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Relational aesthetics: A duoethnographic research on feminism

Laura Formenti
Università di Milano Bicocca, Italy (laura.formenti@unimib.it)

Silvia Luraschi
Università di Milano Bicocca, Italy (silvia.luraschi@unimib.it)

Gaia Del Negro
Università di Milano Bicocca, Italy (gaia.delnegro@unimib.it)

Abstract

This paper offers a frame to reflect on the role of aesthetics in the development of a critical pedagogy for social justice in adult education. Arts-based research and practice have the power to illuminate the participants' views, ideas, and feelings, as well as the systems of values that are embedded in their contexts. Critical thinking and awareness are the result of relational and political processes, triggered by experience and going beyond subjectivity. The authors aim at defining a pedagogical practical theory that celebrates complexity, opens possibilities, develops the new, and triggers deliberate action, rather than fostering specific behaviours or learning. The paper itself is a piece of that pedagogy, developed through a cooperative method of writing-as-inquiry (duoethnography), here triggered by a photographic exhibition and resulting in the dialogic exploration of feminism in the authors' lives. In this example, it is shown how individual voices can be juxtaposed to develop an open, transforming theory of feminism, identity, and education.

Keywords: Aesthetic experience; cooperative inquiry; duoethnography; feminism; systems theory

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Introduction

This paper is the provisional result of an ongoing dialogue among us, and involving many other learners. It is not meant to present a polished theory or accomplished practice, but to foster further dialogue. Our approach is centred on relationships as the fabric of learning: as adult educators and learners ourselves, we interpret education as the creation of dialogic spaces for enhancing critical consciousness about those issues which are relevant for our lives, individually and collectively, but often silenced. Critical pedagogy seeks for the transformation of the relationships, actions, and discourses we live by. In this respect, we share a common interest towards art as a fundamental human experience and a powerful trigger of learning. We use it extensively in our work in university, with professionals, and with distressed parents and disenfranchised subjects. We also use it to explore our theories, practices, and epistemologies: art illuminates, in fact, our mind frames and relationships to knowing. Art sustains a kind of knowing which is out of reach for the purposeful, rational mind.

In the last few years, we developed multiple conversations (from the Latin *cum* + *versari*, 'hanging around in the same space') around our pedagogy by sharing biographic and ethnographic narratives, artworks, poems, and readings. We visited exhibitions, read poetry and watched movies, among us and with others, as ways to develop our theories and practices of adult education. In this paper, we aim to build a provisional but satisfying theory of the relationship between aesthetic experience and adult learning.

A theory is satisfying when it addresses relevant issues in people's lives, not least the researcher. Besides, it appears beautiful, true, ethical, convincing, and useful. A good enough bunch of ideas that speak to our emotions, feelings, and values. Writing is, for us, a form of inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) which sustains theorizing with the support of propositional knowing (Heron, 1996); however, we also consider acting, moving, imaging, and doing art as forms of theorization which are undervalued by academic culture. We use duoethnography (Sawyer & Norris, 2013), a form of cooperative writing rooted in experience which combines personal memories, artefacts, field observation, and theoretical reflexivity. The researchers' biographic, aesthetic and embodied experience is the 'site', not the 'topic' (Norris, Sawyer & Lund, 2012, p. 11) of duoethnography: it is meant to illuminate cultural contexts, in the presence of the Other, and to be critical and transformative. So, we began to write together, walking a reflexive path of reciprocal unveiling, collaboration and critical friendship. This brought us to interrogate our established roles and identities, ideas and presuppositions, as women, intellectuals, and citizens. Our aim in this paper is to reflect on the building of a theory (in this case, about feminism) as an intimate and deeply relational process. This is a tenet of feminist research, as we will argue. In fact, we try here to bridge feminist ideas and methods, with a complex theory of transformation and learning.

We are not alone. Interestingly, aesthetic pedagogies and methodologies, using different media and languages (film, video, photography, electronic media, theatre, dance and artefacts) are expanding in social research (Leavy, 2015), narrative medicine (Charon, 2006; Launer, 2002), online pedagogy (Norris & Saudelli, 2018), and adult education for social justice (Clover, Sandford & Butterwick, 2013). Arts-based approaches are used to sustain perspective transformation (Formenti & West, 2016; 2018; Jarvis, 2012), critical thinking (Kokkos, 2013), and transformative learning (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2009; Clover & Stalker, 2007; Hayes & Yorks, 2007; Lawrence, 2012), not least by implementing a feminist approach (Clover, Sanford, Bell & Johnson, 2016) and in the pursuit of wisdom (Fraser, 2018). All these different

approaches have in common a focus on presentational knowing (Heron, 1996; Kasl & Yorks, 2012) and abduction (Bateson, 1979): these are the privileged ways of knowing that we use when telling stories about our life experiences. Drawing, dancing, or playing a character, as well as enjoying a poem or a picture, can indeed illuminate how a subject – or a culture - makes sense of her world. But these approaches may differ greatly when it comes to their goals, values, ontology and epistemology, and how they address the relationship between subject and context, or among different subjectivities.

Our focus here is on the development of a satisfying theory, and its relationship with practice: there is a need, we argue, to justify and orient the use of art in education. In many contexts, this is not well received, or understood: art is still considered as an extra thing for adult education, too far from the mainstream of rational functional objectives. Learners themselves may react defensively, when invited to draw, dance, or play. They perceive it as childish, time-wasting, and only reserved for the talented. It might be accepted for therapeutic ends; the amazing success of art therapies could be due to both the need and the healing power of aesthetics in human life, but this specific purpose might conceal the wider and deeper meaning of it.

About being exposed to art, there is maybe less resistance, but other problems may arise, since we are only able to perceive what is somehow already expected, starting from our internalized structures, rooted in our biographies and milieus (Berger, 1972). Bourdieu (1987) highlighted the determinant role of education and social origins in accessing legitimate culture. Privilege favours the direct experience and enjoyment of art; upper class and educated people learn to perceive the qualities of an art object in appropriate ways, through the mastery of codes. Perception requires knowledge and reproduces cultural and social divides. Lack of knowledge about the code brings a feeling of exclusion, like 'a fish out of water', and brings to a fundamental inability to elaborate accepted secondary meaning. So, art museums, galleries, and concert halls seem to be there to confirm 'elitism, intellectualism, sexism and paternalism, that have legitimized and maintained hegemonic orders of social, cultural, political, aesthetic and epistemological power' (Clover, 2018, p. 89).

The aesthetic experience may reveal how our subjectivity is shaped by culture, by our webs of affiliation. And yet, with the multiplication of forms, cultures, and ways of doing art, especially after the Nineties, everybody can feel like a fish out of water, when exposed to a piece of art, an installation or a "situation". A mature person trying to decipher juvenile art, or a westerner coping with Arabic or Japanese poetry, or an academic exposed to rap music, have to recognize their lack of knowledge and – sometimes – deep puzzlement. Anybody who has been trained or initiated to "classic" art (music, dance, painting…), with its strong structures and expectations of performance, can feel shaken and disoriented, if not offended, by relational aesthetics, which is the dominant approach in art, after the surrealist revolution (Bourriaud, 1998/2010). The task of contemporary art is to interrogate what we know, how we know, and ultimately how we build what and who we are.

So, what is the meaning, for us, of doing or using art in our work as adult educators and researchers? Can we say, with Dewey (1938), that the aesthetic experience is educational *per se*? We agree with considering it a key to understand experience as a whole, since it weaves different dimensions: sensorial, imaginal, intellectual, and practical. Consciousness, as a perceived relation between doing and undoing, connects the production/perception of art with enjoyment, playfulness, an outgoing and incoming energy, the very base of experience itself (Dewey, 1934). This includes all expressive forms, besides recognized art: popular dance or music, street art, decoration, body practices. The interacting body – perception, movement, feelings - is the foundation of

all experiences. But which are the conditions for *learning*? Our thesis is that the aesthetic experience may be educational, even transformative for an adult, if – and only if - it develops through a specific process, a pedagogy where the *subjective and embodied* is weaved together with the *relational and dialogical* dimensions.

A systemic understanding

The relational is a conceptual and practical bridge to overcome binary thinking, connecting inside and outside, self and context, imagination and emancipation. We refer to systems and complexity theory, especially to Gregory Bateson's work (Bateson, 1972, 1979; Bateson & Bateson, 1987), in defining art as an aesthetic experience of complexity, an expression of cultural as well as subjective values embedded in the material qualities of aesthetical objects, and displaying a mix of consciousness and unconsciousness. As Bateson writes, 'for the attainment of grace, the reasons of the heart must be integrated with the reasons of the reason' (1972, p. 129). A compositional pedagogy aims to (re)connect different levels, dimensions, and manifestations of experience.

Among them, we put the body at the forefront: *aesthetics* comes from the Greek "aesthesis", meaning anything to do with the senses. Art is a sensorial event; we know the world through our senses, and arts speak to them, inviting us to see, hear, touch, feel. The body is intimately involved in language and philosophy (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), as well as religion, meditation and martial arts, on the basis of a body-mind unit. Thinking, feeling, perceiving, and imagining are the enactments of an embodied mind (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991). Humanization itself is a product of art and aesthetic experiences (Crowther, 2001). Our habitual embodiments are unconscious - like the taste of our own mouth (Feldenkrais, 1949) -, interactive, and differentiated.

Another relevant dimension of experience is knowing, and its biographical and social roots. Art is presentational knowing (Heron, 1996): it (re)presents some form, pattern, or rhythm - an organization of stimuli - to our senses. It does not explain. It does not "talk", but it shows, and we are "made to" react to the show, not in a passive way, but by bringing ourselves, our previous experience, our whole body, mind, and soul into this experience. Our imagination, the stories that we have heard, our interpretation of the context at hand are the fabric of presentational knowing, which nonetheless is deeply contextual: it changes if we are alone or in company, if we are happy or troubled. A piece of art, magically, transforms situationally in relation to all these diversities.

Our relationships to knowing are relationships with ourselves, other(s) and the world (Charlot, 1997; Del Negro, 2016, 2018), inscribed in (inter)subjective and societal dynamics. Knowing is embedded in our biographies and systems of affiliation (family, friends, work, etc.); it always comes with desires to be and to become, ideas about the world and one's place in it. As feminist studies have highlighted (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986), epistemology is gendered, and voice is shaped by previous experience and social structures. Whose and which voice will be heard, when male and rational are the standard – also in supposedly transformative education (Belenky & Stanton, 2000)? The aesthetic experience may reveal hidden processes of knowledge construction, entailing a whole - perceptive/emotional/cognitive – response. Our relationship with self, other, and the world is tacitly negotiated through the multiple dimensions of knowing (Del Negro, 2018).

The next paragraphs offer an example of an embodied dialogic pedagogy, whose participants are the researchers themselves. We started a duoethnographic dialogue, based on choosing photographs from an exhibition, telling stories triggered by them, and developing new ideas in dialogue, aimed at exploring difficult questions of awareness and authenticity, about feminism and identity. In the conclusions, we will draw some tenets of relational aesthetics as a pedagogy for adult education and learning.

A dialogic construction of knowledge: A duoethnography on feminism

Duoethnography (Sawyer & Norris, 2013) is a collective form of autoethnography, a research method that started in the late Nineties and has developed since then as an independent stream in interpretative inquiry, as a critique to traditional ethnography and a way to bring the researcher's subjectivity into the picture. While in autoethnography the researcher's I (Ellis, 2004) is evoked to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011), in duoethnography the accent is on plurality and differences: it involves more researchers, writing in a collaborative way and responding to each other, hence multiplying their perspectives in order to build collective and critical knowledge from experience, not least emotional and embodied (Norris, Sawyer & Lund, 2012). Duoethnography is based on the principle that the differences between participants will illuminate their cultural contexts, thanks to the experience of otherness and critical friendship, the struggles and conflicts that may arise in interpretation, and the necessity of composition to achieve an agreed version of a final but open text which celebrates those differences. Dialogue is not only between researchers, but with objects and artefacts, such as photographs, music, fiction, poetry, etc.

So, we are different in age and expertise. We have commonalities, though: we are women, first generation in the university, speaking the same language, and deeply perturbed by recent events (Trump's elections in the US, the Weinstein affair, the Italian politics on family, migration, and women), and the revival of a public feminist discourse (as in the Me-Too movement). This is triggering discussions, self-disclosure, political activism, at many levels, and offers a possibility to foster renewed awareness of the many forms of oppression that a woman can experience. Do we feel oppressed, as women? This opened other questions: What is the role of feminism in adult learning and education? Is the experience of feminism, or feminist ideas and practices, conducive to transformation? Of which kind? And what is the role of art in it?

Speaking of feminism is not always easy or well received. Surprisingly, we discovered that it may produce annoyance in some audiences, as if the word 'feminism' could raise walls instead of dialogue. As an example, we recall a group conversation during a workshop that we organized at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Cinisello Balsamo, January 2018. The workshop, guided by colleagues and friends Darlene Clover, Kathy Sanford and Nancy Taber (Clover, Sanford, Taber & Williamson, 2018), was aimed at enhancing awareness of gender biases in the museum. Most participants – students, teachers, photographers, academics, educators – took a distance from defining themselves "a feminist". Answers to the question '*Are* you a feminist?' ranged from '*I do not call myself* a feminist, but...', to 'I do not *know* enough to answer', or even 'I *am certainly not*!'. We became insecure ourselves about using this word to state an identity, or a belonging. This feeling of uncertainty is good in adult learning, since words (propositional knowing) need to be de-constructed and contextualized within biographies (experiential knowing), to be appropriated or maybe

re-defined by the learning subject. The passage through aesthetic experience (presentational knowing) is considered by Heron (1996) as a necessary step between experience and proposition, if we were to build an embodied, satisfying and critical theory, which then opens possibilities to act differently (practical knowing). These four forms of knowing represent a tenet of cooperative inquiry and a basis for our dialogic pedagogy. In the case of feminism, the verb *to be* seems to create categories and raise walls, due to its ontological and essentialist presuppositions. Ironically, this happens in times when identity becomes so blurred and liquid, that we all seem to be more generally confused about who and what we are, or *can* be.

Our discussion raised a desire to understand better, and curiosity about our own identity, hidden theories, and curricula. So, we decided to start a new collective study by attending an exhibition of women photographers, titled *The Other View: Italian Women Photographers 1965-2015 from Donata Pizzi's Collection* (Perna, 2016). An amazing experience: these pieces of art, created by women and representing evolution in time, through generations and contexts, triggered reflexivity. Each of us chose a photograph from the exhibition and started to write. 'What do you see?' is a simple and powerful question, when it comes to art (Formenti & West, 2018), since the 'what' reveals the 'how', that is the perspectives of meaning orienting our perception. 'The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe' (Berger, 1972, p. 8). So, by answering the question we started a path of investigation about our experiences, theories and epistemologies.

The description of a photograph became a way to narrate ourselves, exploring the meanings and dilemmas raised by it. Narration is only the starting point of our methodology: we use reflexive writing as a research method (Luraschi, 2016) to share representations and reciprocity to develop a local critical theory. We took feminism as a dilemmatic, not granted object. So, we exchanged short narrative texts, poems, and pictures for some months, and then discussed them, as we would do in a group or workshop on similar topics. A tenet of duoethnography is that voices 'bracket in' (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p. 15), to recognize that authors bring their personal epistemology into the study, and to avoid bracketing out subjectivity. This is why, in the following, our voices are visible and differentiated, to leap in the end to a 'communal yet critical conversation' (p. 18), as a dialogic frame.

Laura: biographic memory and being a silent witness

Photo 1: Liliana Barchiesi, *In the occupied house at Famagosta Street*, Milan, 1974. Barchiesi, an activist and independent photojournalist since the early Seventies, chronicled the changing world of women: street protests for divorce and abortion, workers unions and women groups, the role of women in the family, the need of housing. She now works on gender stereotypes, not least of migrant women (Perna, 2016, p. 182). See also https://www.storiadidonne.it/

I instinctively chose a photo by Liliana Barchiesi (Photo 1): *In the occupied house at Famagosta Street*, Milan 1974 (Perna, 2016, p. 90; see Photo 1). It displays a white and quite bare room with a round clothed table in the middle, and an enigmatic lady in the corner. I feel cold and warm. I see white and black. Basic features, no glamour. It is an occupied house: in the Seventies, working class families allied with students, women, migrants from the South, to claim their right to housing. New buildings were built, in the suburbs of Milano: they simply took them. An illegal act, justified by need. I always feel a privileged person, when I think that millions of people do not have a roof over their heads.

So, these bare spaces, still smelling the new paint, suddenly became lively with people, children, and the smell of food: onion and garlic, tomato and frying oil, the smells of migration. Smells of poverty: at seven, I met two new schoolmates from Puglia, girls who barely spoke Italian, and ate bread with garlic and tomato for lunch. My first contact with migration.

I see in this image poverty and hospitality: in the middle of the table, beverages for a host, or maybe a group of activists. I had a fantasy about a couple, maybe from Sicily or Naples, migrants in search of a good life. Care and dignity: someone put a cloth and welcoming bottles on the table. Why do I imagine a woman behind this gesture? And who is the woman in the picture? Surely, not a squatter. She wears fashionable but severe clothes and shoes. She looks in the camera. She says to me:

> Do you see? You have to see this, and think. I want you to know and reflect on what is happening here, and what it means. I am in the picture because I cannot claim a neutral presence. You cannot. We are involved in this.

Presentational knowing is powerful: I feel compelled by this photograph. The woman is my alter ego speaking to me. She tells a story of rights and struggles. Occupiers are not loved in the society of private property and privileges. Not in the Seventies, not now. They may be arrested, fined, put in jails. Or tolerated for a while, until the property does not complain. A critical reflection on basic rights, and how they might be claimed, was in the agenda of adult educators in the Sixties and Seventies (Formenti & West, 2018). In the Seventies, occupation was a political act; these subjects self-organized to make their voices heard in the streets. They took space. By collaborating with each other, they invented a new way of doing politics, bottom-up, and feminists were at the forefront, inventing new ways of doing as 'unexpected subjects' (Lonzi, 1970/2010, p. 18).

Photo 2: Me and my brother playing in the street, 1969.

Many relevant dilemmas of mine were evoked by looking at the photo and writing the story. I re-connected with my life in the Seventies (see Photo 2), as the child of a working-class family that was climbing the social ladder. As a part of this, I was educated in times when most women were not, and mass education was still on the build. Becoming an academic meant disconnection, however, from my family and social origins. I never felt as a child of working-class parents. Besides, I was too young and did not participate to the social struggles of the Seventies, but I am grateful, as a citizen and a woman, for the results they brought, in terms of rights and justice. Knowing and remembering is important, especially in the present times of neoliberalism and fundamentalism. I feel like a witness, as the woman in the photo: inside the picture, yet sometimes separated from *the real thing*.

When I wrote my first comment to the photo, I was unable to see the link between me and the ones who are struggling (still now, and more than ever), the ones who are crushed by the system. They do not have my privileges. Be they women, or migrants, or undereducated people. I am a silent witness. I feel ambivalent towards feminism: the ones who claim *to be* feminists, do not necessarily behave or think like one. And too

often they are, ironically, the ones who need it less. I vaguely feel that I do not deserve *to be* a feminist, but I might *act* as one.

Silvia: body matters and identity struggles

Photo 3: Agnese De Donato, *One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*, 1970. De Donato, a journalist and photographer born in Bari ("when, not even under threat I will tell you"), lived, worked and died (2017) in Rome; she took part in the creation of the feminist magazine Effe (1973), working as an editor and cover designer, and picturing the struggles of the feminist movement.

I chose a photo by Agnese De Donato (see Photo 3): *One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*, 1970 (Perna, 2016, p. 94). Its title is a quote from Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949): by calling women 'the second sex', de Beauvoir means that man is considered to be the standard, so women are defined in relation to men. The quote calls attention to a difference between nature and culture, sex and gender, being and becoming. The way women are thought of – as naturally endowed of some features, and consequently treated in society, affects their becoming: they are taught to be in certain ways. The image shows a contrast between two women: one dressed in white in the background, the other dressed in black (not wearing a bra and partially showing her breast) in the foreground, with a raised fist. The former represents a contrast, indeed, between two characters, the bride and the prostitute, both of them serving male needs; the latter represents the feminist movement, that was fighting in those years to build new ways of living and to create spaces of freedom and independence from men (especially father and/or husband).

The image also (re)presents the battle for divorce in Italy and the opposition to the catholic world. In Italy, the right to divorce was a major social and political theme of late 1960s and early 1970s. The law was first proposed in 1965 by socialist deputy Loris Fortuna, and finally approved in 1969 when a parliamentary coalition defeated, after

harsh public battles, the Christian democratic party and the right party by 325 to 283 votes.

The disciplining of women bodies to become "sex objects" (Valenti, 2016) has shaped the imagination of both men and women, as documented by Lorella Zanardo's work *Women's bodies* that shows how women bodies are sexualized in the Italian television (http://www.ilcorpodelledonne.net/english-version/). Looking beautiful was – and is - a real issue in many women's lives. This brings women to compete and to hide their emotions (Verhaeghe, 2012).

Women's freedom and power have changed since the Seventies, but patriarchal ideas, including stereotypical binaries (Women's Bookstore, 1987/2017; 1990), are still present in our society and in the mainstream of education. My dilemmas emerge from recognizing my own socialization and participation to the patriarchal game of "command and obey", and to the social norm that women must "behave decently" and "cover themselves sufficiently", hiding their (sinful) bodies – to other people and avoiding to "provoke" men. During my divorce, a feminist lawyer helped me to become more aware of psychological violence I suffered from my husband and, in the past, from my relatives. She worked in an anti-violence centre and invited me to visit an installation.

Photo 4: *Com'eri vestita? (What were you wearing?),* Milan, March 2018. Survivor Art Installation created at the University of Arkansas in 2013 by Jen Brockman and Mary Wyandt-Hiebert, and inspired by Mary Simmerling's poem "What I Was Wearing" (https://sapec.ku.edu/what-were-you-wearing). It was displayed in different Italian cities in 2018, by anti-violence centers and local municipalities.

In March 2018, I visited the installation *Com'eri vestita?* (see Photo 4) organized in Milano by the anti-violence centre *Cerchi d'Acqua* at the House of Rights, a public space of the city municipality where citizens may consult to claim their rights and signal discrimination. Walking through the exhibit, I got a glimpse of the horrors lived by women who are sexually assaulted, written in their own words: *'I was wearing my pyjamas. I just wanted to sleep and maybe have beautiful dreams…',* a note said next to a corresponding outfit. The design of the exhibit was simple, and that added to its impact. The clothing on display was just normal: pyjamas, t-shirts, or jeans. Women's pain is emphasized when someone implies that they could have avoided attack if they only had made different wardrobe choices: *'My girlfriend asked me: maybe you*

provoked him!?'. The exhibit also challenges the stereotype of attackers as anonymous strangers. Those women were victimized by friends, colleagues, and family members.
What struck me more, was the ordinariness of this exhibition. Just normal. Aesthetic experience, triggered by what we call presentational knowing, is powerful: it brings to light emotions, questions, personal resonances, and critical positioning. This provocative role is especially true for contemporary art, since one of its main features is the transformation of ordinary objects in extra-ordinary relational events (Bourriaud, 1998/2002).

Gaia: the relationship to knowing beside the single individual

Photo 5: Gabriella Mercadini, *The women's house in Governo Vecchio Street. Editorial staff of "Woman Daily"*, Rome 1979. An activist photojournalist, Mercadini began to work as freelancer in 1968, documenting workers' and students' movements and women activism. She developed a parallel research on art and museums, as with the project *L'art et/est celui qui le regarde*. She witnessed marginalization and struggles with her projects in ghetto camps, in factories and with immigrant women. She died in Rome in 2012 (Perna, 2016, p. 196).

I chose a photograph by Gabriella Mercadini (see Photo 5): *The women's house in Governo Vecchio,* 1979 (Perna, 2016, p. 89). In the picture, twelve women of different ages are sitting in a semicircle among and on top of piles of newspapers. Three older women are standing. All of them seem to wear flowery skirts and dresses, apart from one who wears trousers. Several are smiling, one laughing. The photo apparently interrupted an editorial meeting. I was struck by the relaxed informal atmosphere, transgressing my imagination of how editorial work is (or should be) conducted. In fact, I visited the headquarters of Mondadori, a big publishing house in Milan, for an interview, and I got quite a different impression of a traditional and stiff atmosphere.

There are no desks or chairs in the photo and women are sitting naturally on the product of their own work. *Quotidiano Donna* (Woman Daily) was first published in Rome on 6 May 1978 as a politically autonomous supplement of Workers' Daily, to become self-managed from December 1978. The newspaper was a direct expression of women's collectives and made a claim for anti-authoritarian communication. The group in the picture, however, looks up to the woman on the left. Who is she? What kind of leadership does she exert?

The picture evoked in me a fantasy of the group of peers being led with care, and knowledge shared and personal, even embodied, whilst in our culture personal life, body and emotion are usually severed from rational thinking (Belenky et al., 1986). The term "emotional" in Italy is still used in ordinary language to signal some weakness, much often in women. Italian feminism challenged this way of thinking in the 1970s, as women not only invented alternative forms of organisation and peer-to-peer relationships, and new practices of self-consciousness groups, but they reflected, wrote and theorised on this, in order to develop a relational philosophy of difference.

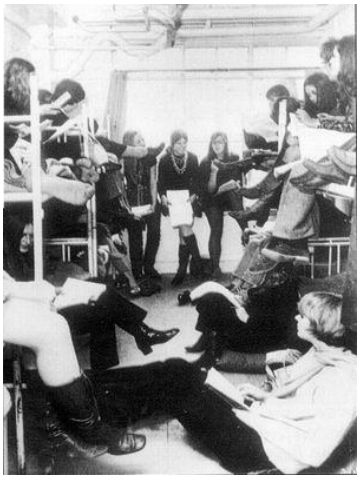

Photo 6: Libreria delle donne (Women Bookstore), Milano: past and present. http://www.libreriadelledonne.it

I visited and participated to the activities of the Women Bookstore (1987, 1990) in Milano (see Photo 6), a historical site of the feminist struggles in the Seventies, when women invented their own pedagogy, a mix of self-narration, critical inquiry, and entrustment (Scarparo, 2005): women of different backgrounds met regularly to share

their stories, to learn from each other about their experience of exclusion and oppression (as we are doing right now), and to build their relational subjectivities in a way that transcended the single individual's story.

In the years when the collective struggles for fundamental rights led to reforms and laws which changed the Italian society, women were engaged in re-signifying their relationship with culture, by founding bookshops, magazines, and documentation centres about women history – so called her-story –, and produced new perspectives in the arts. However, I became myself aware of how much class, education, physical and psychological constraints excluded, and still exclude, many women (hooks, 2000).

Going back to my photograph, I dream of myself sitting on the floor – embodied thinking -, wearing gowns – feminine, beautiful, colourful, handmade –, and discussing and writing with other women. In my youth, despite my parents being lefties, feminism was not talked about. In pursuing an education, I left my working-class migrant family behind me. The models I was exposed to were mostly masculine: men writers, journalists, historians. Women are told they don't know (Solnit, 2014) and often tell this to each other. Why does this still happen? What made *me* look up to those in power, often men? How can I learn to relate to knowing without feeling inadequate and oppressing others?

We/Us, and feminism as a form of action

When our images and texts started to circulate among us, we realised how different they were and started to explore our perspectives of meaning. Laura wrote in an e-mail: 'I see the two of you in your writing'. What does it mean? After many years of biographical research and cooperative inquiry, we got acquainted with the idea that personal experience and reflexivity are powerful leverages for learning, but this methodology creates a different context, more collective, relational, and disruptive. The innovative practices of feminist groups in the Seventies were the historical roots of this way of doing: it was groups of women, workers, artists, activists, and only later academics, in fact, who started to develop practices that taught us what it means to *think* and *act* like a feminist.

Paraphrasing Mezirow (2000), who wrote on 'thinking like an adult', we use thinking and acting to qualify feminism as a transformative way of knowing instead of a fixed identity, and to overcome some limits of Mezirow's theory, which appears overly rational and not enough relational. Art was very helpful indeed: as the highest form of communication about human dilemmas, it shows that certain disorientating dilemmas cannot be *solved* by simply analysing them; they may *dis-solve*, however, when they are performed, embodied, shared, and transformed by action. Transformation of a deeper kind is here at stake (Formenti & West, 2018), entailing a political as well as epistemological and ethical engagement.

Our auto-ethno-aesthetic inquiry plotted an ongoing path of learning, compelling us to act as unexpected subjects (Lonzi, 1970/2010), using our voices, taking space, and claiming difference; but also developing more intimacy, reciprocal care, and recognition, or maybe *entrustment*, as defined by members of the Women's Bookstore in Milano in the early Eighties: a relationship where trust emerges from the recognition of differences and disparities among women, instead of a generic claim for equality. This is how a relational, deeply aesthetic *Us* is formed.

As researchers and adult educators, we became more aware, in the process, that we are part of the picture: as Laura tells in her story, it is impossible to be neutral. So, we

feel more compelled than ever to bear witness and disrupt all normalized, objectifying and standardized methods, taking a personal, ethically engaged position, and creating a pedagogy inspired by biographical awareness and art to celebrate and connect (our) limits and hopes, needs and desires, oppression and freedom, beyond the negative-compensative attitude dominating the adult education discourse. Do we feel oppressed, as women, as South Europeans, as first-generation students/scholars? Yes, sometimes. And we know that, when we do not feel like this, it does not mean that we *are* not. Dis-attention, anesthetization, sanitization are problems of our times, especially in the academy. This study, then, enhanced our consciousness, our desire to see more and better, and to act in order to open possibilities.

By working together with this method over more than one year, we witnessed its power in our (and others') lives. Photographs triggered biographical memories and brought light to what had been forgotten.

This experience built in us a new commitment to act and to think "like a feminist", rather than define ourselves as such. Briefly, we learned how to bring feminism to our lives, as a way of acting, after years of anesthetized (literally: deprived of aesthetics) intellectual and academic discourse. The photographs and written stories evoked perceptions, struggles, joy, conflict, informality, creativity, puzzlement, anger, the power of a free body, and the desire to express emotions and relationships in public. Maybe this will enable the reader to answer 'as coparticipant and active witness' (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p. 21), and start new conversations beyond our study. This is another fundamental tenet of duoethnography.

Learning from feminists

An aesthetic relational pedagogy acknowledges the messiness, freedom, and beautiful disorder of people informally occupying spaces, maybe sitting on the floor, and acting in unexpected ways. The relationship with knowing does not need to be stiff and authoritarian, as Gaia suggested in her story. Body matters. Its celebration in Silvia's images and words, against a patriarchal/masculine idea of "statuesque perfection", challenges academic disembodiment and dis-enchantment (Formenti & Luraschi, 2017). People are educated to ignore their embodied wisdom (Tisdell, 2003), as an emerging literature on wisdom in adult education has addressed (Fraser, 2018). How does it connect to feminism? There seems to be a gap between authors who follow spiritual versus critical threads (Formenti & West, 2018). How can we compose them? Can we? This is an open question for further inquiry.

In our exploration, feminist pedagogy stands out. In feminist groups, ideas were circulated horizontally, and leaders like Luisa Muraro or Carla Lonzi in Italy addressed the issues and paradoxes of a "relational leadership", in theory and practice. The former wrote:

> If I position myself within the mother's genealogy, if I measure myself in terms of a relationship with another woman, if I place maternal authority above established power—if I create a new symbolic—then it is another world, in the more practical and realistic sense. This is what many already practice (Muraro, 1991, quoted and translated by Scarparo, 2005, p. 36).

Lonzi (1970/2010) was disturbed by common "manly" ways to interpret and play leadership. Her whole work features the longing for authentic relationships, based on reciprocity and radical interrogation, which seems to be necessary in the pursuit of self-

transformation. Her radical coherence brought her to multiple and painful withdrawals from established roles and relationships. From her biography (Zapperi, 2017) we learn that she left her profession as an innovative, experimental and engaged art critic - an inauthentic role, in her consideration, as based on observing and objectifying the artist's work - to embrace feminism as a practice of subjectivation. In 1970, she founded *Rivolta Femminile* (Female Revolt), a separatist group, enacting a polemic withdrawal from man's dominated politics. Later, she gave up her leading role to contrast the assumption that her power and knowledge could be used to promote women artists. She became very critical of the whole art system and its values, and beyond. Her need for authentic relationships invested also her private life:

> Since the woman is dialogue, paradise for her is being able to carry on such dialogue with somebody. [...] Women feel very strongly everything that happens to every being [...] while men are induced to ignore these bonds, precisely because they need to feel that they are sole protagonists. [...] The images men have of themselves are outside the relation, while women see themselves within it. Hence the latter are pretty aware of their need for the other, while the former [...] only see their own growth. (Lonzi, 1980, quoted and translated in Melandri, 2010, p. 44).

These words come from the book *Vai pure* (Feel free to go): the chronicle of a four-day conversation with her partner, artist Pietro Consagra, that led to the sharp and painful acknowledgment of their unyieldingly different perspectives and expectations from each other, conducive to their definitive separation. Lonzi could not accept that the artist – "the man" – put his art/himself before life, love, and relationship.

We are learning from feminists, although we oppose radicalism as not helpful in composing polarities and overcoming binaries, of men and women, inside and outside, object and subject. We are looking for a composition, and in this regard our conversation was both academic and deeply personal, embodied and intellectual. It prompted us to look better for the unexpected in our lives, as Gaia who started to recover the stories of women in her family, in search of family myths (Cavarero, 1995). She wrote to us, in an e-mail exchange:

> only in the process of curating a collection of Mezirow's essays (Mezirow, 2016), I discovered that his wife Edee's thriving upon returning to education had such an influence on his theory of transformation! What made me blind to her place in this genealogy?

The role of women in the history of adult education is too often silenced. Internal and external blinders reinforce our dis-attention, nurtured by the values and relationships of patriarchy, as a system of enduring ideas and practices which glorify paternal figures and create heroes, gurus, and followers.

So, we are gradually building a new awareness about our own construction of feminism, and ourselves as women, through our biographies. We did not construct ourselves as *feminists,* as it happened for other women in history. A social identity builds up by interacting, by participating to webs of affiliation. In the Seventies, women became feminist through collective engagement with other women and entrustment, which raised self-consciousness (Scarparo, 2005). The relationship between political and personal was very strong and explicit in those years. For us, instead, feminism entered into our lives in a more academic and intellectual way. The issue, here, is not self-categorization – being or not 'a feminist' - but learning. How do you learn about feminism and how do you become one? *Acting*, as well as *thinking* as a feminist are here at stake.

Aesthetical pedagogy as a performance of possibilities: The power of dialogue

Our project of founding an aesthetical pedagogy combines the experience of art with embodied relationships, writing-as-inquiry, and critical thinking. These are fundamental ingredients, all together, in enacting and plotting paths of transformative learning.
Meeting with art has the power to 'shake us out of our mind sets and offer moments of truth' (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 226); it balances the excess of rationality, individualism, and what Bateson called 'conscious purpose' (1972, pp. 426-447); it overcomes binary discourse by juxtaposing the opposites, without looking for an ultimate truth, master story, or mono-logic perfect idea. Dia-logic and dia-lectic discourse can be enhanced by a piece of art.

An image, a photograph in this case, acts in our lives as an "evocative object" (Bollas, 2009), revealing as well as performing an ongoing unconscious dialogue of self, other, and the world. The artist's perspective awakens and questions ours. So, the search for an authentic, embodied relationship with a piece of art can open possibilities, and start a path of formation and transformation. However, this happens more easily when the dilemmas, hints, memories, questions that are raised become part of a generative conversation.

We see our conversations, based on differences and the will to understand, as a performance of possibilities (Madison, 2012), a way of doing that inspires education not by offering models, instructions, but by triggering movement, creation, and change.

One could argue that a relationship can also happen with a text or with ourselves, reflexively, but we are not totally convinced. When dialogue entails the materiality of the encounter, an aesthetical meeting of bodies and objects in a concrete context, here-and-now, something happens beyond consciousness. Performativity – doing by dialoguing – triggers new subterranean paths of learning. The presence of the Other intrigues, bothers, attracts and defies us. Moreover, a trans-individual mind – *Us* – is created, having agency of its own.

Dialoguing is the best way to reveal oppression and power as intrinsic to social life and human relations, and to question them, at least in the small space of a conversation. We often interpret emancipation as a big leap, such as moving away from an oppressive context or relationship which does not allow an adult – a woman - to think and behave freely or authentically. However, emancipation starts silently, by little steps, and needs ongoing conversations, long-term engagement, resistance and resilience. We need to emancipate from the dominance of abstraction, conscious purpose, and the cognitive over the body and imagination: a form itself of oppression, if a less visible one. Most theories and practices of education systematically ignore the body and senses, the role of emotions and feelings, and the play of unconscious processes in human lives and learning. The aesthetic experience – contemplating a photograph, writing a poem, walking in the woods - enacts knowing in context, that is relational, embodied, and socially constructed, contrasting the hegemonic discourse of adult learning which celebrates awareness, reflection, and agency, over uncertainty, reflexivity, and vulnerability.

Besides, many contemporary artists are strongly subjective, sometimes autobiographical, in their work, but also relational, thought provoking, and socially active. And yet, people go to art exhibitions, enjoy what is displayed, and their life goes on, unchanged. Art itself has no power, until it raises questions and provokes answers. In order to reawaken our systemic wisdom, we need to be questioned more deeply and (re)connect the polarities of binary thinking in a very concrete way.

To be transformative, the aesthetic *experience* has to be exposed to other perspectives within a dialogic context. This is a fundamental tenet of an aesthetic relational pedagogy for adult learning. An adult person is constantly called to (re)position and (re)frame her ideas and actions, in relation to previous, present, and future contexts, and within a dynamic world of (changing) relationships with objects, artefacts, spaces, with the environment, oneself, and the other. We fiercely defend ourselves from learning, as well as from taking responsibility and risks, or leaving our comfort zone. Consciousness, then, is but the first step towards freedom and agency (Freire, 1972). Further steps are needed to lead to a wider sense of self and collective change, maybe through uncomfortable questions and alternative ways of acting and seeing.

We chronicled in this paper how performing a duoethnographic conversation about art, identity, and feminism led us to such a kind of learning. As Spry (2011) wrote:

> Performative autoethnography views the personal as inherently political, focused on bodies-in-context as a co-performative agent in interpreting knowledge, and holds aesthetic craft of research as an ethical imperative or representation… [For me] it has been about dropping down out of the personal and individual to find painful and comforting connection with others in sociocultural contexts of loss and hope (Spry, 2011, p. 498).

The personal *is* political, and vice versa. A transformation seems to be possible only if enacted in the public sphere (Alexander, 2013), through the implementation of disruptive practices and spaces of collective discussion. Performative autoethnography, as a method of inquiry, is firstly self-reflexive and self-subversive, rather than interested in "giving voice" or "helping" others, but it may be, hopefully, contagious in provoking cascade effects when we teach or facilitate cooperative inquiry. Giroux (2001) defines this kind of project as public pedagogy: a creative process of critical learning beyond the sterilizing confines of normative educational discourse.

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