

CAROL RAMA: BETWEEN SEXUALITY, MADNESS AND PAIN¹

Carol Rama, entre a sexualidade, a loucura e a dor

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ABSTRACT

Long ignored by the critics of art, the artistic production of Carol Rama (1918-2015) gains prominence in exhibitions and in feminist interpretations. It is highlighted, in her work, issues related to sexuality, erotic fantasy, lust in the relationship between genders, male masturbation and sensualized exhibition of naked bodies, associated with madness and sexual perversion. Foucault's reflections and conceptual operators allow us to launch a more in-depth look at this transgressive artistic production and show the striking criticism that the Italian artist launches to the dispositif of sexuality, the biopower and eugenicist science. As shown by the philosopher, in his critical reading of both medical science and Christianity, since the 19th century, the normalizing processes were leaned on medical-psychiatric notions, such as *psychopatia sexualis*, updating misogynist narratives about original sin and the figure of Eve, almost always accompanied by the serpent. I explore these themes regarding the pictorial art of Carol Rama, seen as a practice of female freedom.

Keywords: art, sexuality, biopower, feminist criticism

RESUMO

Por longo tempo ignorada pelos críticos da arte, a produção artística de Carol Rama (1918- 2015) ganha destaque em exposições e nas interpretações feministas. Sobressaem, em sua obra, temas relacionados à sexualidade, à fantasia erótica, à lascívia na relação entre os gêneros, à masturbação masculina e à exposição sensualizada de corpos nus, associados à loucura e à

¹ I would like to thank the Archivio Carol Rama, Torino, that kindly allowed me to reproduce Rama's paintings in this paper. All the figures used are © Archivio Carol Rama, Torino.

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perversão sexual. As reflexões e os operadores conceituais de Foucault permitem lançar um olhar mais aprofundado a essa produção artística transgressora e evidenciar a crítica contundente que a artista italiana lança ao dispositivo da sexualidade, ao biopoder e à ciência eugenista. Como bem mostrou o filósofo, em sua leitura crítica tanto da ciência médica quanto do cristianismo, desde o século XIX, os processos normalizadores se apoiaram em noções médico-psiquiátricas, como a de *psychopatia sexualis*, reatualizando narrativas misóginas sobre o pecado original e a figura de Eva, quase sempre acompanhada pela serpente. Exploro esses temas a partir da arte pictórica de Carol Rama, vista como prática da liberdade feminina.

Palavras-Chave: arte, sexualidade, biopoder, crítica feminista

Figura 1



Carol Rama em 1997; © Archivio Carol Rama, Torino

-between the artist and the philosopher

In the article titled "The phantom limb. Carol Rama and the history of art"(2015), Beatriz Preciado starts her presentation of the Italian artist, denouncing the exclusion of her work since the fascism in the 1930s and the return of the repressed, the return of "phantom limb". Rama is born in 1918 into a family of industrial bourgeoisie of Turin, the Italian city known by the counsel of factories, in the twenties, analyzed by Antonio Gramsci and Luigi Fabbri, and dies in 2015. In reality, her first exposition, carried through in the Faber gallery of Turin, in 1945, does not happen; it is closed for "obscurity". And only in 2017, her work is displayed, for the first time, in New York, in the "Antibodies"² exposition, carried through in the New Museum.

Preciado believes Rama to be a radically subversive artist, noting that she gets to give a face to the character of "the origin of the world ", of Gustave Courbet, 1866: her production is about a woman who desires, a political agent, and not without a face like in the framework of the French painter. At another moment, the Spanish critics claims that, in the past, there was not yet a case of intelligibility adequated to understand the work of this artist, with which I totally agree and it helps understand the purpose of this text: the use of Foucault to speak of Rama and the use of pictorial images of Rama to read the philosopher.

I also consider that there was not a discursive regime appropriate to read the work of this painter, in addition to the idea of pornography or art punk, even decades ago, in the same way of uneasiness, misunderstanding or even irritation that Foucault always causes are well known and recurrent. About Rama, Preciado says: "She returns to undo dominant narratives" (2015: 19). To me, Foucault does not return; since the seventies, he has come to stay, uninterruptly, decade after decade, subverting consecrated ways of thinking and presenting other possibilities of thought, the "penser autrement" ("to think differently"). Here the term serendipity can be

² <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-carol-rama-art-way-process-lifes-pleasure-pain>

useful, when designating the random encounter of forces that produce new ideas and open new avenues. So, if Preciado complains of that lack of language to read the work of this artist, I record my meeting with Carol Rama and the new book of Foucault, *Les Aveux de la Chair*, released this year of 2018.

- *where is the place of pleasure?*

In addition to meeting with these two "artists of themselves", in the happy expression of Tony Hara (2015), we put the question to the work of Italian painter. After all, what is that uneases/attracts/seduces/fascinates in her workmanship? Since the 30's and 40's, Carol Rama paints erotic, obscene, abject figures, that evoke the libido, the sin and the flesh. In full validity of the fascist, patriarchal and eugenics ideals, that promoted the woman ideal as asexual-mother-of-the nation and that declassified the different as "the desviant ones", "sexual perverse" or "abnormal people", she defies the aesthetic standards and the bourgeois moral with images of sexuality, madness and pain. From Mussolini to Berlusconi, and investing courageously against the catholic church, her paintings disclose a fascination for the abject, obscene e exotic. According to the artcritic Anne Dressen, "the overflowing and pornographic eroticism of Rama when she was only 25 years old, was an act of *Resistenza*", highlighting the artist's statement when she expresses that "the sin was my master" (DRESSEN, 2015: 36).

In the series "Appassionata", naked women, well painted, with strong lipsticks, flowers in the hair and high red heels, alone or alongside male figures, also naked, appear in ambivalent erotic situations, since while the sexual organs are highlighted in red and raise multiple sexual fantasies, they are sometimes in wheelchairs, or disposed in some hospital bed.

Figura 2, 3 & 4

Série appassionata 1939; © Archivio Carol Rama, Torino

In "Opera n. 9" (1939), the four dental arches on a scene of fellatio create fear and desire, by referring to the castrator "vagina dentata". In several works, the red tongue stretched out evokes challenging erotic images: tongue licks, tries, enter holes, curses, poison, infects. "Dorina" (1940) stretches her tongue like a snake. In fact, the serpent is a recurring figure in Rama's workframe, evoking continuously the figure of the first woman in front of the devil's

temptation and on the verge of collapse. Sin rounds women, in these warm, reddish, shocking landscapes of the paintings of the Italian painter.

Figura 5 & 6



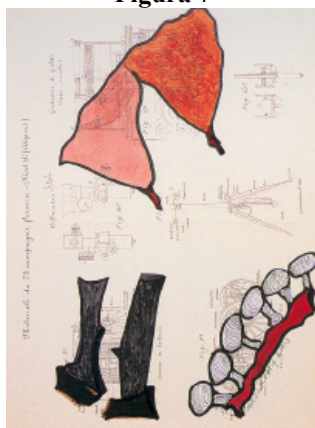
Opera n. 9 e Dorina 1940; © Archivio Carol Rama, Torino

Which body does Rama construct in her paintings? Images of non-normative bodies, as it appears in "Appassionata", from 1940, bodies in hospital bed, bodies that masturbates, have sex, defecate; mutilated bodies and amputees; bodies in wheelchairs, anyway, beyond the normative bodies of the fascist state. The idea of original sin is raised recurrently in her your work, whether in the figure of Eve with the serpent, on the organ in the characters' sexual suggestion, even on mere exposure of huge Phalluses, which penetrate or leave the female holes, as well as in her autobiographical narratives.

However, I want to go back historically, in addition to the Fascist regimes that revitalize Christian imagery, misogynist morality and culpability of the founding priests of the Christian Church and I also aim to highlight how Rama invests against technologies of power with her art. The bodies that she produces seem to laugh of Christian convictions and values. In this direction, Preciado sees "La mucca

pazza" ("The Mad Cow"), a painting in which the animal infected by toxic products threatens to contaminate humans, such as the post-human figure of hysteria, or AIDS, and perceives, in several of their works, the exposition of the violence of the contemporary necropolitics and the exorcism of these fascist practices (PRECIADO, 2015: 33).

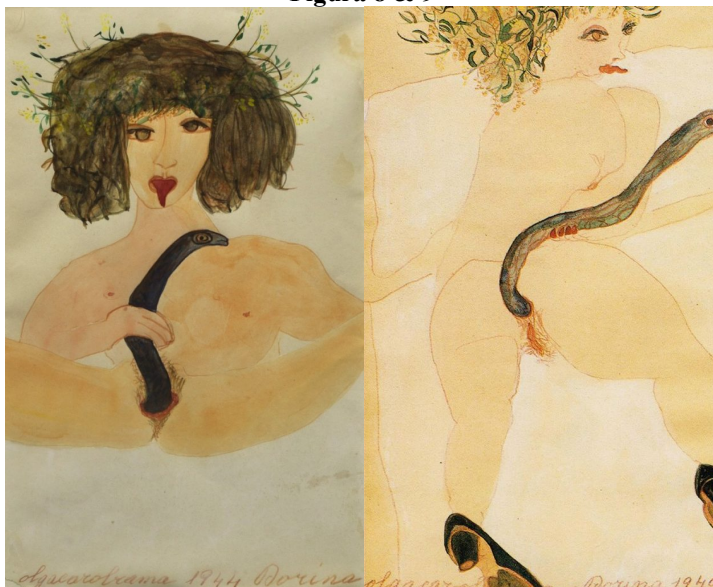
Figura 7



La mucca pazza 2002; © Archivio Carol Rama, Torino

In her paintings, Carol Rama mocks the Christian misogyny that makes the woman both the origin of the world and the "Devil's door", in the words of Tertullian (160dC - 220dC), or the responsible for the original sin, according to St. Augustine (354dC - 430dC), the origin of evil and the fall of man, dragging all of humanity. These conceptions, as we know, have shaped the Western psyche and also published medical-psychiatric settings that, in the nineteenth century, made the woman a figure of hysteria associated with the libidinous sex (GREENBLATT, 2018).

Figura 8 & 9



Dorina 1944/5; © Archivio Carol Rama, Torino

Commenting on the work of Carol Rama, Jack Halberstam observes that: "The female body in its job refuses to be the origin of the world or the face of death, the mother with the child in her arms or the artist *porn* backwards" (2015: 87). In her artistic production, sin and sex are always associated in the representations of naked, seductive, exaggerated, sinful women with their tongues extended outward, signaling illicit sex, just as the serpent, associated with the phallus, penetrates the female body, entering or exiting the holes. In fact, it is Rama who states that "sin is one of the most important things in life, (...) sin is one of the most beautiful things in the world" (RAMA *apud* VERGINE, 2015: 50), and so it stands in the place of sin to produce ruptures and undo the fall. According to Natalie Haddad:

Provocative quotes about sex and sin reinforce an interpretation of the artist as herself a kind of *appassionata*.

Rama did her part to cultivate this reading — “The ‘*Appassionata*,’” she says, “are criminal [...] so it’s important to have a criminal side to us” — and the libidinous (and libidinal) intensity of her work can be astonishing. Yet the complexity and intelligence of her visual language — laying waste to hegemonic constructs of femininity, female desire, and the female and male body — are crucial to its success.

Figura 10



Apassionata 1946; © Archivio Carol Rama, Torino

-Foucault and Christian morals

Artistic production of Rama is suggestive enough to keep the critical reading that Foucault provides about the Christianity of the early years of our era, in *Les Aveux de la Chair* (2018). On that volume IV of the *History of Sexuality*, the philosopher highlights the importance that sex and the notion of desire assume in the thought of founding priests, such as Tertullian, considered the "inventor of the original sin" and Augustine, responsible for production of the concept

of "libido", that is, the sexual form of desire, which updates the original fall. According to Foucault, sex becomes increasingly a fundamental key to the hermeneutic interpretation of the individual about itself, to the revelation of the soul, to the reading of the body movements, interiority and its own history, as well as to the confession of sins and the resulting purification and salvation, contrary to what happened with the spiritual asceticism of the ancient Greeks, studied earlier. In his words:

This is not only to learn sexual behavior rules according to the moral, but also to examine incessantly in order to interrogate the libidinal within himself. Is it necessary to say that, after Saint Augustine, it is with the head that we experience the sexual thing? Let us at least say that the St. Augustine's analysis introduces a true libidinization of sex. (Foucault, 2004: 101)

Augustine sets a theory of concupiscence – the *libido* – as an internal structural element of the sexual act as we know it currently. Whereas there was sexual conjunction in Paradise, observes the philosopher, it is with the fall that man loses control of his own body and can no longer practice a moderate sex. He becomes a slave of *libido*. That is, "the fall produced libidinization of the sexual act" (2018:339): that is, the problem is not the sex, but the excess, the fact that *libido* manifests itself, after the fall, in the form of involuntary and that is how we have designed it till this day. Augustine proposes an ethic of non-excess. The problem for him becomes the involuntary erection, the lack of control of one part of the body, a helplessness with which Adam was punished due to disobeying God. "It is the will turned against itself, decoupled (...) in the movement of the libido that accompanies the sexual act, one can see the division tag that, dividing the whole subject, makes one want what he does not want." (FOUCAULT, 2018:343). To paraphrase Augustine, Foucault concludes: "Instead of becoming fully master of himself, (...) by his own free will, he died in his spirit: he will die, in spite of himself, in his body." (2018: 343)

The emergence of the "subject of desire," which is far from being an individual who uses pleasures, had already been problematized in vol. I of the *History of sexuality* and in other

articles, and it is here taken up. It refers to the guilty and powerless subject, unable to know himself, the one who obeys, subjected to the search for truth of himself in the eyes of the pastor, far away from the one who seeks the care of himself in the pagan world. The perverse ownership that makes Christianity the asceticism of the ancients is thoroughly analyzed in *Les Aveux de la Chair* and shows how, to Foucault, Christianity marks a moment of profound disruption and destruction in Western culture. He says, analyzing the question of discretion between the ancients and the Christians:

In the old conception, the capacity to make the sharing between the maximum and the minimum and the aptitude to have the right measure in the way of conducting were linked to the use that each one made of its own reason. (...) (Christianity) The heteronomy of man is fundamental and it is never to himself that he must resort to define the extent of his conduct. There is a reason for that: it is that, after the fall, the evil spirit has established his Empire over the man. (...) Satan is, therefore, the principle of illusion in its own interior of thought (FOUCAULT, 2018:131).

In order to present itself as the only possibility of the soul salvation, as escape for the human being condemned to suffering in this world, due to his disobedience and rebellion, it must destroy him from the inside, produce a definitive split in his own being, which the Christianity does makes, with the introduction of suspicion in the heart of the individual. To suspect and to recognize oneself as a sinner and to obey slavishly are part of the same movement of the one who resigns himself and that accepts to be ruled by others. And this is not a provisional obedience as the asceticism of the ancients, a passage to reach the self-domain, the *apatheia*³, but it is an eternal obedience, because all are subject to relapse. Foucault says:

Christian obedience is not a way to respond to an order, it is not a response to the other. Obedience is and must be a way

³ "The Greek *apatheia* ensures the control of oneself", to become master of himself, the individual has to obey his master, provisional Guide. "The purpose of Christian obedience is to mortify his will, to cause his will to die" (FOUCAULT, 2008: 235).

to be, before every order, more fundamental than any situation of command; therefore, the rule of obedience anticipates in some ways the relations to others (FOUCAULT, 2014:245).

In Christian pastoral care, women are continually associated with sin and flesh, seen as public dangers and cited as wasteful, frivolous, sensual and sinful, since Eve, responsible for the fall of humanity; they demand, therefore, greater control and vigilance by men. Yet the serpent, elevated to the condition of goddess in ancient Egypt is sex-linked, transformed into a metaphor of the phallus, the symbol of perversion, of malice and betrayal. The languages of both Serpent and woman are found in the watercolors of Rama. And here I return to Foucault: "In *De carne Christi*, Tertullian sees the origin of the fall in the fact that the snake (le serpent, in French) made advances in the body of the woman when she was still a virgin. Cain would be the offspring of that action." (2018:45, n. 3)

-Carol Rama and antibodies

Figura 11



Masturbazione; © Archivio Carol Rama, Torino

Opposing to self-mortification and the annulment of will, Carol Rama proposes another course with her artistic work, when putting in scene the blaming of woman, the sin of Eve, the seduction of the serpent, and the empire of the flesh. And there is no way to not refer to the parrhesiastic attitude of the artist, always courageous, insolent and scandalous in its cynicism. The transgressive bodies she constructs then appear as antibodies, as antidotes to the normalizing forms that aim to encode, stiffen, or castrate them.

Contemporary feminisms will also radicalize these ideas. In the years 70, French feminists seek to deconstruct this morale-boosting reading, showing that there is a "phallic libido", there is also a female libido, a "libido à soi", as the psychoanalyst and Professor Antoinette Fouque says, in the seminars she organizes at the University of Vincennes, in 1969, in which she suggests the notion of "libido creandi des femmes", as opposed to the "phallic libido". (FOUQUE, 2018:217).

It can be said that Carol Rama is much closer to these feminists, even without assuming any explicitly feminist activism. But we can also approach her with the famous Brazilian writer Machado de Assis, who ironizes the moralistic and misogynist conceptions of the priests of the Catholic Church, not only from Turim. In his tale "Adam and Eve", published in 1885, in the midst of a tasty conversation at the home of Mrs. Leonor, in the wake of 1,700, Judge Dr. Veloso decides to expound his theory about the origin of the world. In contrast to the official version, he explains that the world was really created by the devil. When it comes to evil work, God is taken to compensate for the damage and disaster caused to the universe by the Satanic creator, creating the sky, the Moon and the stars and blowing the enlightened soul on the bodies of Adam and Eve. Eve, in turn, does not accept the suspicious invitation of the envious Serpent, refusing to disobey and betray God, which results in the wide acceptance and free entrance of the couple in the Garden of Eden, blessed by God for all eternity.

Figura 12

Carol Rama - Lusinghe - 2003 - pastello, acquerello e smalto su carta (vecchia stampa) intelata - cm 25x35 - coll. privata

Lusinghe; © Archivio Carol Rama, Torino

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