

Linda Bertelli, Martina Cavalli

“We consider incomplete a history that was formed on the non-perishable traces”.

Figures and gestures of contingency in contemporary artistic practices

Abstract

This essay explores the intersection of contingency and aesthetics in contemporary artistic practices, challenging the historical dichotomy between reason and fact, and between necessity and contingency. Through the lens of Italian feminist thought, particularly the work of Carla Lonzi, it examines how contingency can redefine aesthetic gestures and suggests the concept of “dynamic liminality” as the conceptual operator of such redefinition. The study identifies four main components of “dynamic liminality” – instability, repetition, impermanence, and unproductiveness – showing how contemporary artists like Nao Bustamante, Marcel Broodthaers, Chiara Camoni, Lucia Cristiani, Peter Fischli & David Weiss, Laura Grisi and Beatrice Meoni embody these concepts. Their works demonstrate the critical and transformative potential of contingency, proposing an aesthetics that embraces transient, unstable, and unproductive elements as essential to artistic expression and cultural critique.

Keywords

Contingency, Dynamic liminality, Italian feminist thought

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1. Introduction*

Modern thought has been structured on the opposition between the truth of reason and the truth of fact, as well as, consequently, between the necessary and the contingent. For the discourse of contemporary aesthetics, which in many ways questions the cornerstones of modernity, this opposition has ceased to be considered legitimate and philosophically justifiable. The consideration of the emergence of configurations of meaning from contingency has led, for example, in the paths of phenomenology, post-structuralism, and feminism, to questions about the conditions of possibility of a knowledge of contingency and the event that does not constantly fall back on the side of the empirical, the spurious or the impure, the heterogeneous and the transient as opposed to the dominant side of the rational, the formal, the pure, the homogeneous and the imperishable that has claimed the right to constitute itself as the dominant regime of truth.

If the history of Western rationality has above all been the imposition of structured rules and hierarchies of concepts with which to define *de facto* hierarchies in the world, the contemporary space of the aesthetic and the discourses with which it has been both formed and described has emerged as a conflictual space towards such hierarchies, sometimes even as a space of subversion. On the other hand, there would be no subversion without the recognition that the structural transformation of meta-physical hierarchies is played out not secondarily on the sphere of the aesthetic as a sphere in which contingency is taken up, examined, and performed as the promise of another possible configuration of the world.

Aesthetic subversion, by means of a reconsideration of contingency, calls into question the encoding (or recoding) of the aesthetic gesture, which is removed from its constitutive tension towards the ideal and the eternal. From this perspective, an aesthetics of contingency could only place itself on the side of the rejection of all classicism, thus proposing itself as a linguistic and formal experimentation rooted in the terrain of

* This essay was jointly conceived, discussed, and developed in all its parts by the two authors, who share equal responsibility for it. Regarding the drafting of the text, the Introduction (1), the preface to section 2, and subsection 2.1 were written by Linda Bertelli; subsections 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, and the Conclusions (3) were written by Martina Cavalli. Unless otherwise stated in the footnotes, all translations are by the authors. The title – "We consider incomplete a history that was formed on the non-perishable traces" – is a quotation from Carla Lonzi (1974: 16).

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dynamic materiality, on the one hand, and that of semelfactivity, on the other, thus reaching as far as the experiences of performance, whereby the semelfactive, that is, that which happens for one and only one time, is prepared and staged. This has also entailed a revision of the temporality of the work and the experience of its fruition since the work has *ipso facto* ceased to be inscribed in the register of stability and permanence in order to take shape as a paradoxical event that can be repeated insofar as it is singular each time, identical to itself but always other than itself, according to a logic of differential variations that appears to be all the more indispensable for grasping the meaning of art of contingency.

Starting from these premises, in the following essay, we will adopt a theoretical and methodological perspective generally much less used in this field: the Italian feminist thought of the so-called second wave (Bracke 2014; Hecker, Ramsey-Portolano 2023; Lussana 2012), trying to show how it has contributed in a relevant way to open up and elaborate an aesthetics of contingency, not only for the historical reasons, already extensively analysed (Casero 2020; Casero 2021; Perna 2013; Simi 2024; Ugolini 2022), of relation and interweaving, from its beginnings, with the experiences of the artistic avant-gardes of the post-World War II period, but also for theoretical reasons. More specifically, guiding our analysis will be the idea of deculturation as proposed by the founder of one of the first groups of Italian feminism in the 1970s, “Rivolta Femminile”, the art historian and thinker Carla Lonzi (1931-1982) (Lafer 2020; Ventrella, Zapperi 2021). This notion – which envisages the deconstruction and refusal of any artistic praxis based on the myth of the artist as a solitary producer and on the mythologisation of the work as the product of this praxis – is, in fact, closely linked to the way Lonzi articulates the relationship between art and life, which is particularly relevant to the meaning of contingency, in its link with the aesthetic field, that we intend to bring forward.

A passage contained in Carla Lonzi’s diary, *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una femminista* (Lonzi 1978) – thus in a writing that tests the boundary between the personal and the intimate, on the one hand, and the public on the other – presents a decisive junction, in Lonzi’s work, as far as the definition of an aesthetics of contingency is concerned. The subject of the piece is a hypothesis concerning the possibility of documenting feminine gestures, especially what Lonzi calls “the gestures of sustenance of humanity”: gestures repeated by women for generations, they are the sensitive, yet invisible, weave of that same order that has placed women in a materially and symbolically subordinate condition in relation to men:

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Again I felt like making small films about the gestures of women who provide for the sustenance of mankind: cleaning up, looking after children, the sick, etc. The title 'Women's Culture of the sustenance of humanity' [...]. I would like to film the gestures to highlight the skill and the plotting of experience they require [...]. I would like to film those that do not become a product, but only a caring. Gestures in the air like those of acrobats, gestures made of air. On these gestures without following is built our life. (Lonzi 1978: 763, 767)

Although the passage is extremely clear, it is very dense and, in our opinion, it is worth analysing it in order to identify some core concepts for an aesthetics of contingency that allows us to understand certain forms of contemporary artistic practices, the developments of which we will analyse in the following sections.

Lonzi's quotation, in fact, calls into question aesthetics in its operative, technical, and critical aspect since it intends to make visible those female gestures that belong to the dense texture of everyday experience and do not aspire *per se* to the values traditionally and constitutively attributed to the work of art. From this perspective, aesthetic reflection considers the gesture in its contingency as that which eschews any attribution of aura and its symbolic and economic valorisation. In this sense, following Lonzi's distinction between what is "product" and what is, instead, "care", the contingent gesture is an-economic because it precedes any form of production, whether material or symbolic (Bertelli 2021). The contingent gesture produces nothing except the web of relations in which it is inscribed. If the dominant code of the economic devalues the contingent gesture, which is the institution of the relationship itself, then Lonzi's suggestion seems to be to learn to recognise it again in order to make it visible in the centrality it occupies in our experience. The unproductive precedes production itself and there is no production in the strictly economic sense that is not instituted by removing the unproductive, subordinating it to itself, placing it at the margin of the symbolic field. On the contrary, the process indicated by Lonzi consists precisely in recognising the power of the removed as excess with respect to the code in force and its logic (Bertelli 2021).

Lonzi poetically connotes the contingent gesture, calling it a "gesture in the air" or "gesture made of air". In fact, what the gesture expresses has the same consistency as air: it does not persist but is unstable and transitory. Therefore, it cannot but be constantly repeated in its force, establishing the very order of the relationship. What Lonzi thus seems to indicate is the very close link between contingency and repetition since

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only that which is repeated establishes itself in its uniqueness and originality. The contingent gesture, thus, operates through the effects it produces, effects of care, of relationship, of opening up the world, which are not intended to be a work of art since they trace the very sphere in which their meaning emerges. In other words, they are paradoxical gestures insofar as they circumscribe an opening of meaning that will soon be saturated by the meanings attributed to them as minority, subordinate, marginal, or liminal. In this perspective, the artistic experiments that have staged these characters of contingency and the gesture that is linked to it share the critical and reflexive vocation of Lonzi's aesthetic project. They are forms of experimentation that investigate the sense of change, transformation, and transience by observing it in its making. The expressive gesture of contingency is thus acknowledged, circumscribed, performed, repeated in its structural fragility, in the ever-present danger of its failure and non-resolution.

2. Contingency as a dynamic liminality

As we have lined out, this idea of contingency is very much linked to a posture, a way in which we act in the world and in which we react to the experience offered to us. Connected to this very definition, we propose to call this specific stance or attitude as "dynamic liminality", an expression that translates the concept of "bilico" in the Italian language, meaning a state in which a body is in a borderline position at the intersection of different states – gestures "like those of acrobats", mentioned by Lonzi in the passage just referenced. Such a state of the body is spatially connotated and it expresses the idea of movement in its connection to time in its unfolding, in a tension in which the effort to stay in place is almost invisible but consistent. The kind of balance acquired by this tautness is made by a succession of movements and gestures that prove meaningful in their subsequent articulation and only in that circumstance. This is a precarious deportment, one of uncertainty, transitory by nature, from which one is able to overflow, to possibly lose balance, to have conscious involvement in this falling. This dynamic liminality is composite and many-sided, it is not monolithic in its occurrence but rests on various hinges, different forms in which it can be adopted and performed.

In an attempt to reconstruct a phenomenology, to narrate the many ways in which Western contemporary artistic practices from the Sixties have been questioning and reflecting on it, we set out to observe how

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artists work, from what specific angle they approach the complex interactions that dynamic liminality activates in experience. Reflecting on the various sides contemporary artistic practices have been focusing on, we propose a division in what we propose as dynamic liminality's four main components: instability, repetition, impermanence, and unproductivity. Furthermore, we will discuss the work of artists who explore that specific category in an effort to show how all these contribute to the construction of the meaning of the concept.

2.1. *Instability*

The concept of instability can be understood first of all in the sense of disequilibrium in the physical sense, as the precarious and fleeting state of equilibrium to which a body is subjected when exposed to opposing forces. This play of counteracting forces has the physical body as its theatre and place of application. The body thus finds itself actively operating as a set of opposing forces in such a way that a fragile equilibrium can be achieved. Equilibrium is the momentary synthesis of this play when the sum of these forces is zero. In this way, the concept of instability is linked to that of impermanence, which we will present later. If the classical model of permanence is the statue, with its concentrated gravity and preponderant materiality, the model of instability, on the other hand, is represented by the tightrope walker or acrobat, whose distinctive trait is the levity of the body, achieved through a complex series of pushes and counter-pushes. The union of instability and impermanence also brings out the temporal dimension of instability, which is embodied in the instant in which the precarious synthesis takes place as a fleeting event. While the model of the statue implies a time that expands to the eternal, at its opposite, the model of the acrobat finds its *raison d'être* in the temporality of the instant. Placing oneself in a state of imbalance compels the body to engage in subtle movements to achieve consistency. Intentionally looking for physical precariousness demonstrates an openness to the unforeseen and embracing the inherent risks of uncertainty, even to the extent of eventual collapse. The Chicana artist Nao Bustamante (b. 1969) (Alvarado 2018; Fusco 2005; Gutiérrez 2010; Muñoz 2002; Muñoz 2006) has investigated on the balance conquered through impalpable

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gestures through her work *America the Beautiful*¹ (2002). The fifty-minute performance offers a radical image of balance without masking the effort and fatigue behind the gestures that make it possible. After putting on her make-up, undressing, taping her thighs, and putting on a pair of stiletto heels, the artist climbs a high and unstable ladder, on the top of which she performs tightrope walker movements, managing to maintain an unimaginable balance. Then she begins an equally precarious and tiring descent, threading her body between the rungs of the ladder, in constant danger of falling or hurting herself. The performance unfolds in front of the spectators each time in a slightly different way in reaction to the space, time, and context. The structure of the narration, in fact, rests on a series of twelve fixed actions defined by the artist as “tasks” or “tricks”, the only ones that Bustamante rehearses before the performance in front of the audience. In these twelve positions, the artist concentrates on the balance of her body at that moment, opening up the performance to spaces for improvisation and, therefore, to a further grade of instability. This aperture that occurs in the intervals between actions that instead remain unchanged is profoundly linked to the desire to never totally master the action in order to create a space that exists and manifests itself, each time differently. There is thus a clear link between contingency in the work, and more specifically in the performance, and the display of a refusal, or at least a critical posture, with respect to the mastery of technical skills. It is evident that this refusal opens, in Bustamante’s performance, to the dimension of improvisation, to the choice therefore not to completely dominate the performative act, in dialogue with the contingency of forms, contexts and interaction with the audience (Bertinetto 2022: 133-4). When asked about the importance of improvisation, Bustamante replies, “... I’ve heard people say things like there’s no such thing as improvisation, like improvisation is the amount of experience that you have all built up [...] nothing can happen that hasn’t happened in a certain sense. But it’s very important for me to maintain this idea of the beginner’s mind, of a fresh space” (Muñoz 2002), showing what Halberstam defines as a “rigorous refusal of mastery” (Halberstam 2011: 143). *America the Beautiful* offers us the opportunity to reflect, through the lens of the performative act, on the value of actions without utility,

¹ To watch the performance online please see <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/hidvl-collections/item/1293-nao-america-beautiful.html>. Date of last access: 11 June 2024.

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these minimal movements also in the air that push the body to a repositioning, a remodulation aimed at maintaining the state of equilibrium, which although precarious is never lost. The equilibrium that Bustamante chases and laboriously achieves each time allows us to clearly observe these gestures that have no sense of being except in the exact instant in which they are made, not before or after, realizing their lack of finality, except that of reacting in the search for balance. Bustamante’s proceeding in reaction to the unforeseen happens allows her to continually recreate and remedy a new equilibrium, re-establishing each time the different conditions necessary for the stability that is obtained from inconsistent gestures.

The same theme of dynamic liminality through the representation of balance is explored not only through a body that produces movements without intention. Rather, it is the object that takes on the main role. The mid-1980s work *Equilibres (A quiet afternoon)* by Swiss artists Peter Fischli (b. 1952) and David Weiss (1946-2012) (Fischli, Weiss 1998; Danto, Fleck, Söntgen 2005; Rales, Nemerov 2013; Spector, Trotman 2016) is a telling case study of it. The series includes both color and black and white photographs and is subtitled *Balance is most beautiful just before it collapses*. Every piece portrays assemblages of everyday objects and waste material from the artists’ studio put one on top of the other. For example, in *Quiet afternoon*, a piece from the series, we see a courgette standing on a carrot inserted in a cheese grater, captured a moment before collapsing; *Three sisters* is a precarious circle of four high-heeled shoes jammed into each other; *The fart* shows a sculpture made by two glass bottles connected by a metal wire, posed on two chairs mounted one over the other, standing on a pile made of two Coke bottles and two gas canisters. In addition, the amusing titles of the individual shots testify to the duo’s ironic approach to the creative process against the sacralisation of the artist’s inspiration. In fact, the project stems from the artists’ exploration of a dull afternoon (lit. a quiet afternoon), a moment of radical everydayness in which time is spent creating fragile arrangements, which are dismantled immediately after being photographed. Therefore, the photographic process freezes the instant before the fall and maintains the gravity force, collocating the unsteady composition into the dimension of durability while the object it retains dissolves completely.

Even though the aesthetic appearance of the forms in the work is similar, particularly in the fragile grouping of objects that not only lose their functional purpose but also undergo a shift in their recognizability, in the work *Oggetti pittorici* [Pictorial objects] by the Italian painter Beatrice

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Meoni (b. 1960) (Conte 2017; Ferri 2020), compared to that of Fischli and Weiss, there is an explicit reference to the resonance between these unstable elements and her own stance in the world. As with Lonzi, this disuseful, an-economic condition becomes a state to be recognized as constitutive of existence. The artist speaks of her work as a succession of phases that bring drawing, assemblage and painting into dialogue for the concept of still life. She creates these *Pictorial objects* as sketches made of fragments of things that pass through her life and her studio (cups, saucers, trinkets...) to create three-dimensional collages, unstable piles composed of disparate objects. These have no aesthetic ambitions, they are products of a manipulation that introduces real painting. In a later phase, Meoni explores the balance on her body, driven by a biographical fact, a fall, and reshapes her body to always seek a precarious position, bringing back to the canvas “a stuttering sign, an unstable painting”.

She scatters the *Pictorial objects* as if leaving traps around, she opens her studio to disorder and accumulation, thus creating situations in which her body is forced into imbalance. Even when Meoni leaves the studio, in her exploration of the outdoors, she takes these objects with her, exposing them to risks caused by impervious paths: in this particular time, as the artist explains, she goes to paint on a small treehouse built about four meters above the ground, in a rather literal condition of suspension, shakiness and precarity due to the weather, materials and insects. “I won’t paint there forever, it’s just a stage in impermanence, in a space that barely contains me. It is a stage in uncertainty”². Meoni in this process provokes herself and the objects she brings with her not securing them to a fixed support, but to bases that look more like trampolines. Thus, these objects have their own life cycle, they investigate the balance and acquire meaning in their futility and in their closeness and proximity to her. These objects are studies of the balance between the artist and things, they are images of her wandering on the perimeter of things, on the edge. Meoni’s *Oggetti pittorici* give us a glimpse of a balance that can only be achieved through a fall, in the precariousness of an adjustment, and in the converging memory of the actions that led to the new conformation.

² Conversation with the artist, 18 June 2024, online.

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2.2. Repetition

In our reasoning on possible ways in which dynamic liminality is given, repetition is a factor that connects contingency to a circular structure of time. Repetition, in fact, withholds time in the present, obstructs progression and thus prevents memory from settling down, thus becoming a possibility for further elaboration. The temporal structure of repetition can be understood as a pair of iterations and alterations (Derrida 1988). In fact, from both a theoretical and aesthetic point of view, repetition does not imply the re-presentation of the same after a certain period of time, as for instance in the case of the reproduction of an artistic gesture as it is. Rather, it brings out the subtle play of differences that come into being in the re-emergence of desire as an act of memory – even of an unconscious and traumatic memory belonging to a buried past – and as a tension towards an absent object. The temporal arc that is configured between the recovery of the past and the opening to a future is thus structured thanks to the iteration of memory and its alteration, which of the past brings out new contents of meaning, now made available for elaboration.

Italian artist Lucia Cristiani (b. 1991) is a visual artist working with performance, sculpture, and video between Italy and Bosnia Herzegovina. In her artistic production, Cristiani analyzes and activates practices of community building and collaborative resistance to traumatic events, working in and from dynamic liminality. *Passerò domani* [I will come tomorrow] (2016) is a one-channel video by Cristiani in which Suvad Veletanlić, a middle-aged Bosnian street dancer, performs a dance of his invention, the "Jii-coou", a mixture of 90s Berlin techno and martial arts. His stage is the walls of Bijela Tabjia, the White Fortress overlooking Sarajevo, once a military fortification and weapons depot, now a visual diary of love stories and events from recent history, thanks to the graffiti that citizens painted on its walls at the end of the Siege of Sarajevo (1992-1996). Suvad dances daily, tirelessly in the streets of Sarajevo looking for a dance partner with whom to share this passion and his life. Cristiani invites the dancer to be the narrator of his experience of Sarajevo without giving him directions or a script to follow, simply offering him space to talk about what is closest to his heart.

If one's own history has been largely destroyed, and if events seem to contribute to our absence (or, in any case, to our invisibility), the mediation that art offers has, according to Cristiani, the very task of showing this perishability and, at the same time, the possibilities of realization that

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it allows. As Carla Lonzi writes in the *Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile*, “We consider incomplete a history that was formed on the non-perishable traces” (Lonzi 1970: 16). These perishable traces are clearly connected to the nature of the “gestures made of air” (Lonzi 1978: 767) that, according to Lonzi, have historically constituted women’s lives. We would like to expand Lonzi’s insight to include every subject who has experienced “seeing every day what they created destroyed” (Lonzi 1970: 16). The redundant repetition of destruction forces the subject, as Cristiani stages with Suvad to continuously start anew, performing gestures that, in retrospect, will prove to be “without following” and yet constitutive. When repetition enters the circuit of aesthetic mediation (as in the films envisioned by Carla Lonzi or in Cristiani’s *Passerò domani*), it ceases to be a symptom and becomes a strategy for reclaiming the past and realizing the present. At dawn, in the video, Suvad dances alone while his voice-over tells his story of migration and quest for fortune and love. What he proposes through dance is his way of being in the world, clumsily making his path through the stones of the White Fortress, exploring the ground with his rhythm, and learning from time to time where to put his feet so as not to stumble. Suvad presents himself as a desiring agent in search of the other: having returned to Sarajevo after the end of the war, every day he goes to the same spot in the city center, not far from the monument to the Eternal Flame, to dance next to a board with which he looks for his soul mate. That of the dancer is a way of defining oneself as lacking that is not resolving but is creatively open to the future and consists of the possibility of acting on one’s need and transforming it. In the repetition of the gesture, there is no pretense of gaining any control over reality: the repetition of the routine is what creates the conditions for Suvad’s relationship with the other. It is an act of resistance in a stagnant context that tends to force the individual into his own isolation.

This combination of constants (Suvad dances in the same place, every day, moved by the same spirit) and innovations made by contextual novelties³ (the Jii-coou dance has codified movements that are, however, combined in an ever-new way) also defines the dancer’s physical space of action which is never predetermined or foreseeable and predictable. It represents the aforementioned tension between absence and desire as in

³ On the idea of dance as a practice of variability on the theme – of turn – in respect to the normative set of rules of the discipline, please see Dal Sasso 2021. In order to analyze the relationship between normativity and creativity in contemporary art, see, among others, Irvin 2022.

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this research, the dance is indeed driven by a need, a lack, but it is executed by claiming this lack and transforming it into a twofold desire: the search for a dance partner becomes an engine to obtain recognition in an ever-new scenario⁴.

2.3. Impermanence

Gestures that are meaningful in the instant they are enacted, which materialize and then dissolve in the air are the ones that also nurture the impermanent nature of contingency. This is the value of such a perishability that speaks of a way of being in relation to the world which finds itself on the common practice of the everyday, understood as a dimension always at risk of leaving no stable memory of itself.

We would like to explore this ramification through the observation and analysis of a work by Belgian visual artist and poet Marcel Broodthaers (1924-1974) (Viart 1969) who joins a genealogy of artists who explore a contingency that reveals itself in acts that are always on the verge of leaving no trace of themselves and Italian artist Chiara Camoni (b. 1976) who inhabits impermanence as a dimension for germinative and choral work. Broodthaers' artwork *La Pluie (Projet pour un text)* [*The Rain (Project for a text)*], 1969, is a two-minute black and white video recording a performance by the artist. He sits in the open air in front of a wooden crate that he uses as a desk to write on a notebook with a nib and ink. It begins to rain and the pouring water dilutes to the point of dissolving the traces of ink impressed by the artist on the paper. However, the artist does not stop dipping his pen into the inkwell and tracing invisible marks on the paper until he has completed his writing project. Through the aesthetic mediation of video, these gestures that demonstrate their fallibility are fixated and made transmissible, and this perishability is kept and shown in the process of erasure of these movements.

Chiara Camoni's practice thrives on collaboration, relying on the shared actions of many hands and intertwining precious moments from

⁴ Usually, when reflecting upon improvisation as a possible methodology in art, the subject acting as improviser most of the time is the artist. Improvising is an action that the artist performs during the creative process. In this case, Cristiani invites and includes in her artistic process another subjectivity with their own agency, such increasing the opening of the work to unpredictable events.

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everyone’s experiences, including those of the viewer. Her home and studio are open spaces that welcome friends, colleagues, and others to share moments, stories, meals, and work. The sculpture series *Sisters* (2017-ongoing) is crafted with the devotion of children making flower garlands. Small ceramic elements, flowers, and dried plants are meticulously strung together and arranged on a metal core, forming the intricate weave of the dresses adorning these clay-faced ancestral figures. The organic materials comprising these figures connect them to the fleeting nature of existence, reflecting the impermanence, mutability, and slow degradation that are part of every life cycle. These sculptures speak of perishable memories, conveying the plurality of stories that compose them, unbound by any claim to last forever, embracing the passage of time, allowing for decay and inevitably leading to impermanence. In a 2011 poetic text titled *Certe cose / Certain things* the artist wonders “how, at a certain point, shapes disappear. We’re usually more interested in the birth of a shape or a form. It arrives from somewhere and starts moving through the world. We’re not as much concerned with its disappearance”⁵. The artist’s fascination with the end of things does not focus on destruction as an end in itself, but rather on the life cycle, where birth and decay are creative, transformative, and vital moments within the same process of enchantment⁶. In fact, these towering sculptures possess a moment of evanescence: in the single-channel colour video *Burning sister* (2023), one of the *Sisters* slowly burns on the seashore, dissolving into ashes in a ritualistic atmosphere of fulfillment that is typical of metamorphoses. As Camoni states: “This is not a sacrifice, but a short actualization taking place within the figure. It is as if she were coming to a completion, reaching her point of truth in the moment that she vanishes” (Aspesi, Griccioli 2024: 27). Here again, the temporal dimension of the video interferes with the finite linearity of the pyre, translating the instant of the spark into duration. The *Sisters* also change form and become part of new works, new stories and new experiences. Thus, what remains of the “burnt sister” is re-inserted into the creative process: the ash is used to glaze the ceramic

⁵ The text is available on the artist’s website, http://www.chiaracamoni.net/txt/Certe%20cose_certain%20things.pdf. Date of last access: 30 June 2024.

⁶ The vital circle of objects and narratives is an integral part of the artist’s practice and reflection, for example see 2022 solo show *La Distruzione Bella* at SpazioA gallery in Pistoia, Italy <https://www.spazioa.it/highlight-upcoming-chiara/>. Date of last access: 30 June 2024. To further explore artistic practices that challenge the fixed nature of art as a static form and focus on transient and variable forms of perishable artworks, see among others, Spieker 2017.

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part of the installation *Casetta* (2024), which is the basis on which the video is shown in the context of the exhibition *Chiamare a raduno. Sorelle. Falene e fiammelle. Ossa di leonesse, pietre e serpentesse* at Pirelli Hangar Bicocca in Milan during Spring 2024. Camoni’s artistry embodies the wisdom of anticipating repair while creating, fashioning objects that, even as they wear out, find new, ephemeral forms in their exhaustion. Her creative process weaves relationships: between people, memories, materials, and times. These bonds, though delicate, are robust enough to sustain our lives, often rooted in subtle, impalpable gestures that inhabit fleeting temporalities. These silent, often unnoticed actions shape our existence in the world.

2.4. *Unproductiveness*

On the value of traces that are not eternal, uncoded, destined to dissolve in the air, Italian artist Laura Grisi (1939-2017) (Celant 1990; Ferri 2012-2013; Scotini, Dirié 2021) builds her work *La misura del tempo* [The measuring of time] (1969), a black and white video (5’45’’). The camera records, through a spiral movement, a performance in which the artist, sitting on the beach in Sabaudia (Rome), counts the grains of sand in her hand. Time is thus measured by means of a double movement, the abstract, linear, and uniform flow of the hourglass represented by the punctual and delicate, repetitive gesture of the artist (the grain of sand clearly echoes the any instant whatever of Bergsonian matrix [Deleuze 1983]); and the circular, encompassing, embracing one rendered through the sequence shot by the camera. The artist’s body is the unit of measurement of both these ways of understanding time: her hands are the sandglass, and her figure is the centerpiece of the spiraling camera. According to Raffaella Perna, “(...) in the video there is a relationship with the feminine symbolic dimension, in the choice of representing a gesture that is always the same, prolonged in time, requiring skills and above all patience, tasks traditionally entrusted to women present in Grisi’s imagination” (Perna 2020: 51-60)⁷. As Paola Ugolini suggests, “Counting grains of sand is also an absolute activity, without purpose or work, capable of

⁷ Translated from Italian by the authors: “[...] nel film esiste una relazione con la dimensione simbolica femminile, nella scelta di rappresentare un gesto sempre uguale a se stesso, prolungato nel tempo, che richiede perizia e soprattutto pazienza: lavori tradizionalmente affidati alla donna presenti nell’immaginario di Grisi”.

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elevating Work to a cognitive value, freeing it from the constraint of productivity” (Ugolini 2022: 77-8)⁸. What the image conveys is how, historically, women’s gestures have been consistently described as removed from the circuit of economic value production while, on the contrary, constituting one of its very conditions of possibility. The fabric of women’s gestures is both what has never been inscribed by the laws of production and one of the implicit foundations upon which those laws rest and become operable. In itself, Grisi’s gesture produces nothing; it is a gesture that is not a product, to use Lonzi’s words once again. However, with its time of any instants whatever, it also stages what institutes the realm of production in general, and the production of value in particular (Bertelli 2021).

Lucia Cristiani’s performance *Zanne fragili* [Fragile fangs] (2022), part of a larger project, *The toothless’ club* (2022)⁹, also work on unproductiveness as an element whose staging makes visible and help to decode the mechanisms behind production processes. In this case, they concern the processes of generating aggression and violence, and the possibility of their disarmament. *The toothless’ club* is an environmental installation made of a fusion of dental movable prostheses that follow the shape of the mouth and act as implant supports for new teeth. Cristiani casts dozens of these metal prostheses and installs them in the exhibition space. She then creates two particular specimens through silver galvanization of resin temporary canine teeth, which she delivers to two performers. These castings protrude from the mouth of the bearers, making them very similar to fangs, which, however, prove to be fragile and disturbing but not dangerous in themselves. The performers wander around the exhibition space, almost trying to merge with the audience, not forcing contact but ready to reciprocate every glance received, often questioning, puzzled, and sometimes frightened. Similar to what happens to animals that show their teeth when they smell others’ fear, these fangs activate awkward self-defense dynamics that prove to be more of an impediment to the wearer than a true weapon of defense. These fangs are delicate and increase the extent of the body in which one can be

⁸ Translated from Italian by the authors: “Quella di contare granelli di sabbia è inoltre un’attività assoluta, senza scopo e senza opera, in grado di elevare il Lavoro a una valenza cognitiva, liberandolo dal vincolo della produttività”.

⁹ The performance and the installation were exhibited in the context of the exhibition *Prede*, solo show by Cristiani curated by Stefano Giuri and Gabriele Tosi at TOAST Project Space in Florence in 2022. More info at <https://www.toastprojectspace.it/prede/>. Date of last access: 20 June 2024.

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wounded. They stage new ways of being in relationship with other subjectivities in a dimension of shared fragility, laying the foundation for an alliance based on the possibility of being in need. Fangs have a structural function; they make flamboyant personality traits normally kept hidden, private, and once made manifest, radically alter the wearer's way of relating, make it difficult to smile, produce drool in the mouth, fatigue the bite by their heaviness. These new individuals appear embarrassing to other human beings around them, with their frailties on display, yet opening the floor of discussion to a possible shared management of violence and conflict. This formal materialization of the effects of marginality opens up a new space for confrontation that is free from judgment, undermining a binary relationship of power: this act of sharing changes those who practice it and the space they share with others irreversibly by transforming what is defined as improper in our performative society.

New social dynamics are thus configured and they leave space for and welcome the unexpected: the audience is not alerted to the presence of the performers in the space and the reciprocity of the gaze causes discomfort. Cristiani challenges conventional manners of relating and claims alternative ways of coexisting, by initiating actions that reverberate in space and time in reaction to the audience, in the context in which they are enacted through further accountability. Indeed, it is a matter of respecting the position and the new dimension of the individuals in front of us, which is inextricably linked to an increased capacity to be able to hurt them but also to be hurt or injured by them. The eventuality of confrontation goes hand in hand with this new posture that critically assumes its own fragility as positioning in the world. The kind of relationship Cristiani engages with the subjectivities with whom she interacts takes place on uneven, shaky ground, on a slope that requires careful pacing, where the possibility of stumbling is considered. A transformative action is made possible by dynamic liminality that appears as an active imbalance that is constantly sought by the artist. Cristiani contributes to delineating the meaning of dynamic liminality as a series of movements towards other subjectivities that are given in disjointedness and derangement that embraces the possibility of slipping, experiencing oneself in this downfall.

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3. Conclusions

In conclusion, the aesthetics of contingency, as articulated through the lens of Italian feminist thought and exemplified by Lonzi's insights, offers a powerful critique of traditional aesthetic and cultural hierarchies. It calls for a re-evaluation of the roles and meanings attributed to artistic gestures, urging a recognition of their relational and transformative potential. This perspective not only enriches our understanding of contemporary art but also invites further exploration into the ways in which art can engage with and reflect the complexities of lived experience. Lonzi's notion of deculturisation, which deconstructs the myth of the solitary artist and the valorisation of art as a product, underscores the significance of the contingent gesture. This paper aims at demonstrating that Lonzi's conceptualization of the contingent gesture as an "an-economic" act – one that precedes production and generates relational webs – provides a critical framework for understanding contemporary artistic practices.

By foregrounding the idea of dynamic liminality, the study has also illuminated the multifaceted nature of contingency in art. This concept, which captures the tension and movement inherent in the contingent gesture, resonates with the experimental and performative dimensions of contemporary art. Through the analysis of the work of artists coming from different artistic generations and geography, a phenomenology of the contingency provided in the unbalance has been outlined. Marcel Broodthaers, Nao Bustamante, Chiara Camoni, Lucia Cristiani, Fischli & Weiss, Laura Grisi and Beatrice Meoni reflect on various declinations of the possibility offered in the experience of what we propose to call dynamic liminality, taking sensible form in the exploration of instability, repetition, impermanence, and unproductiveness. These declinations are not meant to be watertight compartments and rigidly separated categories. Their boundaries are ephemeral, often overlapping, blurred, and the works discussed in this essay contribute to delineating a network of reflections on balance in which the nodes speak at such a small distance that they almost coincide.

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