

Born into a family of the Lombard aristocracy, Clemen Parrocchetti (1923-2016, Milan) trained in painting at the Brera Academy, which she graduated from in 1956. Across the 1960s, her painterly style shifted from an existentialist realism to an abstract and surreal language. While partaking in the feminist momentum of the early 1970s, her artistic practice underwent a radical change when she started to use textiles and small household objects in her early assemblages, but above all with the introduction of embroidery. In 1978 she joined the Gruppo Immagine of Varese, with which she participated in the 1978 Venice Biennale - a collaboration that lasted for almost all of the 1980s. Going further in her exploration of textiles and embroidery, the 1980s see her explore the themes of classical mythology with a sensitivity towards the metamorphosing body. In her final decade, Parrocchetti focused on the animal world and her relationship to it, formalized in numerous drawings and paintings.

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Memorandum
for an object of
female culture
composed of spools
bobbins and various textiles
freely embroidered
with thread and ribbon sewn
on a slab encapsulated
in latoplex
denunciation of the condition
of the woman still subproletarian-t
to embroider
attention on the pro
blem of racial discrimi
nation woman sow
be silent woman pin cush
ion woman mattress
for the blows lastly
woman object

Clemen Parrocchetti
Handmade Militancy
Curated by Sofia Gotti and
Caterina Iaquina
28 April - 26 August 2023

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.”

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 plexiglass 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 Iaquina and it has been possible thanks to the collaboration of the Clemen Parrocchetti Archive.

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| 1. <i>Memorandum for an Object of Female Culture</i> , 1973
Embroidery on metal
50 × 25 × 1.5 cm | 8. <i>Wake up!! It’s time</i> , 1978
Graphite, thread on card
54.6 × 38.1 cm |
| 2. <i>Dialogue</i> , 1978
Embroidered jute tapestry
190 × 190 cm / 196 × 187 cm | 9. <i>Under custody and repressed</i> , 1975
Assemblage, embroidery, spools, pins on metal
51 × 51 × 7.5 cm |
| 3. <i>Hope for Equality</i> , 1973
Embroidery, objects, jute on metal slab
ø 50 cm | 10. <i>My Heart</i> , 1982
Video, color, sound
10’ |
| 4. <i>Final alternative: Power to the Widowed</i> , 1974
Assemblage, embroidery, spools, pins on metal
31 × 31 × 6 cm | 11. <i>For Life, Always</i> , 1977
Embroidered jute tapestry
195 × 126 cm |
| 5. <i>Out of the encircled ghetto</i> , 1974
Assemblage, embroidery, spools, pins
50.9 × 50.8 × 5.5 cm | 12, 14, 15. <i>Untitled</i> , 1978-1979
Embroidery, tempera on cardboard
54.6 × 68.6 cm |
| 6. <i>Double service with a pearl tear</i> , 1974
Assemblage, embroidery and spools, pins on metal
51 × 25 × 7.5 cm | 13. <i>Chastity belt</i> , 1976
Graphite, marker, indian ink, collage on paper
54.6 × 74.4 cm |
| 7. <i>Metamorphosis of a Procession (Wake Up!)</i> , 1978
Assemblage, embroidery and spools, pins on metal
21 × 69.5 × 69 cm | 16. <i>Untitled (Boh!)</i> , 1977
Embroidered jute tapestry
200 × 125 cm |
| | 17. <i>Untitled (My anger, my strength)</i> , 1979
Embroidery on paper
65.5 × 50.5 cm |

