

# In dialogue: for an approach to activist curating.

LEUZZI, L.

2023

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**LAURA LEUZZI**

## In Dialogue: *for an approach to activist curating*

In 1997 Italian feminist philosopher and thinker Adriana Cavarero published *Relating Narratives*, a study elaborating a fundamental theory about identity and selfhood<sup>1</sup>. According to Cavarero, expanding from Hannah Arendt's view of the key role of other as the most appropriate narrator, to be human is to have a 'narratable self' with a unique life-story and a desire to be narrated. Thus, we are able to perceive ourselves as 'narratable selves' with a unique story. Even when we are not aware of it, the selfhood that emerges from someone's story is exposed and inevitably bound to the other who tells our story back to us. Therefore, narrating ourselves is a relational process: only by virtue of the narration/relation process is autobiographical narration possible. These ideas and concepts have inspired me greatly in the last few years in my work as a researcher and curator committed to telling untold stories and uncovering materials that had previously been marginalised.

Feminist video artworks from the 70s and 80s, that have been off the radar for many years, are often based on personal stories, matters related to identity and personal experiences: they have a unique biographical quality or trait, as expressed in the motto "the personal is political". They reflect political and civic visions, and battles for human rights

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<sup>1</sup> A. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood*, London/NY: Routledge [1997] 2000.

and recognition, many of which we are still fighting today. Inspired by Cavarero's attention to how personal narratives are formed through a relational process, in the past few years I have utilised interviews, dialogues and salons as a powerful tool to collect/create memories with women video artists and curators, to explore and engage on a deeper level with their works, beliefs and ideas. I am convinced that spending time with them has enabled me to collect their oral histories - professional and personal alike - which otherwise would be lost to scholarship - in both a formal and a spontaneous way, and thus adopt a fresh perspective on their various works and practice. It has been of fundamental importance for me to narrate back their stories and engage theoretically with their practice through my writing as well as in a curatorial capacity. That familiarity, friendship and intimacy, feared though these things are in some sectors of academia and in the associated scholarship, offered me a way into the work and stimulated reflection and inspired me to find new strategies when engaging with and mediating the work as an author and curator. Ultimately, for me listening became the first act in curating. These interviews, conversations and memories (or written memories if the artist was not available) became the basis for experimenting with curatorial practices that

incorporate text, dialogue, and speech and with the critical material that accompanied them. In my practice and research, I aim to retain the artist's word in performances (even when voiced by another performer) and my writing, in the hope that it will accompany the artwork in its life, in its iterations, in re-enactments, in exhibitions, in performative screenings and at events, as well as becoming a primary source for academic writing. This approach has served as a way to mediate the work, by deploying its context and story, and I have found it to be a useful approach to artworks that bear witness to, and are grounded in feminist approaches. Through this approach the message of the work can thereby be expanded, and the audience enabled to engage with it on a deeper level. Ultimately, I try to maintain a non-hierarchical stance, and to form a relationship with activist artists and fellow curators that will hopefully inspire and lift all of us.