi had conceived of women’s self-liberation: as a clear-cut rupture with male constructions of history, rather than as their continuation or completion (Zapperi 2017, 119–56). Taken together, the cooperative’s non-conformist handling of historiography, as well as its bridging role between feminist separatism and the art establishment more generally, functioned as crucial premises for Accardi’s solo exhibition.

### **A meaningful constellation of works**

Since phenomenology had become an integral part of art practice in the 1960s, spatial research in the artistic field went hand in hand with the occupation

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e sarà quindi grata a chiunque vorrà aiutare in questo senso facendo pervenire materiali, libri, fotografie”.



Fig. 5: Carla Accardi, *Origine* at Cooperativa Beato Angelico (detail), 1976, photo: Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome

of new spaces and the development of new display strategies and criteria.<sup>22</sup> It seems reasonable to assume that Accardi, whose interest in transparency and installation had long brought her to consider spatial relations as part of her work, must have been particularly aware of the implications of the exhibition space. The constellation of works at the cooperative bears witness to the operation’s site-specificity. Several pieces from recent years were placed in relation with a newly created installation, and with what looked like an *objet trouvé* – a unique interplay in Accardi’s oeuvre. As documented by the installation shots, when entering the space, occupying a niche on the right-hand side, a photographic portrait of a young woman in an original wooden frame was on view [fig. 4]. In the passageway, where the open space narrows towards a low chamber, the opposite walls were covered by the above-mentioned, site-specific plastic strips, attached to the upper edge of the wall and the skirting board, but otherwise floating freely. Occupying the five intervals between the six stripes on the right side, nineteen historical photographs of another female figure were pinned to the wall [fig. 5]. Elsewhere, Accardi would title this photographically documented body of work *Origine (Origin)*, like the exhibition itself.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, however, the press coverage provides information about the presence of other works. According to Sandra Orienti’s review, “outdoors” “stood

22 For an overview of the Italian exhibitionary landscape see: Troncone 2014.

23 Carla Accardi, “‘Origine’ (1976)”, typewritten statement, Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome.



Fig. 6: Carla Accardi, *Trasparente*, 1975, sicofoil on wood, 130 x 90 cm, collection of the artist, Rome, photo: from Fondo Suzanne Santoro, Archivia, Casa Internazionale delle Donne, Rome

one of [Accardi's] 'tents'.<sup>24</sup> In the mid-1960s, Accardi had begun applying varnish to prefabricated transparent plastic film (first Perspex, then Sicofoil) and expanded painting into space. Her 1965-66 *Tenda (Tent)* and *Triplice Tenda (Triple Tent)*, 1969-71 are fragile environments bearing a domestic reference: mounted on a filigree Plexiglas structure, Sicofoil sheets painted with colorful, repetitive marks are shaped in various space-filling forms recalling tents. If Orienti's observation is correct, Accardi might have shown one of these works, or else a smaller prototype, temporarily placing it in the dead alley, as the cooperative did not have an inner courtyard.<sup>25</sup> While only Orienti mentions this piece, several reviewers speak of the presence, indoors, of other works, Accardi's *Trasparenti (Transparents)*: unpainted plastic strips stretched across wooden frames, forming minimalist reliefs. The artist had started this series of medium-format pieces in 1974, experimenting with a

sculptural handling of plastic film on a surface, interwoven into geometric patterns. Although only the work *Trasparente (Transparent)*, 1975, is documented in the archive of the cooperative (yet the picture is unlikely an installation shot) [fig. 6], Maria Torrente speaks in the plural,<sup>26</sup> Orienti mentions "a group of works",<sup>27</sup> Franca Zoccoli "two or three examples".<sup>28</sup> A review in the magazine *Saman* gives a more precise indication: when entering the space, three such stretcher frames wrapped in transparent plastic strips could be seen on the left wall; a further one was installed on the opposite wall, next to the niche (Giannelli 1976).

24 Orienti 1976: "[A]ll'aperto ha posto una delle sue 'tende', svirgolata sulle pareti di plastica translucida di colori brillanti che generano all'interno un dinamico flusso di luci rifrante" ("[O]utdoors she has placed one of her 'tents', their translucent plastic walls marked with bright colors that generate a dynamic flow of reflected light inside").

25 According to Suzanne Santoro there was no backyard in the cooperative (conversation with the author, December 2, 2019). The exhibited piece could have been the simpler *Tenda (Tent)* (1965-66) or one of Accardi's three *Tende miniature (Miniature tents)*, since the *Triplice tenda* would have been difficult to handle because of its size and weight (see: Kittler 2017).

26 Torrente 1976: "[T]elai" ("[F]rames").

27 Orienti 1976: "[U]n gruppo di opere".

28 Zoccoli 1976: "[D]ue o tre esempi delle sue aeree tessiture, sostenute da telai di legno [...]" ("[T]wo or three examples of her aerial weavings, supported by wooden frames [...]").



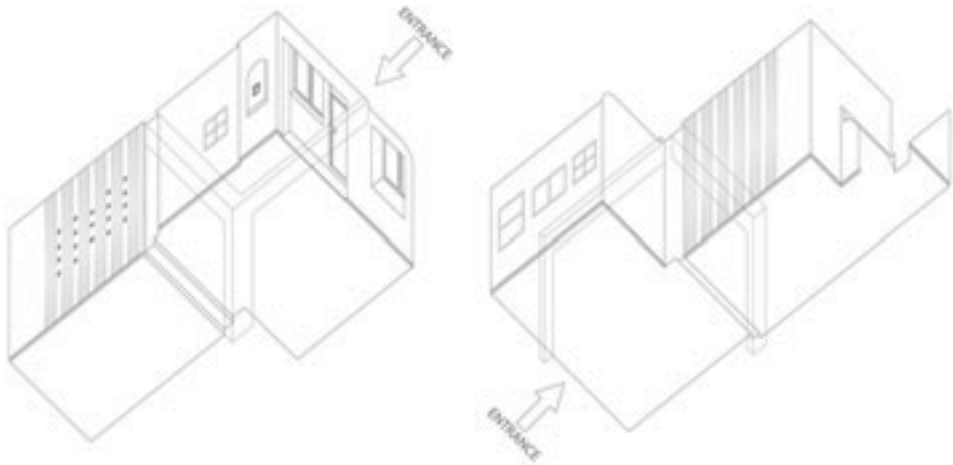


Fig. 7: Luca Longagnani, Axonometric rendering of Carla Accardi’s exhibition *Origine* at Via Beato Angelico 18 in Rome, 2020, rendering created specifically for this article

These contemporary sources reveal that the exhibition consolidated one strand of Accardi’s practice in particular, the use of transparent plastic, as representative of her artistic career [fig. 7]. As typical of a retrospective, the selected works seemingly testified to past developments, conveying a sense of meaningful unity. In her coherent staging, the handling of flatness and space, of (possibly) color, and historical photographs also marked relevant formal variations. The attempt to outline a certain artistic trajectory was reflected in the exhibition reviews. Critics commented on the stylistic development condensed in the show: Orienti notes that the plastic material references previous phases of Accardi’s oeuvre, but the transparent weavings in the wedge frames would now prioritize, after experiments with color, a play with air and light and thus give her body of work a new twist (Orienti 1976). Zoccoli and Torrente, too, emphasize the progressive emancipation from color, concluding that the exhibited corpus appeared familiar and new at once (Zoccoli 1976; Torrente 1976). Such a formal reading followed art historical conventions and the idea of a linear development expressing itself in stylistic innovations. Although Accardi’s exhibition allowed for such an interpretation at first glance, it was ultimately a subversion of it. Instead of following the chronology of a catalogue raisonné, the artist’s selection and placement of the exhibits prioritized formal and material affinities to generate a distinctive force field between the works. Paired with the contemporary Sicofoil, a material drawn from the techno-world, the fading photographs stood out as all the more historical, as did the portrait in its original frame, an uncanny relic from the 19th century. Qua iconicity and indexicality, analogue photography unmistakably locates itself in the past, and the uniqueness of the lived moment it records enters into a tension with the present (Geimer 2018). The contrast

between contemporary and historical points in time, indexed by the materiality of Sicofoil, on the one hand, and analogue photography, on the other, destabilized the idea of linear evolution within the show.

### **Genealogy of woman**

According to Foucault, following Nietzsche, genealogy can become an investigative method that tears past and present out of their order, thus breaking with the idea of a unity of history (Foucault 1971). Instead of reconstructing the “historical beginnings”, genealogy casts an original scenario for a specific, contemporary emergence. In so doing, it does not write history in the absolute sense, but – in a speculative way – it focuses on a specific prehistory. Genealogy, as a Foucauldian method, links a specific manifestation in the present (“birth”) with its possible origin (“descent”) in the past, revealing the contingency of seemingly natural categories (Saar 2009; Weigel 2006). It was not in the textual format of cultural analysis, but through the expography of her solo exhibition that Accardi similarly tore the retrospective mode out of its linear course, and turned it into a genealogical one. The artist countered the idea of inevitable lines of advance, contrasting a developmental concept of history with a genealogical prehistory of her position in the present.

In the work *Origine*, specially conceived for the exhibition, the timing of materials and media literally embodied a generational sequence, at once thematizing “descent” in an iconic way. The nineteen black and white photographs installed vertically between the transparent stripes depict a young woman in the 1910-20s, captured in various contexts, including the city of Rome [fig. 5]. For the most part, the woman is alone in the picture; only once does she appear with her lover, and with her newborn daughter. Taken from a family album, the photographs recall cultural techniques of storing life in time and, with their hanging, a vertical logic of filiation. Isolated in the niche, the *objet trouvé* holds an even older photograph of another young woman [fig. 4]. While in the 1970s numerous artists explored autobiography through the hybrid genre of text-photo narratives (*récit-photo*) (Nachtergaele 2012), Accardi’s lapidary use of found photographs, without any captions, seems anti-narrative in comparison. And yet, as a visual memory of past time, the photographs’ reality effects evoked, in the context of the exhibition, a scenario of Accardi’s biological origin.

In the second half of the 1960s, in the aftermath of her separation from artist Antonio Sanfilippo, Accardi had already publicly addressed the context in which she was born. In an interview with Lonzi, later published in the critic’s book *Autoritratto* in 1969 (Lonzi 1969), Accardi reflected on her mother and grandmother, describing their failure to cope with the financial dependence and psychological

oppression that patriarchal upbringing and marriage in a Sicilian upper-class family had meant to them. While the grandmother fell ill and died prematurely, Accardi’s mother, in her own narrative, failed to build an independent existence from her financial privilege (Cozzi 2012, 245–246). As Lonzi’s diary *Taci, anzi parla* suggests, the engagement with female reference figures represented, in the context of *autocoscienza*, a crucial discussion topic, supported by the collective analysis of private family photographs (Lonzi 2010, 385). It seems plausible, then, that Accardi had discussed the photographs during these encounters. Moreover, in the Milan group of Rivolta Femminile, the photographer Jacqueline Vodoz had portrayed her grandmother to explore female family ties, a private photographic project with which Accardi was familiar. In fact, in a critical comment on the exhibition *Origine*, which seems to eschew an in-depth engagement, Lonzi accuses former friend Accardi of having adopted Vodoz’s idea and capitalized on it in the art world.<sup>29</sup>

That the unusually iconic operation was indeed anchored in a context of “elaboration and analysis” emerges from a statement Accardi wrote on *Origine* in 1976.<sup>30</sup> Although she intended her text to be clearly separated from the work, she subsequently proceeded to publish it in a condensed version.<sup>31</sup> The unpublished part of the note interestingly discloses the *objet trouvé* as a portrait of her great-grandmother (and not her grandmother, as Lonzi and others had erroneously assumed), and the protagonist of the remaining photographs as her mother. The passage summarizes the reasons that led Accardi to this, albeit fragmentary, matrilineal exhibition of her family genealogy, bundling her tentative approach to the subject matter into five different moments, and providing information about her preoccupation with psychoanalysis, especially Luce Irigaray’s writings popular in feminist circles at the time: “1) moment in which the initial falling in love of the boy and the girl for the mother are equal (Luce Irigar[a]y). Photography is therefore used not within the sphere of memory but as a testimony of a pre-oedipal love. / 2) moment just before the assumption of the traditional role (only one photo is

29 Lonzi 2010a, 1006-1007: “[L]’altro ha sempre la sua identificazione culturale, e anche l’aspetto gratificante dell’invidia, a sorreggerlo e a mantenere la disparità. Per esempio, Piera [Jacqueline Vodoz] ha amato molto sua nonna e l’ha fotografata a più riprese anni fa. Quando ha capito il senso del suo gesto, nel femminismo, ha mostrato a Ester [Carla Accardi] quelle foto [...]. Quindi [Carla] adesso si è sentita autorizzata a esporre in una sua mostra di quadri, anche una foto della nonna [sic]. L’operazione di [Carla] riscuote quelle gratificazioni che le impediscono di avere dei dubbi e quindi di prendere coscienza. [...]” (“[The] other always has his cultural identification, and also the gratifying aspect of envy, to sustain him and maintain disparity. For example, Piera [Jacqueline Vodoz] loved her grandmother very much and photographed her several times years ago. When she understood the meaning of her gesture, in feminism, she showed Ester [Carla Accardi] those photos [...]. So [Carla] now felt authorized to exhibit in one of her exhibitions of paintings, even a photo of her grandmother [sic]. [Carla’s] operation reaps the rewards that prevent her from having doubts and therefore from becoming aware”). It seems unlikely, however, that Lonzi had seen the exhibition.

30 Accardi, “‘Origine’ (1976)”: “[E]laborazione e analisi”.

31 The statement was partially published in: Boetti 1977, 37.

with my father). / 3) moment of continuity (origin) from woman to woman (me in my mother's arms). / 4) moment that alludes to the person: my mother's inherent solitude in the field, solitude that can hypothetically give way to the aspiration (suffocated but evoked by her during her life) towards a personal realization. / 5) underlining the theme of individuality is the moment of origin from person to person. Wish, utopia, hypothesis? An evocative moment, perhaps simpler than this writing. The photo of my great-grandmother is a testimony to my predilection for her image and her history."<sup>32</sup>

Accardi's matrilineal succession of generations, as the artist suggests, activates the photographs less as carriers of private memory and much more as potentially revealing symptoms of a separate subject position for women, whose millenary reduction to that of men Irigaray had powerfully unveiled.<sup>33</sup> Thus selected and arranged, the photographs locate the woman-figure, on the one hand, in her traditional position of "speculum" of man in Irigaray's terms, even as they capture, on the other hand, her inherent potential of self-liberation.<sup>34</sup> In its double meaning of biological creativity and self-realization, motherhood becomes, in Accardi's take, the locus of origin of female individuality, effecting, through relationships "from woman to woman", a continuity indifferent to the history of man.<sup>35</sup>

The broader dimension of Accardi's genealogical prehistory was immediately apparent to some reviewers. According to Zoccoli, *Origine* thematizes the "female excess": "Carla Accardi sets out in search of herself, she follows the course of the neglected female excess and calls her suggestion 'origin', almost a

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32 Accardi, "'Origine' (1976)": "1) momento in cui l'innamoramento iniziale del bambino e della bambina per la madre sono uguali (Luce Irigaray). La fotografia dunque è usata non dentro la sfera della memoria ma come testimonianza di un amore preedipico. 2) momento appena precedente alla assunzione al ruolo tradizionale (una foto sola è con mio padre). 3) momento di continuità (origine) da donna a donna (io in braccio a mia madre). 4) momento che allude alla persona: l'insita solitudine di mia madre nel campo, solitudine che può ipoteticamente dare sbocco all'aspirazione (soffocata ma da lei evocata durante la sua vita) verso una realizzazione personale. 5) sottolineare il tema della individualità è il momento di origine da persona a persona. Augurio, utopia, ipotesi? Momento evocativo, forse più semplice di questo scritto. La foto della mia bisnonna è una testimonianza della mia predilezione per la sua immagine e la sua storia".

33 Luce Irigaray's book *Speculum. De l'autre femme* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1974) was translated into Italian the following year [*Speculum. L'altra donna* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975)]. In employing the term "Speculum", Irigaray references Lacan's concepts of the mirror stage and symbolic order, with the aim of dismantling his theory as a phallogocentric reduction of woman to a mirror for man.

34 In a letter written prior to the show, and published in 1977, Accardi mentioned these photographs and characterized them as representing her mother "liberated" from social roles (Accardi 1977, 395).

35 In the 1970s, the concept of motherhood had become an increasingly controversial object of confrontation. As the struggle for the right to abortion intensified, archaeological and historiographical research showed a growing interest in matriarchal societies and the archetypes of the Great Mother. See: Gioni 2015.

longed-for restoration of matrilinearity”.<sup>36</sup> Torrente defined the installation as a “space of light and [...] memory, in which the flow of unconscious evocation produces an absolute and ‘non-dialogical’ female dimension”, in which the mother appears as “a creature depersonalized in a role, charged with all denied meanings”.<sup>37</sup> The historical photographs elicited a generation-spanning resonance, gaining contemporary significance in the eyes of the beholders. In so doing, Accardi’s “non-dialogical” staging of the female individual in the space of the cooperative connected past and present, private and political dimensions of the trope of woman’s creative power.

### **Genealogy of a practice**

Returning to Foucault, in order to visualize a specific history genealogically, we would have to arrange it through a montage, a construction that allows us to perceive it through alienation and distancing on the one hand, and pathos and affect on the other. Similarly, in the published part of her comment on *Origine*, Accardi stresses the importance of translating “all those motives and contents, which [she] lived [...] in the elaboration and analysis of the conscious and unconscious mother-daughter relationship”, to the “sphere of visual language”. By these means, creating a work that “rejects drama”, Accardi speaks about attaining “rest”, “a break to find detachment and breath”.<sup>38</sup> The stringently minimalist execution of the site-specific installation was instrumental in positioning Accardi, not least importantly, with respect to a particular artistic temporality. As early as 1966, the artist had noted that belonging to a “middle” generation of artists (with respect to the conceptualist neo-avant-garde) gave her the opportunity to de-vulgarize the idea of artistic maturity and to rethink it beyond male-coded power gestures on the one hand, or figures of retreat on the other. To this end, she sought to relieve her art of all those meanings, iconographies, and mythologies that generally inform the approach of the young, at once opening her work up to the unforeseen, by taking an interest in the concerns of younger generations (Accardi 1966). Within the exhibition at the cooperative, Accardi’s strikingly representational operation,

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36 Zoccoli 1976: “Carla Accardi parte alla ricerca di se stessa, risalendo il corso della negletta eccedenza femminile, e chiama ‘origine’ la sua proposta, quasi una vagheggiata restaurazione della matrinlinearità”.

37 Torrente 1976: “Spazio della luce e spazio della memoria in cui emerge dal flusso della rievocazione inconscia una dimensione femminile assoluta e ‘non dialogica’ [...] in cui la figura materna ha la mobile evanescenza di un brivido di luce ipotetica, creatura depersonalizzata nel ruolo, ora ricaricata di tutti i negati significati”.

38 Accardi, “‘Origine’ (1976)”: “[T]utti quei motivi e contenuti, da me vissuti [...] nell’elaborazione e analisi del rapporto conscio e inconscio madre-figlia”; “sfera del linguaggio visivo”; “rifiuta la drammaticità”; “si riposa”; “pausa per trovare un distacco e un respiro”.

legitimized by the contemporary conceptualist trend of photo-text installations,<sup>39</sup> remained firmly embedded in her experimentation with Sicofoil, a terrain she had long been exploring and convincingly navigating. Accardi's use of transparent plastic "authenticates" her exceptional use of photography. At the same time, the iconic subject of the installation suggests that its underlying concerns could be expanded to the whole constellation of works gathered at the cooperative. Seen in this light, the exhibition *Origine* corroborates the claim, reinforced by recent scholarship on Accardi's work of the 1960s and 1970s, that she conducted her feminist quest for self-liberation precisely through her formalist artistic practice.

The capacity of Accardi's practice to gain significance both in relation to, on the one hand, "the history of art", "the 'ordered' space of Culture", and, on the other hand, the "history of female survival", "the incongruous space of [...] incommensurable difference" had been publicly acclaimed by feminist critic (Sauzeau) Boetti shortly prior to *Origine's* opening (Sauzeau Boetti 1976). In an article published in *Data* in April 1976, the critic focused on significant works from the artist's long career, suggesting a novel reading. Among her selection, *Triplice tenda* and *Trasparenti*, formally aligned with neo-avant-gardist tendencies such as environment, new painting or conceptualism, are highlighted as examples of the "female symbolic" that the critic was theorizing at the time. While, for Sauzeau Boetti, the tent materialized, through color, form and format, female pleasure and a corporeal sense of embrace, the minimalist interweaving of contemporary plastics in *Trasparenti* stood in relation to ancestral women's work, seemingly remediating a textile technique.

On the occasion of Accardi's self-curated exhibition, rather than subscribing to a univocal reading, the artist's choice to place the installation *Origine* in a constellation of works including *Trasparenti* and (possibly) *Tenda* emphasized the various contexts of signification in which her practice could be made to function. Re-contextualized within the all-women space of the cooperative, bridging feminist separatism and the art establishment, the anti-monumental and anti-hierarchical character of the materially resonant exhibits, along with their references to domesticity, separateness, and the storing of lived time, stood out more starkly. Neither did Accardi disassociate her origin as an individual from her origin as a woman, nor, as an established female artist, did she situate her practice in isolation from the gender and generational codes structuring the art field. In accordance with the exhibition site, Accardi's use of genealogy powerfully enforced the cooperative's experimenting with non-linear historiographies without fathers. Instead of accounting for a linear development, Accardi turned the progressive linearity conventionally grounding retrospectives into a genealogical investigation which encompassed private, political, and artistic dimensions, presenting them as inextricably connected. Reconsidering

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39 See for instance the surveys of "narrative art" displayed in 1974-75 at Cannaviello Studio d'Arte in Rome. More specifically, for the use of photography in feminist art practice, including the very context of the Cooperativa Beato Angelico, see: Perna 2013.

the exhibition *Origine* as a whole thus allows us to reassess Accardi’s public self-positioning in the mid-1970s.

This reconsideration appears urgent not least in light of *Origine*’s subsequent exhibition history. About thirty years later, in 2007, when Accardi was invited by Mario de Candia and Patrizia Ferri to the Centro di documentazione della ricerca artistica contemporanea “Luigi di Sarro”, in Rome, to contribute a rarely presented work to the exhibition series *Cose quasi mai viste* (*Things almost never seen before*), the choice fell on the installation *Origine* [fig. 8].<sup>40</sup> In the meantime, the artist had repeatedly distanced herself from her feminist commitment (Cozzi 2011, 79–80). According to her studio assistant Francesco Impellizzeri, the original Sicofoil strips had been reused for other works, but he could identify the photographs thanks to the holes left by the drawing pins.<sup>41</sup> It was challenging to reconstruct the piece’s

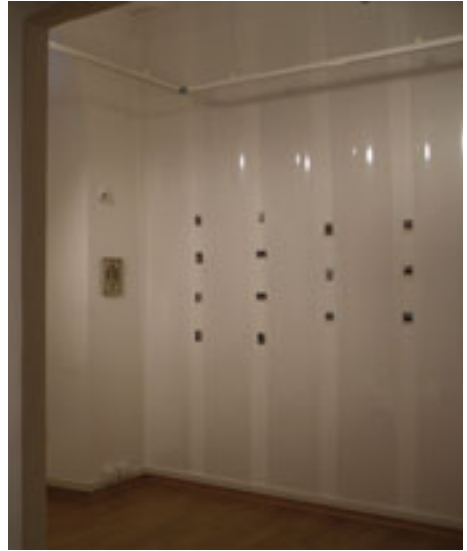


Fig. 8: Carla Accardi, *Origine* (1976) re-installation at *Cose quasi mai viste Origine* (*Things almost never seen before*) (detail), 2007, photo: Centro di documentazione della ricerca artistica contemporanea “Luigi di Sarro”, Rome

proportions and gaps, which in 1976 were designed site-specifically. For the re-installation, only one of the two wall hangings was retained and reproduced in acetate instead of Sicofoil. Accardi increased the number of photographs from 19 to 20, now arranging them vertically in two rows of four and four rows of three, omitting some of the originals, and adding photographs of herself in the 1950s to form the last two rows. Unlike in 1976, when it hung in a separate niche, the portrait of the great-grandmother now appeared on the adjacent wall and in the immediate vicinity of the installation. In this substantially altered configuration authorized by the artist – or even further modified – the work continues to be exhibited as Accardi’s *Origine* (1976) 2007.<sup>42</sup> As an anachronic object, it now conflates the temporality of the 1970s with that of its re-staging (Bishop 2013).

40 *Idee, processi e progetti della ricerca artistica italiana degli anni ‘60 e ‘70: cose (quasi) mai viste*, curated by Mario De Candia and Patrizia Ferri, (Rome: Centro di documentazione della ricerca artistica contemporanea “Luigi di Sarro”, 2005–2007). Exh. Cat. (Rome: Gangemi, 2011), 34–35.

41 Conversation with the author, November 27, 2019.

42 In Accardi’s catalogue raisonné of 1999, *Origine* is not listed as a separate work, but two installation views are included, along with a caption: “In May, she exhibited the environment *Origine* at the Cooperative in Via Beato Angelico, founded in Rome in April together with ten other women” (“In maggio espone l’ambiente *Origine* nella sede della Cooperativa di via Beato Angelico fondata a Roma in aprile insieme ad altre dieci donne.”) [Celant 1999, 368]. In the

Yet, as Beatrice von Bismarck notes with respect to the diverse media and cultural practices taking part in the historicization of exhibitions, “each new exhibition situation or re-installation creates altered relations, in turn influencing the meanings of the individual elements as well as those of the exhibition as a whole” (Von Bismarck 2019, 85). Accordingly, the re-installation of *Origine* participates in the historicization of Accardi’s position, taking an influential stance. Staging *Origine* as an autonomous, self-referential work minimizes the significance of the 1976 exhibition, curated by Accardi in the all-women cooperative she had co-founded, in which the installation was originally embedded. The re-installation removes the work from the historical and situational context in which it was first realized, and therefore retrospectively separates the private genealogy on display from its former political investment. In this way, it constructs a scenario of origin that appears to have diminished its potential significance for the present (Lebovici and Zapperi, 2008). In re-directing the historiographic attention to the 1976 exhibition, my reading of *Origine* instead aimed to emphasize, along with the work’s initial contextual ties, the forceful claim Accardi embraced in those years: to “bring [her] political and artistic interests together”.<sup>43</sup>

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supplementary catalogue raisonné of 2011, *Origine* is listed as “1976 10” and described as follows: “*Origine*, 1976 sicofoil, photographs and photographic portrait of an ancestor in an original frame, environmental installation on two walls, dimensions variable, arch. no. 710, Rome, collection of the artist” (“*Origine*, 1976 sicofoil, fotografie e ritratto fotografico di un’antenata in cornice originale, installazione ambientale su due pareti, dimensioni variabili, arch. n. 710 Roma, collezione dell’artista”). *Origine*’s substantially modified re-installation from 2007 is listed as “(1976) 2007 1” [Celant 2011 371–372].

43 Accardi used these words to describe her engagement with the Cooperativa Beato Angelico in a 1976 interview, published the following year (Accardi 1977, 390).



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**„OD ŽENE ŽENI”.  
GENEALOGIJA IZLAGANJA – ORIGINE KARLE AKARDI, 1976**

*Apstrakt:*

U radu se preispituje potcenjeni značaj samostalne izložbe Karle Akardi *Origine* (Poreklo) koja je održana u maju 1976. godine u ženskom kolektivu (zadruzi) koju je umetnica osnovala u Ulici Blaženog Anđelika (*Via Beato Angelico*) br. 18 u Rimu. Priređena na lokaciji koja nije neutralna, ova izložba, koju je umetnica sama kurirala, prikazala je veliki broj radova Karle Akardi i učinila vidljivom privatnu i političku isprepletenost njene umetničke prakse, značajno proširujući njeno potencijalno značenje. Analizirajući fragmentarnu dokumentaciju izložbe i njenu kritičku recepciju, biće predstavljeno da je ovom prilikom, umesto pružanja uvida u konvencionalni pregled stilskog razvoja, Akardi privremeno postavila, u Fukoovom smislu, kontekst porekla za njeno postajanje u sadašnjosti: kao žene i kao umetnice.

*Ključne reči:*

ženski kolektivi, umetnik kao kustos, genealogija, samostalna izložba, instalacija, fotografija, Sicofoil, feminizam, istorizacija