

*We Unleash Storms, Yet We Like the Sun*

Lina Pallotta & Caterina De Nicola

Text by Michele Bertolino, curator of the exhibition

The title of the exhibition "*We Unleash Storms, Yet We Like the Sun*" could be a tag on a wall. Or alternatively it's that poetic phrase that you would stumble upon while scrolling your tumblr feed, so very millennial, or it'd be the kind of *statement* printed on some t-shirt, so very fast-fashion and pseudo-punk. Yet, if we travel back in time and we land in the sunny alleys of Naples in the 70s, we could have heard this very phrase in the midst of those busy streets, shouted at the top of the lungs by students, queers and hippies attending protests in rutilant public squares. Let us retrace the timeline in between: a surge of identity politics worldwide and in the specific case of Italy *the ebb in the private*<sup>1</sup>.

Some contextual elements. The exhibition features works by Lina Pallotta (b. 1955, lives and works in Rome) and Caterina De Nicola (b. 1991, lives and works in Zurich). Two artists who share similar artistic approaches. Photographs dating back to the 90s of Porpora Marcasciano, trans activist and writer, feature alongside embellished walls made of screws and translucent balls scattered on the floor. The never-ending *trip* of a lifetime in a constant process of pushing borders forward placed side by side with the dysfunctional meltdown of once-useful tools.

More contextual elements. It's a herstory of real dreams, utopian practices and wet intimacies. The landscape you are witnessing is reminiscent of the 70s in Italy, *a virtual civil war* (T. Negri), where leftist groups, students, creatives were imagining another world; or, queer and trans groups were making their way out of the closet through a movement of self-narration, mythopoiesis<sup>2</sup> and discovery. *There was a widespread and growing aspiration towards experimenting with new gender models and different forms of sexuality and other infinite variations away from the path that society designated for us* (P. Marcasciano, "L'aurora delle trans cattive", 2018, p. 89). Lina Pallotta and Porpora Marcasciano met on the same side of those barricades in 1976, and they never left each other's side. Despite the distance, they managed to meet in different places, be it the East Village in NYC or in Italy, in Rome, Bologna and Naples. The photos retrace their journey, at once an individual gesture but also a collective effort of self-affirmation, a constant redoing of one's self, *a transito or passage that is at once collective, undefined and infinite as well as movementist* (P. Marcasciano, "L'aurora delle trans cattive", 2018, p. 91). More than 30,000 screws are a

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<sup>1</sup> In the journalistic and political language, the *ebb in the private* describes a specific period in Italian political and social history, around 1978 and 1982, defined by political and social disengagement. The 60s and 70s have been characterized by workers, students and women protests, important reforms (divorce, abortion right, among other) and intense social struggles. At the beginning of the 80s, on the other hand, squares and streets emptied, commercial television and advertising grew, and the economy got better. On the political level, the ideological engagement left space to a more personalized political involvement and to the generalized acceptance of the neoliberal values. Such a historical turn has its counterpart in the reganian policies in the US or the privatizing laws of Thatcher's government.

<sup>2</sup> Mythopoesis literally means the art or ability to invent myths and fables either to explain natural phenomena, or describing individuals' attitudes, or important achievements. This operation has a valuable collective function, since it enables the construction and solidification of community ties. Today, mythopoesis can be understood as a process of self-mythologisation through the rewriting of one's own story. David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan studied the links between mythopoesis and contemporary artistic practices, see: David Burrows, Simon O'Sullivan, *Fictioning. The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2019.

marker of such a *trip*. Their mechanical look signifies a strategy, a wheel in motion and a possible scheming of mischievous opacity and resistance.

The exhibition *We Unleash Storms, Yet We Like the Sun* grew out of an ongoing conversation between the artists and myself on processes of image- and world-making, namely the ways that we collectively make the spaces we inhabit through symbolic practices. How do we resist a system forcing our bodies into becoming carefree and “functional” subjectivities? The *ebb in the private*, the rise of neoliberal rhetoric and politics of identities designed specific paths for different subjectivities: the leather gay, the butch lesbian, the extra-feminine trans woman. Identities split into smaller groups, growingly self-interested and not intersectional. Identities became pragmatic strategies to ask for specific rights, since *the very mechanism of claiming a right, in a certain sense, requires you to assume and guarantee a tendentially stable and normative identity* (L. Ellena and C. Lo Iacono, *Porpora Marcasciano. Gli “ottanta voglia” di frocie lesbiche e trans*, Zapruder, 2010, p. 129). The individual quests for self-expression are tied up in specific types which as *empty simulacra* (are) *put on the market as commodities* (M. Mieli, *Toward a Gay Communism*, p.58). Subjectivities are bought and performed. They became revenue streams, statistical deviations, big data collections able to capture and predict future behaviors: they turned into easily foreseeable profiles, so easily readable that they can be tracked in the blink of an eye. Desires, pleasures, enjoyment and self-appearances turn into conduit for profit. They undergo a process of yassification, even more desirable, more pleasurable, clear and shiny following the aesthetic of the web. Efficacy, compulsion for transparency, quantification, legibility: they all *flatten out the human being itself, making it a functional element within a system* (H. Byung-Chul, *The Transparency Society*, p.3). Again, how do we resist?

De Nicola and Pallotta understand self-construction as an operation of subject-making which opposes the hegemony of the transparent. They both *embrace techniques of becoming dark or opaque in order to better become present in the ways that we want, but without being seen or apprehended* (S. McGlotten, *Black Data. Against the Hegemony of the Transparent*, 2016). They’re given tools: opacity, precariousness, affectivity.

Pallotta’s photographs of Marcasciano trace an unfinished portrait of the trans activist, who – first of all– is a friend, a comrade, and a person. An oblique gaze captures everyday scenes, depicts the evolving body and expands on intimate geographies. A close relationship stands out: the photographer’s eye grows in proximity with her subject, having shared dreams, hopes and struggles. Such photos emerge from a state of uncertainty and precariousness; they opt to be in the margin, embodying *the necessity of a resistance that is sustained by remembrance of the past* and affirmation of a presence (bell hooks, *Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness*, p. 150). They mirror the transient dance of life, the uneasiness of being-out-of-place while projecting an intuitive understanding of the materiality of the body, which is ever-present and just behind the camera lens. Pallotta’s calculated language of image-making eludes the transparency of photography and it differs from the flashing lights of the transparent neoliberal rhetoric of inclusion, the frontal moving gaze. Her photos are grainy, out-of-focus, sometimes overlapping two images together, a moment in-between actions. The clarity is compromised, full comprehension is elusive, yet our attention becomes *distinctively interstitial, unregulated, voluntary and driven by desire* (S. Roseneil, *Foregrounding Friendship. Feminist Past, Feminist Futures*, 2006, p.323). Language is also a place of struggle. In a complicit gesture, we witness Pallotta’s and Marcasciano’s inclination towards one another. We move *athwart*, we get a glimpse of affection: it is our gut driving us. Our presence is a disruption.

De Nicola wears multiple interchangeable masks, engaged with various modes of artistic practice. Her body coagulates in writing, music and art-making. She understands precarity as non-functionality and inadequacy, that which is slightly embarrassing and out-of-place yet affectively self-designed and resistant against an overtly easy assimilation. A systematic normalization occurs in gender technologies<sup>3</sup>, appearance mechanisms, everyday symbols and shared images that successively become void of meaning. This normalization produces a homogenizing and leveling *inferno of the same* (H. Byung-Chul, *The Transparency Society*, p.39). The artist confronts this need for transparency by reaffirming its poor materiality and symbols. Her reaction is an escape route opting for the illegible and unrecognizable. **XXX** is made up of more than 30,000 screws covering an entire wall and a few peripheral sections of the space. The screws lose their primary function, they are futile. Their sheer number gives a sense of the unruly, bringing about an ornamental clumsiness, off-kilter. We stare at the merging of non-functionality and total functionality, whereby one of the photos hangs on the screws. The ornament works as a coping-mechanism since it *has an indeterminate use value that challenges the protocols of capitalism, [...it] represents a certain surplus that allows the viewer a rare and important passage that is more than an escape* (J. E. Munoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 128).

The balaclava is made of steel. Arm yourself, uselessly.

*We Unleash Storms, Yet We Like the Sun* suggests opacity, precariousness and affectivity as reappropriated techniques for the production of the self, as a *transito*. Porpora Marcasciano, whose gaze is omnipresent in Pallotta's works and in sync with the dissident undercurrents in De Nicola's installation, speaks of *transito* (transit) as a form of being. *Transito* is an uninterrupted passage of a human (or non-human) body through space, a body that can't fully be grasped, shapeshifting. An infinite trip in perpetual motion, even when stuck in one place. Marcasciano uses the term when referring to her transition, as a continuous reshaping of her embodied self as well as her understanding of the world. *Transito* does not allow for a definitive shape, and it flourishes in the *brokenness of being, a brokenness [that] is not a prescription for repair*, rather an ensemble of desires, love and proximity.

Let's revert back to the title: *We Unleash Storms, Yet We Like the Sun* presents a dichotomy, on the one hand an inability to stand still and on the other, a withdrawal from transparency. Pallotta and De Nicola reflect upon bodies reduced to their primary presence, a hard materiality, be it the cold steel of the screws, or the warm corporeality of the figure in the photographs. A hard materiality that reshapes desires, reorients hopes and reimagines possibilities. A comfort zone where we can remain. In here we can retrace visionary perspectives. *It ends with love, exchange, fellowship. It ends as it begins, in motion, in between various modes of being and belonging, and on the way to new economies of giving, taking, being with and for and it ends on the way to another place altogether* (J. Halberstam, *The Wild Beyond. With and For the Undercommons*, p.5).

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<sup>3</sup> Gender technologies refers to those strategies and mechanisms used to produce a binary society in Western culture, through medical knowledge, laws, and cultural products (e.g. fashion, music, art). Those technologies define a specific path each body has to abide by: they might be cultural and social narratives of gender costumes, traditions or medical processes. In any case, they represent violent strategies the dominant power uses to construct and maintain a specific order. As an example, Paul Preciado has widely discussed the violence of gender technologies on non-conforming subjectivities or bodies by focusing on intersexual babies. Intersexuality is a group of conditions in which there is a discrepancy between the external genitals and the internal genitals. When a newborn presents this situation, doctors operate by amputating parts of the body in order to make it look like any other bodies in the binary spectrum. See, P. Preciado, *Testo Junkie. Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, The Feminist Press, 2013.