



Ketty La Rocca

LE MIE PAROLE

A pioneer in the territory of visual poetry, Ketty La Rocca (La Spezia, 1938 – Florence, 1976) brought together in the course of her career those groundbreaking lines that started in the Italian neo-avant-garde of the 1960s and were to culminate during the following decade. The rejection of neo-realist sentimentalism and the deconstruction of female stereotypes are characteristic features of her works.

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In punta di piedi
ho versato dell'acqua
nell'orecchio,
ho atteso l'onda.
Nessuna barca
Contiene le mie mani,
ogni mio legno si schianta
dal mio caldo.¹

“You have accepted the symbols of official culture, but you have transformed them into symbols that have become their own.”² With these words Ketty La Rocca (La Spezia, 14 July 1938 – Florence, 7 February 1976) took her stance and warned us of the dangers of so-called Western culture. To delve into Ketty La Rocca's creations is to rise to a challenge: the very same one that she accepted throughout her life.

After completing her studies in teaching in 1956, Ketty La Rocca settled in Florence, where in the early 1960s she started to become interested in visual poetry and met Camillo (Lelio Missoni) and Eugenio Miccini, founders, together with Lamberto Pignotti, of Gruppo 70, one of the “verbo-visual” expressions of the Italian neo-avant-garde.³ As of 1964 La Rocca began to make collages, cutting photographs and words out of

¹ “On tiptoe / I have poured water / into my ear, / I have waited for the wave. / No boat / is in my hands, / each of my timbers crashes / from my heart.” SACCÀ, Lucilla. “Inedito, 1971”, *Ketty La Rocca. I suoi scritti*, Martano, Turin, 2005, p. 32. Our translation.

² SACCÀ, Lucilla. “Estratto della trascrizione della registrazione avvenuta fra Ketty La Rocca e l'amica Verita Monselles”, *Ketty La Rocca. I suoi scritti*, op. cit., p. 140. Our translation.

³ Gruppo 70 was born in 1963 during the Florence convention *Art and Communication* and *Art and Technology* with the aim of starting a sort of semi-ological war against the mass communication system. With an interdisciplinary spirit, its members focused on empowering artistic language through the synergies occurring between the various expressive codes in order to somehow agglutinate the immediacy and communicational effectiveness of speech and advertising. Visual poetry experiments with the possibility of establishing a relationship between culture and mass communication through a synthesis in the form of collage, a mixture of words and images/writing and painting that takes on new symbolic meanings. Under these premises they created a new complex and heterogeneous system built on the union of a verbal and iconic logic.

advertisements in popular culture magazines. She worked in active collaboration with the group from 1966 until 1968, when—as the artist herself tells in one of her letters—a split arose among some of its founders. Parallel to this, she took courses in electronic music and worked in a radiology practice, a fact that probably influenced some of her subsequent works.

Nevertheless, we should not forget her beginnings as a primary school teacher because, as she herself confessed, this experience awoke in her an interest in the problem of language in relation to power and the construction of unconsciously assumed roles. In a 1962 text La Rocca revealed some of her preoccupations regarding the attitude shown by schoolchildren when they are unable to break the canons and what is expected of them. The artist recounted how they are incapable of expressing themselves freely, and how they somehow follow learnt patterns, not allowing themselves to step outside them. This was precisely an attitude that she avoided throughout her life, by striving to break out of stereotypes and committing herself to expressive autonomy. In this way, within Gruppo 70 La Rocca blazed an autonomous and individual path based on interests that brought together her concerns regarding the new theories of communication and language. In fact, we can say that the stuff of her theoretical core in her beginnings was built on Marshall McLuhan's texts on communication and the information society and the theories developed by Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco on the limits of language.

Reflection on technological poetry and an insight into the legacy of the avant-garde in the field of collage gradually gave rise to a poetic understanding of the fragment. La Rocca started working with the technique adopted by the Florence-based group, but soon added her own elements reflecting the search for other meanings. In fact, we find a notable influence of Claude Lévi-Strauss's book *The Savage Mind*, published in 1962. The artist made several references to the book, not only in her personal writings but also in the presentation to her 1971 project entitled *In principio erat*. At this point the artist began to show interest in tribal communities, with the aim of explaining and exploring the subject of gestural language. For Ketty La Rocca, the symbolic, magic and fantastic elements of these communities had a direct influence on collective life, shaping

behavioural structures. In one of her reflections on language, La Rocca wrote how, unlike in these cultures, in Western thought all those elements have been cancelled or directly relegated to a private sphere.⁴ In this same period, we can also perceive the influence that her reading of Freud and Jung may have had on her work. The artist was interested in the emotional part concealed behind messages, especially taking into account what she called 'language of the alienated'. Her desire was none other than to understand some of the aberrations performed in structures that were regarded as normal. This was why her creative processes were aimed at destabilising the current configurations of the verbal and iconic materials that form the communicative foundations of her contemporaneity. The exercise performed by La Rocca caused a sort of structural break that can clearly be read as a political action, and at the same time comes close to a conceptualisation on montage. La Rocca surmounted the surrealist legacy based on automatism and focused on the rebuilding of unity through structuralist theory. According to this theory, fragments cluster together following what is known as the minimum difference principle.

The collages of this period reflect, as we were saying, an interest in the technique of montage, a procedure that brought La Rocca's conceptual universe into contact with the proposals made by the group of experimental writers called Gruppo 63.⁵ Some of the direct influences are to be found in Umberto Eco and Nanni Balestrini, the publisher of all the group's works in this period.

Although it is not difficult to follow the experimental line that leads us to George Eliot or Ezra Pound, La Rocca's particular combinatory technique, when blending technological

⁴ SACCÀ, Lucilla. "Inedito The Ketty La Rocca Estate 1971-1972, data proposta in relazione agli studio sul linguaggio svolti in questo periodo", *Ketty La Rocca. I suoi scritti*, op. cit., p. 127.

⁵ Gruppo 63 was a literary movement belonging to the Italian neo-avant-garde. It was created in Palermo in October 1963 after a conference held in Solunto by a number of young intellectuals. The group, comprising poets, writers, critics and scholars moved by the desire to experiment with new forms of expression, wanted to make a break with the traditional structures of Italian literature and its members were characterised by an attitude that was close to the ideas of Marxism and structuralist theory. They rejected defined rules and upheld experimentation with both linguistic forms and their content.

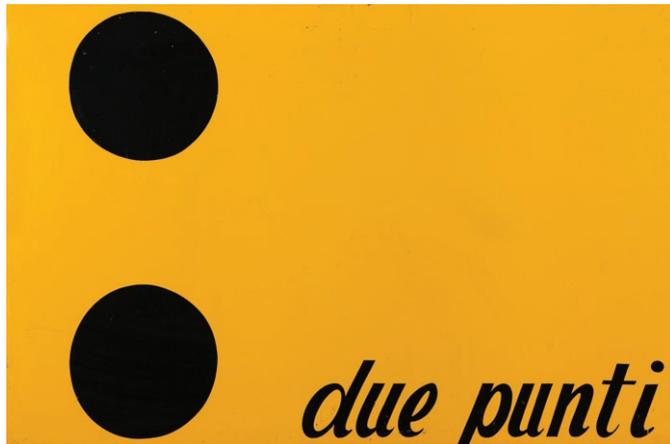
languages of diverse origins in reference to the linguistic question, focuses our attention on new cinematographic proposals that nourish any artistic expression that consists in making a reflection on language. In fact, it follows the lead given by Umberto Eco with the publication of *Opera aperta* (1962), showing how an indeterminate element appears and facilitates dialogue in the construction of any expressive manifestation.

As of 1966, Ketty La Rocca began to participate in numerous group exhibitions and performances, and also to do a great deal of theoretical and poetic work. As we will see, this period coincided with the discovery of her illness, a circumstance that was to lead her to construct an increasingly personal and autonomous language.

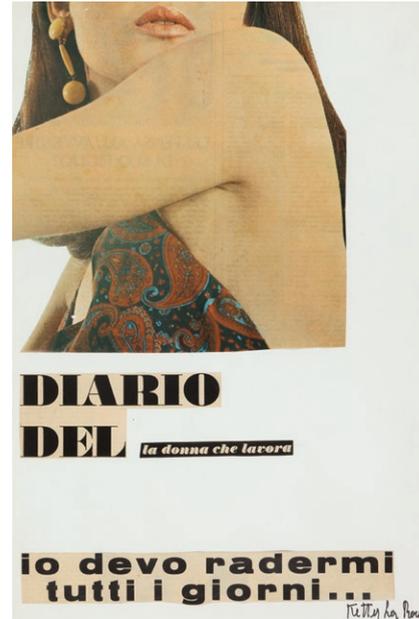
Although we should bear in mind that some theoreticians have placed her in a certain minimalist movement, it is inescapable to consider her work as originating from synaesthetic roots. We could talk of a sort of minimalist synaesthesia that has its place in works in which La Rocca cuts out human figures and objects following their outline, with the aim of making analogies with the letters of the alphabet. The artist starts from the image of the female body, understanding it as a commodified object, transforming it into a figure-sign, in some way anticipating her subsequent work with hands. These cut-out figures that appear in her collages are directly related to the large-format PVC letters of the alphabet she created in 1969. It is no coincidence that the verticality of the human body mirrors the letter 'i' in the word 'io' and the letter 'j' in the word 'je' ('I' in Italian and French). The background of these collages is always neutral, often black, highlighting the paradoxical nature of some of the brief messages that accompany the image. The whole creates an impact produced by the contrast between the iconic-verbal elements. The stark, caustic syntagmata are interspersed with the image and succeed in revealing themselves as aphorisms. We should not forget that in these pieces photography takes on the meaning of the Duchampian ready-made, producing almost instantaneous materials of visual consumption which, in conjunction with the brevity of the message, reinforce the function of the aphorism, understood as the possibility of not being the truth but revealing it.

The irony that increasingly characterised Ketty La Rocca's work adopted the dimension of nonsense, always presented in





Artist's statement, 1971
Two dots, 1969



The guerrilla war, 1964-65
Diary of the working woman, 1964-65



refined forms. La Rocca, aware of the trail left by an aesthetic of the absurd in her work, engaged in spontaneous or automatic processes characteristic of a child's mind. In fact, in a letter she sent to Lucy Lippard, in answer to the latter's question about the words used in her *Riduzioni* she explained that her texts are always nonsensical, a sort of paradox of language. Even if we consider her iconic-verbal works of a political bent, she manages to put across a poetics of nothingness that emphasises the disarticulation between image and word that in turn becomes metalanguage. As Ada De Pirro points out in one of her texts on La Rocca's work, nonsense is related to the tradition of the limerick, a technique which was born in Ireland and from there spread to the Anglo-Saxon countries.⁶ La Rocca may have been familiar with limericks through the *Enciclopedia dei ragazzi*, for which many of them were translated.

If we concentrate on her poetry, we continue to find this mark of nonsensicality. Her writing draws from artistic experience and an acquaintance with the experience of the neo-avant-garde poets. In her poetic texts we find fragments of phrases and isolated syntagmata with no apparent link between them.⁷ For La Rocca there is no distinction between the advertising slogans we find in her collages and the poetic statements that appear in her writings. The whole comes to impinge, once again, on the interest the mass media hold for her. The manipulation she wields through language plays a significant role and becomes a stimulus for consciousness with a view to liberating it.

In this context, La Rocca felt the need to abandon book pages and collage cards. Wishing to reach a wider audience, she

⁶ The limerick is a form of poetry that originated in Ireland. It consists of five lines with a strict rhyme scheme: AABBA. It generally has a humorous function, and is often obscene.

⁷ "100 lavatrici col buco nero rotondo perfetto. Da ogni buco un uomo precipita, l'abito a doppio petto è irrestringibile. La cravatta firmata, la bocca aperta e anche le gambe e la braccia, è ancora disponibile, il cucciolo bastardo si annoia, gira la testa, non sa il ridicolo suo esserci con il secchiello, in bocca sul panchetto non pretende, di essere patetico, tutto è perfettamente razionale" ["100 washing machines with a perfect round black hole. From each hole a man falls, his double-breasted suit is non-shrink. His signed tie, with his mouth open and his arms and legs too, is still available, the bastard puppy is bored, it turns its head, it can't ridicule it there with the bucket, with its mouth on the bench it does not attempt, to be pathetic, everything is perfectly rational"], unpublished poem, in SACCÀ, Lucilla. *Ketty La Rocca. I suoi scritti*, op. cit., p. 40.

started to make advertising posters that she placed on walls in public spaces. In the same way, she embarked on a type of work done on metal advertising hoardings. This was how she created some of her urban signage pieces, into which she introduced ironical and ambiguous messages. In fact, as Eco observed, street posters are a good example of mass communication for educational and civic purposes, as they stimulate drivers and pedestrians from an emotional point of view. Around 1967 her interest in the word became even more radical, as we can see in *Verbum Parola Mot Word*, where the image gives way to the word. The enigmatic compositions of the street posters find a match in the collage *Il mito ci sommerge* (*The Myth Engulfs Us*), created a few years earlier. In fact, if we take an overall view of her works, we can see a narrative thread running through all of them. A sort of personal universe in which everything that happened in her life appeared and reappeared without regard to any timeline. Interests, stimuli and obsessions that constantly fed her creative capacity. Despite the variety of different techniques used up until then, all her works address matters that in the great majority of cases fall into three main issues: the role of women, the role of the church and north-south discrimination in contemporary societies. Indeed, her preoccupation with her condition of womanhood was to accompany her throughout her life, as is shown by a letter to Lippard in 1975 in which she says: "I enclose some photos with texts I have written and, for the sake of curiosity, a text on my position as a woman. In Italy at least, being a woman and doing my work is still incredibly difficult."⁸

As of 1968, La Rocca focused much of her investigation on the relationship between the function of communicative language and gesture. Just as Bruno Munari had published *Supplemento al dizionario italiano* in 1963, La Rocca's enquiries were also ahead of their time in the assertion of gesture understood as an authentic and primordial element. She not only recovered its importance, but also condemned how consumer society had lost its perception, its understanding, and had dissipated the ability to read and express it. In particular,

⁸ SACCA, Lucilla. "Lettera a Lucy Lippard, estate 1975", *Ketty La Rocca. I suoi scritti*, op. cit., p. 143. Our translation.

La Rocca considered hands to be senders of involuntary messages, and so embarked on a new type of work in which hands were presented autonomously and uniquely, as she showed in *The Artist's Statements* of 1971. These interests account for some of the television broadcasts entitled *Nuovi Alfabeti* that she created in the same year. These experimental programmes, which targeted people with hearing disabilities, were an invitation to think about disability in a broader and more transgressive way.

In 1972 she exhibited *Il libro a mano*, a project that months later she was to include in *In principio erat* during the 36th Venice Biennale. In the same Biennale, La Rocca presented the video *Appendice per una supplica* in the performance and video section, curated by Gerry Schum. In both works, hand movements indicate the immediate understanding of a gesture construed as a sign. A simple, authentic gesture that appeals to all those signifieds and signifiers that the linguistic manipulation of culture has cancelled. In the face of the veracity of the simple, naked sign, the language of the media reveals itself to be artificial and false, something which in a way remains true today and enables us to talk of a visionary attitude with regard to the mass media.

As of this period, her career can be interpreted as an immersion within the corporeal. Through photographs, videos, calligraphies and interventions using a variety of media, the body came to occupy a central place in her works. We should differentiate this from those artistic expressions in the sphere of body art, as the body that awoke her interests entered into a dialogue with a sort of semiotics of the body, as Lea Vergine accurately interpreted in her seminal book *Il corpo come linguaggio*, rather than with other forms in which the body becomes a medium of expression, while at the same time appealing to it as an artefact. From that moment on, La Rocca's working method is reaffirmed on the basis of the differentiation between action and documentation. Although she was contemporary with the theories that conceived of the artist's body as an artistic object, she drew a distinction between them and maintained a distance from these definitions and the possible interpretations derived from the fact of working with different media. All the investigations that she made through the dialogue between body and work took into account the importance of the receiver, that is,

the audience and all the elements or senders that form part of the space in which the action takes place.

In turn, her performances sought the tipping point between the dialogue of oral communication and physical action through a visual resolution underscoring the communion between them, as is made patent by the performance she staged in collaboration with Giordano Falzoni during the 10th edition of the Quadriennale d'Arte, *La Ricerca estetica dal 1960 al 1970*, held in Rome in 1973.⁹ In fact this piece, entitled *Dal momento in cui*, practically unknown to date, can be seen as a variant on the more widely studied *Le mie parole, e tu?* The latter, consisting of a series of photographs, and the video *Appendice per una supplica* evince her search for a universal language based on handwriting and gestures. Her reflections led her to a zero degree of forms of expression with the aim of building an authentic language that would enable her to affirm her identity.

During this period, she participated in numerous group exhibitions both nationally and internationally, through which she came into contact with creations and artistic proposals by other artists. Ketty La Rocca saw one of the photographs by Manzoni at the exhibition *La Ricerca estetica dal 1960 al 1970*, in which Manzoni can be seen signing a model who poses like an ancient sculpture. This photo caused La Rocca to initiate a new investigation on the relationship between the body and classical statuary. This was the starting point of a large part of her *Riduzioni*, which marked her return not only to her political interests but also to the practice of automatic writing. This new channel led her to a sort of disintegration of the image; whereas on the one hand, she maintained that original sense whereby the outline prevails, on the other she replaced any iconic reference with an automatic calligraphy, as is clearly reflected in the works *Fidel*, *Golda Meir* and *Moshe Dayan*, all created in 1974.

Parallel to this, she developed another type of work based on the use of x-rays of her own body. Bearing in mind this period and relating it to the course of her illness, we are struck by a certain phantasmagorical presence that conjures up not only death but also an exercise of an introspective radicalness

that is seldom witnessed. In an interview she gave around that time, Ketty La Rocca stated not only that she was aware of her imminent death but also that it was possible not to fear it and to highlight it. She talked of how most people have some x-ray or other of their own body at home, an image of our body to which we attach less importance than a passport photo. However, she wondered whether the first of the two might be much more personal and truthful, something which in some way points metaphor-like to our innermost being. Again La Rocca was drawing attention to the lack of transparency and sincerity through the use of her secret bodily images, unafraid to show herself and display that self that she summoned so often through her works. Her intense, subtle *Craniologie* point to this need to combine image and word in favour of our innermost thought, in a dialogue that is as ephemeral as flesh. This fleeting nature of the body contrasts with the permanence of the x-ray itself and the ability of photography to live on in time. As Roland Barthes endorsed, our capacity to contemplate a photo leads us to an intimate experience that is bound to the idea of death. At the end, we stand before some x-rays of her skull, which conceal her hand inside it. The process she used to produce them reveals her thought and her anxieties. Again her nonsense writing outlines the image: the automatic sign prevails while the trace of the corporeal vanishes. We are aware that this same image is a reminder of our finite existence.

Imma Prieto Carrillo

⁹ We wish to thank the Fondazione La Quadriennale di Roma for allowing us to show this video in the exhibition.

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