

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY: ITALY AND BEYOND

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For scholars engaging with feminism in the Italian context, reckoning with its distinctive intellectual lineage remains crucial, particularly with regard to its sustained dialogue with the philosophy of difference. This trajectory gained momentum in the early 1970s through the work of Carla Lonzi (1931-1982), whose thought proved foundational to the plural and polyphonic development of Italian radical feminism.¹ At its core lies a critical emphasis on sexual difference, understood as neither reducible to biological “sex” nor to the cultural construction of “gender,” but rather «as the inscription of both of these in the symbolic dimension» (Bono, Kemp, 1991, p.16).

In Italy, this conceptualisation became particularly influential from the emergence of the feminist movement through the 1980s, shaping not only theoretical discourse but also political and artistic practices, most notably those rooted in *autocoscienza* (consciousness-raising practices)². In this sense, it offered a distinctive frame through which women’s experience could be articulated beyond dominant heteronormative systems of representation, while also informing aesthetic strategies that sought to reimagine visibility and language as spaces of autonomy, self-definition, and critical intervention. Yet at the same time, this emphasis on sexual difference has also contributed to a certain distance between Italian feminism and other feminist traditions – most notably British and American strands – which have often foregrounded equality-based paradigms or, at times, have critiqued difference theory for its perceived proximity to essentialism³. And

¹ In particular, the two texts from 1970 (*Sputiamo su Hegel*) and 1971 (*La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale*), which over the years have proven to be truly “seminal” works for the discussions that would come to shape the radical feminist debate in Italy.

² The Italian context developed a distinctive form of these practices, whose specific character is already embedded in the term *autocoscienza*, introduced by Carla Lonzi. Rather than simply “raising consciousness” about patriarchal oppression, it refers to a self-directed process through which women both discovered and constructed themselves as political subjects, individually and collectively.

³ See Bono and Kemp (1991, pp.13, 17). See also De Lauretis, T. (1989), *The Essence of the Triangle*, “Differences”, pp.3-37.

while it remains the case that feminism, in its heterogeneous and protean nature, has consistently operated as a critical political force that challenges and unsettles established disciplinary premises without necessarily leading to synthesis or easy resolution⁴, the differentiated epistemological approach that emerges, for instance, when reading the Italian context against other traditions, nonetheless points to a broader methodological tension. Indeed, although a focus on difference enables the articulation of situated subjectivities, it may also complicate the development of shared analytical frameworks across contexts, particularly with regard to the very meaning of “feminism” and the possibility of a common language of “feminist” aesthetics. This challenge is further sharpened by the role of the national frame that, while indispensable for situating women’s experiences within specific historical and cultural contexts, may also become over-determining insofar as it obscures the transnational networks, exchanges, and resonances that exceed it. Crucially, such a dynamic operates not only at the international level but also within Italy itself, where marked regional disparities—particularly pronounced until the postwar period—have generated uneven trajectories in women’s emancipation across social, economic, and cultural domains.

The result is a possible impasse: a fragmentation of feminist discourse that risks limiting the possibility of sustained collaboration across both national and transnational borders. This constellation of tensions gives rise to a set of pressing questions: how might feminist coalitions be forged across these divides without erasing the specificity of local histories? As M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2010, p.27) ask, «can transnational feminist lenses push us to ask questions that are location specific but not necessarily location bound?» And, further, can difference be mobilised as a critical resource to reveal, rather than obscure, both the limits and the productive potential of occupying positions structured around the common goal of attending to absence and intervention (through practices of recovery, revision, redefinition, re-mediation), what Alexandra Juhasz (2001, p.3) has referred to as the «perpetual ‘re’ for things feminist»?

It is in relation to these questions that photography emerges as a particularly productive terrain. As a medium of mediation, inherently relational in its structure—linking photographer, world and viewer—photography, together with its critical discourse, has become a key site of feminist encounter, and a historically privileged space for reconfiguring political meanings around gender, understood not merely as a product of speech but «of watching, looking, seeing, and being seen» (Raymond, 2017, p.4). Within this space, dialogues across difference may be (and have been) sustained without effacing the specificity of situated experience.

⁴ See also Scott (1992, p.51), where a similar dynamic is discussed in relation to women’s history.

A significant instance of the productivity of such encounters was offered by the international conference held in Bologna in September 2025, from which this volume originates, giving rise to the exchanges and debates that shape its contributions. From these interactions emerged a range of approaches to the relationship between the history of photography and feminism, foregrounding the extent to which ‘feminist aesthetics’ is not a fixed or unified framework but rather a dynamic and generative field, whose analytical force derives precisely from its internal tensions and productive dissonances. In this respect, feminist engagements with the history of photography offer not only a critical lens on the medium but also a set of methodological propositions for historiography more broadly. Often beginning from the identification of absences, erasures, and gaps, they move toward questions of positionality and method, developing modes of intervention that, rather than converging on a single “reparative” orientation, treat incoherences and blind spots as constitutive of feminist inquiry itself. In doing so, they resist closure and insist on the provisional, situated, and processual character of (feminist) knowledge production. This heterogeneity, in turn, opens up new ways of thinking about photographs and their makers, while sketching tentative, context-responsive principles for what might be understood as feminist histories of photography.

Across its contributions—written in both Italian and English, in a deliberate effort to sustain dialogue between Italian and international scholarship, and to enact the very principle of difference that underpins the collection—this volume brings together interrelated methodological and historiographical concerns that engage the history of photography from feminist perspectives. Far from proposing a unified field or stable narrative, the essays assembled here articulate a range of interventions in which photography functions simultaneously as a medium of aesthetic investment, a political instrument, and a site of inquiry into archival, institutional, and representational practices. To map this plurality, the collection is organised around multiple, intersecting thematic axes.

A first axis centres on practices of reconstruction and epistemological reflection, as explored in essays that consider the trajectories and impact of research projects that have generated new forms of knowledge and fostered networks around the history of cis- and trans-women’s photography. Starting from a series of nationally grounded yet internationally resonant initiatives: the Italian projects *Fotografia femminista italiana* (Casero, Perna), from which the Bologna conference originated, and *Fotografiste* (Bertelli, Ghezzi), that, although based on different methods and shifting chronological focuses, both critically examine the institutional conditions and processes of legitimation that have shaped women’s photographic practices in Italy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the Portuguese project *WOMENPHOT.PT* (Camanho, Carneiro, Lourenço Marques), that similarly maps and interprets women’s participation in the early

stages of photographic history in Portugal, while also bringing dispersed and vernacular materials into dialogue with wider European networks of circulation and exchange; the Scandinavian research and editorial project *Striving for Independence* (Lien, Sandbye), reconstructing the dense social, affective, and political contexts in which Nordic women photographers (1860-1920) negotiated professional autonomy, social mobility, and participation in feminist struggles; the collection and study of women photographers at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Lachaud); the Japanese context explored in the publication and exhibition *I'm So Happy You Are Here: Japanese Women Photographers from the 1950s to Now* (Takeuchi), which traces shifting regimes of visibility in postwar and contemporary photography in connection to experimental curatorial practices. To these are added archival initiatives that are explicitly activist and community-based, such as the Argentine *Archivo de la Memoria Trans* (Masnatta), functioning as a counter-archive of trans visual memory rooted in collective and reparative practices that oppose earlier regimes of surveillance and pathologization; and the Mexican project *Rosa Chillante* (Tapia), that leverages a feminist archival model grounded in self-management and participatory selection, opening up decolonial and South–South dialogues on visual culture and feminist historiography.

A second axis shifts the focus from nation-bound archival recovery to broader questions of scale, circulation, and infrastructure, bringing together contributions that address global historiographical and methodological questions, alongside theoretical reflections on the feminist gaze (Sanfratello) and feminist philosophy as embodied epistemology (Recchia Luciani). From the impact of world anthologies of women photographers (Robert) to efforts to map and promote women's photobook culture (Lederman), these essays bring into critical focus the productive tension between transnational overview and the specificity of local or medium-based approaches, as well as the cyclical dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, whereby moments of expanded visibility are recurrently followed by institutional, editorial, and market-driven contractions, revealing the instability of photographic canons even within feminist-oriented publishing practices. From a different analytical perspective, the *PhotoMatrix Project* (Balbi, Parkmann, Vítů) combines computational analysis with archival research to investigate photomechanical reproductions, showing how digital tools not only enable large-scale analysis of visual circulation but also reshape questions of authorship, attribution, and visibility, particularly with regard to the often-overlooked contributions of women within complex image-production networks.

By contrast, a third axis moves from the macro-level to the micro-histories of photographic practice, re-anchoring feminist historiography in labour, embodiment, relationality, and everyday forms of visual production. Here, the focus moves from structural

approaches to individual trajectories, through which photography emerges as a materially grounded and industrially structured field, revealing the central yet frequently invisibilised role of women as workers, technicians, and agents within its operative conditions. These encompass labour in photographic industries such as Ferrania (**Plaitano**), and the long histories of commercial studios such as Studio Petri (**Brandinelli**), as well as transnational professional careers such as that of Helga Ebert (**Kappler**) and Laura Salvati (**Fontana**), alongside forms of anthropological and political engagement through the work of Annabella Rossi (**Carelli**). They also include more explicitly embodied forms of photographic perception shaped by fatigue, vulnerability, and collaboration, in which the act of photographing is less a detached visual practice than a form of shared, corporeal witnessing (**Michałowicz, Adamska**), as well as archival practices that extend photographic labour into processes of cataloguing, care, and collective activation (**Ghisu, Ladogana**).

Within the same framework of more fine-grained analysis, foregrounding the rediscovery and reinterpretation of single trajectories yet with a more explicit focus on artistic production, another group of contributions turns to women artists who used photography as a critical, conceptual, material, and political tool in dialogue with feminist visual cultures. Across these case studies, matters of authorship, medium specificity, and transdisciplinarity are continually reworked, alongside issues of sensorial limits, political opacity, and public recognition, including in exhibition contexts (**De Francesco**). Questions of political inscription and cultural translation are brought into focus, for instance, from the posthumous institutional framing of Jo Spence (**Di Bello**), which exposes the paradoxical tension between feminist historiographical visibility and processes of commodification, to the transnational trajectory of Stephanie Oursler (**Caruso, Federici**), developed between early Italian experimentation, US civil rights struggles, and second-wave feminism. In the works of Patrizia Vicinelli (**Subrizi**) and Antonia Pozzi (**Panzavolta, Pozzi**) photography is pushed to the threshold of media difference, between poetry and visuality, functioning both as conceptual reference and as a principle in the processes of subject formation and transformation. This transmedia trajectory extends into the photo-filmic practices of Adriana Monti (**Boyer**), rooted in 1970s Milanese feminist networks and Situationist circles, and into the material and conceptual stratifications of Suzanne Santoro (**Cortesini**), where layering, masking, and reconfiguration unsettle dominant regimes of visibility and articulate a feminist archaeology of images; culminating in more recent ecofeminist photographic practices that interweave environmental exploitation and gender oppression across the Global South and contemporary Italian contexts (**Novaga**).

A further set of concerns emerges around the infrastructures of circulation, which function as key epistemic technologies of feminist political inscription and subject forma-

tion. This fifth axis explores how different formats and editorial platforms—from photo-books to albums, diaries, and magazines—operate not only as tools of documentation, but as active components of political struggle and as vectors for the circulation of resistant imaginaries. This is investigated in contributions that move along the porous boundary between aesthetic research and activism: from analyses of photobooks as experiential and process-based forms of knowledge within feminist consciousness-raising practices (**Della Ventura; Susi; Ravaoli**), to editorial and exhibition projects linked to key episodes of feminist mobilisation (**Rossi**); from the strategies of early autonomous lesbian collectives in Italy, where photography, illustration, and wall writing become instruments for presencing lesbian subjectivity and political visibility (**Corsini**), to the visual chronicles of feminist occupations and processes of collective narration (**Genovesi**).

In relation to this broader aim of redefining the conditions of feminist visibility and its political meaning, a final axis focuses on reportage and documentary practices as transnational registers of political and affective exchange circulating across geographical, media, and ideological borders. Augusta Conchiglia's experience in Angola situates photography at the intersection of anti-colonial struggle and solidarity networks between Italy and the MPLA (**Ricozzi**), while Mirella Ricciardi's work between Kenya, Italy, and the United Kingdom (**Ferraro**) and Anna Maria Maiolino's experience of displacement, which operates as a generative matrix for visual experimentation wherein fragmentation and bodily recomposition articulate a migrant subjectivity across Italy, Venezuela, Brazil, and the United States (**Benedetti**), open onto a broader geography of photographic practice shaped by movement, translation, and political entanglement. This also includes the feminist visual cultures of the Ūman Ribu movement in Japan, through the work of Matsumoto Michiko (**Cavazzuti**), as well as Spanish transition-period practices in the work of Pilar Aymerich and Anna Turbau, which document forms of embodied participation across protest, institutional settings, and marginal environments (**Mercader**).

Taken together, these contributions—despite their diversity but also through their internal coherence—show that the relationship between photography and feminism cannot be delimited as a discrete field of inquiry, but is more productively understood as a historiographical problem in motion, whose object is never given a priori but is continually constituted through shifting relations among practices, institutions, networks, and regimes of visibility. Across these intersecting registers, a feminist history of photography emerges as a methodological practice in formation, attentive to its own partiality and to the necessarily unfinished nature of its objects of study.

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