

Clemen Parrocchetti "Handmade Militancy" at ChertLüdde, Berlin

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“Handmade Militancy” presents largely unseen works by Clemen Parrocchetti made during the most heated years of 1970s Italian feminism. Parrocchetti found her visual grammar in the materials of domestic labor—needles, spools, bobbins, cooking utensils, medicaments, textiles—repurposed into the subversive tools of denunciation and protest. Parrocchetti’s work speaks to women’s fights for equal pay, divorce bills and the right to abortion, issues that after almost half a century remain at the center of political debate.

Parrocchetti (1923–2016, Milan) trained at Milan’s Brera Fine Arts Academy while she was already a mother of five. After her academic studies, she became readily involved with militant factions of the Italian radical left. Her nascent feminist voice found expression in works she called *Objects of Feminine Culture*, which she exhibited in galleries and alternative art spaces (including libraries and community or cultural associations). In 1978 she attended *Woman Art Society*, the first national meeting of over 500 culture workers, addressing sexism, the patriarchal art system and feminine versus feminist aesthetics. The event was organized by the Italian Federation of Workers in the Visual Arts, which Parrocchetti was part of, together with the feminist Gruppo Immagine of Varese, active from 1974. Parrocchetti soon joined Immagine with whom she exhibited at the Venice Biennale that year. The group displayed handmade protest banners next door to Mirella Bentivoglio’s first-ever all-women show at the *Biennial Materialisation of Language*.

Presenting works made during these critical years, this exhibition opens with the manifesto *Memorandum for an Object of Female Culture* (1973) that presents inflammatory words of red thread painstakingly sutured onto an aluminum sheet for the “still sub-proletarian” woman “pin cushion/mattress/object.” The manifesto introduces Parrocchetti’s practice of denunciation, calling out against the patriarchal orders that cast women into subservience and subalternity. The manifesto is seminal to the speech she delivered at the *Women Art Society* gathering:

“But my anger towards marginality accumulated over years, served me to unleash a more analytical, minute, close research that liberated me from a large part of male culture, which had, until then, suffocated me. It is while suffering from marginalization, that I developed my discourse on female creativity. For some years now I have been ironically telling the story of women using the simplest means and modest materials, never traditional to male culture. I have criticized women and also excused them when appropriate, but I never pitied them. Instead, I invited them to react, rise up and upset the rules of the game.”

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By using such “modest materials,” drawn from the confines of feminine domesticity, Parrocchetti critiqued and contested female subjugation and objectification. Forsaking the conventional picture frame, traditional to what she terms “male culture,” the works on display include assemblages within plexiglass cases—a core body of work within the artist’s oeuvre. Each piece’s title is a protest slogan designed to incite women to rise up: *Chastity Belt (Watch out for commodification)*, *Under custody and repressed*, *Dreaming gender equality* and *Final alternative: Power to the Widowed*. Within them, we find pins and needles piercing foam-stuffed fabric lips, breasts and vaginas—those sites of the female body where patriarchal violence concentrates itself, and from where women’s protest unleashes.

The case *Metamorphosis of a Procession (Wake Up!)* (1978) captures her vision of women’s insurgent, politicized bodies; it presents a small sisterhood of dolls facing a ringing alarm clock, organizing against the dark oppressive figures that encircle them. Corresponding *Metamorphosis*, the pencil drawing *Wake up!! It’s time* (1978), presents the same alarm clock at the center of the composition. Here we see a form of synecdoche where the many mouths (and other kinds of lips) stand in for the entire female body, waiting to be shaken awake.

While the plexiglass cases contain throbbing mouths waiting to enunciate their titular slogans, her handmade tapestries liberate their cry and open them for conversation, confrontation, communication. *Dialogue* (1978) is composed of two jute hangings with mouth-shaped holes, connected by a red thread embellished with small fragments, scraps of fabric, reminiscent of the decorations on a kite’s tail. Mainly built from raw jute, the tapestries on display are seminal to a body of work that spans over forty years. Like protest banners, these works march on Parrocchetti’s call to resist submission and to affirm a new kind of subjectivity untangled from patriarchal and capitalist structures of control.

For Parrocchetti the perforated fabric is a window into the future where her *Scream towards hope* (the title of her tapestry exhibited at the 1978 Biennial) is materialized *For Life, Always* (on display, 1977). This final tapestry appears in the only video ever made by the artist *My Heart* (1982). An audio-visual proclamation of self-reliance and independence, the video montages footage of streams and forests with headshots of the artist reciting a poem, in turn inspired by the artwork *Artificial Padding* (1982).

Militancy, for Parrocchetti, is something that starts from the private sphere, where forms of violence against women are concealed and perpetrated. The home is also where the artist first recognizes the submission and oppression of subjectivity not just as her own, but all women’s. Her plexiglas cases speak to this nascent awareness that materialized in the domestic tools and body parts enclosed within these shrines. Ultimately, her revolt spills into the public space (whether the street or the gallery) where her work becomes an open and collective declaration of dissent. While her lexicon largely dwells on the home and handmade, on the revolution that starts within, her reflections on militancy as a response to, or a form of, violence extend far into the mundane with references to public figures including the notorious militant and terrorist Ulrike Meinhof. Across her practice, Parrocchetti insists we see the contiguity of private and public resistance.

“Handmade Militancy” is the first exhibition of Parrocchetti’s work outside of Italy since her death. The exhibition is curated by Sofia Gotti and Caterina Iaquinta and it has been possible thanks to the collaboration of the Clemen Parrocchetti Archive.

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