

Chiara Fumai
Poems I Will Never
Release 2007–2017



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curated by
Milovan Farronato
Francesco Urbano Ragazzi

in collaboration with
Cristiana Perrella

For the first time, the work of Chiara Fumai (Rome, 1978 – Bari, 2017) is featured in a major retrospective exhibition. Four years after her premature death, a group of institutions pays tribute to the artist, preserving her legacy and presenting it to a wide international audience. *Poems I Will Never Release 2007–2017* fully covers her short, intense career, through an almost all-encompassing selection of works, some of which have never been exhibited before. The event thus plays a decisive role in the exploration of a creative personality that made a major contribution to the development of languages of performance and feminist aesthetics of the 21st century, covering what the artist liked to call her “unwork,” produced in many forms that go well beyond the practice of performance, for which she is known best, to include videos, collages, installations and wall paintings.

Born in Rome on 22 February 1978, Chiara Fumai grew up in Bari; in 1999 she took a degree in architecture at the Milan Polytechnic, after which she focused first on design and then on activities as a DJ and organizer of music events. After initial experiences in the art world with videos and installations, she shifted for the most part towards performance. In an ironic game of fiction and reality, her actions summon up female figures from the past who struggled to make their voices heard, such as the medium Eusapia Palladino, the theosophist Madame Blavatsky, the terrorist Ulrike Marie Meinhof, the feminist writer Carla Lonzi, all the way to the anarchist passionaria Valerie Solanas, who shot Andy Warhol in 1968. Sophisticated anti-heroines, tenaciously driven by tenets of feminism, revolutionaries or disruptors, alternate with a few but signif-

icant male figures like Harry Houdini, illusionist and escape artist, or Nico Fumai, the father of the artist. With solemnity, radicality and irresistible wit, through herself and her work Chiara Fumai brings their stories to light, conveying profound reflections on language and the fragmentation of identity.

The unique character of her research soon led to important results. In 2012 she took part in dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel, in 2013 she won the 9th Furla Art Award, followed by the 14th New York Award in 2017. In 2016 she showed work in the 16th Rome Quadriennale.

Among the leading institutions that have shown Fumai's works, we can mention Fondazione Antonio Ratti (Como), Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo (Turin), Museo del Novecento (Milan), Museion (Bolzano), Muzeon Arts Park (Moscow), Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo (Madrid), SongEun ArtSpace (Seoul), Villa Medici, MAXXI | Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, XVI Quadriennale d'Arte (Rome), Bozar (Brussels), De Appel (Amsterdam), Whitechapel Gallery, David Roberts Art Foundation, Delfina Foundation (London), CONTOUR 7 – Biennial of Moving Image (Mechelen), MACBA (Barcelona), Pivot (São Paulo), National Gallery of Art (Viinius).

In 2019, two years after her death, on 16 August 2017 in Bari, her work was included in the Italian Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale.

The Girl with the Blanket, 2008

Room 1

In August 2008 Chiara Fumai spent 31 days as artist in residence in the prison of the Oostereiland Penitentiary of Hoorn in the Netherlands. During her journey in Oostereiland, the artist maintained a secret correspondence with a mysterious man and produced some of her most important pieces, including a complex escape plan that would let her slip through the surveillance system in less than one hour. During her imprisonment, Fumai spent most of her time sewing a 12-meter long escape rope, using fabric from the prison's curtains and clothes from her wardrobe, but at one point, the development of the project left her with nothing to wear apart from a brown Indian blanket provided by her friend Fred Martin.

Before escaping from the prison, the artist wrote a love poem about female sexuality during imprisonment and left it in the toilet of her cell, where it still remains as part of the local artistic patrimony, viewable by appointment. The people of Hoorn will always remember her as the girl with the blanket. Can you believe it?

The photograph fixed to the wall, punctuated by writings and drawings written in pencil by the artist, communicates the claustrophobic atmosphere and the different passage of time inside and outside a prison.

I'm a Junkie, 2007

04

Room 1

In the middle of a field in Greece, the artist, dressed in traditional Greek clothing, lip-syncs a 1930s song composed by Emilios Savvidis and Sosos Ioannidis and performed by Roza Eskenazi. The beatific melody played in the video is *Eimai Prezakias (I'm a Junkie)* and it is a hymn to the pleasures of opium. The song is a masterpiece of *rebetiko*, an urban and low-class genre that might be compared to today's punk or trap music.

In 1936, the Greek government banned the audio track used in this video, and yet it is also now part of the national artistic patrimony.

House Museum, 2011–17

05

Room 1

House Museum is the reproduction of a room in the Milan apartment where the artist produced *The Moral Exhibition House*, her work for Documenta 13 (see room 5 p. 10) and lived crucial years of her adult life. The environment is an ironical self-celebration that Fumai had planned for a future retrospective. It now contains a selection of stage clothes, props, books, and vinyl records from the artist's archive currently kept at the CRR1 – Centro Ricerca Castello di Rivoli.

Chiara Fumai Reads Valerie Solanas, 2012–13

Room 2

06

Chiara Fumai Reads Valerie Solanas is the installation dedicated to the writer and activist who shot Andy Warhol in 1968. The video-performance, created by Fumai for the IX Furla Art Award (2013), shows how the speeches of other women cross the body of the performer and often coincide with it. The wall drawing summarizes the structure of the famous SCUM Manifesto (Society for Cutting Up Men) written by Valerie Solanas in 1967. The manifesto for the elimination of men, recited by the artist in the video, is described in the diagram from a scientific and objective point of view and allows to reflect on the function of language and its subversive power. The purpose of the manifesto was to demonstrate the inferiority of men, violently attacking the gender binary that characterizes the patriarchal social system and bringing forward criticism of women who adopt a submissive attitude. “A work dedicated to all insolent females”: these are the words used by Fumai to describe the SCUM Manifesto.

Never assuming a moralizing attitude, the artist transforms Solanas text into a powerful cry towards the patriarchal art world. The frontal shot of the video, featuring a belligerent figure, is designed to recall two other remarkable framings: the proclamations spread by the Al Jazeera satellite network where Osama bin Laden claimed the collapse of the Twin Towers and the first political TV announcement of Silvio Berlusconi in 1994.

Criminal Woman, 2011–13

Room 3

07

The Criminal Woman is a misogynistic-positivist book by Cesare Lombroso published in 1893, when the criminologist was following the séances of Eusapia Palladino, an illiterate maid from Puglia who gained fame and success abroad pretending to have psychic powers.

Chiara Fumai invites us to attend the ghost conference of Lombroso and other four positivist scientists. Taking inspiration from the divergences in the essays written by the five participants in the Palladino case at the time of their scientific experiments, the conference narration is structured by overlaying fragments of five different voices contradicting each other's theory.

The voices travel through time to quibble about Eusapia Palladino, spirits and images, preconceptions, credulity and the ongoing rivalry between man and woman. Without ever reaching a conclusion, the discussion produces a bizarre phantasmagoria, between unexpected conversions and anti-materialist creaking in which the tricks used by Palladino to the detriment of the scientists, and her ignorance and imagination become an allegory of a surrealist spirit that hovers restlessly and laughingly over the ruins of a positivist science.

The audio material has been constructed utilizing fragments concerning Eusapia Palladino and the scientific essays published by the protagonists, while the video puts together archival images. The internal area is inspired by the medium ambient of Palladino and by the furnishings of the commission of the Society for Psychical Research.

I Did Not Say or Mean “Warning”, 2013

08

Room 3

Assuming the character of a museum guide of the Querini Stampalia Foundation in Venice, the artist introduces all the female portraits in the historical collection, from the 16th to 19th centuries, narrating the background of the history of art through the women portrayed and the anonymity of their biographies. The narration of the guide is interrupted by messages transmitted through IS (International Sign language) containing the anonymous terrorist threat left on the answering machine of a feminist group affiliated with the armed struggle.

While the guide tells the stories of the abuses suffered by the women depicted in the paintings, her calm speech is interrupted by violent gestures that give voice to the terrorist, who angrily mimics her subversive message of protest and revenge: the guide, the feminist militant and the mute painted women blend in the presence of the artist.

Per Vas Nefandum, 2016

09

Room 4

In *Per Vas Nefandum* (literally “dirty way” in Latin, it makes reference to the anal intercourse) a preacher dressed in white proclaims a violent condemnation of homosexuality, alternating sophisticated theological arguments, threats and evocations of the Apocalypse. A creature from Fumai’s universe, Annie Jones, the most famous 19th century Fumai’s “bearded lady” at the Barnum circus, retaliates against the preacher with a refutation of the Apocalypse announced by internationally renowned occultist Aleister Crowley. In *Per Vas Nefandum* words are not the only relevant elements. Close-ups and details emphasize the preacher’s gestures, expressions, and paraphernalia. Fumai took these items from public orations of famous Christian evangelists—such as Kathryn Kuhlman and Aimee Semple McPherson—who used film and television media to spread their own catechesis. As in other works by Chiara Fumai, the video takes the form of an anti-historical pastiche in which different ages and cultural references collapse. This status is highlighted by the surroundings: the “Witch Head Nebula” from the Orion constellation where the artist lets parts of her own collages compose a flow of cosmic debris around the preacher. The video was presented for the first time in Brazil, the world’s leading country for homophobic and transphobic violence.

Astral Body, 2016

10

Exhibition View

Room 4

The theoretical premises of this body of works are to be found in the process of the appropriation of pagan images and symbols and their reconversion into a new Christian iconography. The project focuses in particular on the figure of the Virgin Mary, in which surviving features of some ancient goddesses coexist with her role in Christianity, as well as with magical powers that have been attributed to her character over time.

These composite works were created in response to the invitation by the Club Maria (a spiritual group founded in 1980 in the U.S.S.R. that proposed the Virgin Mary as a feminist model of Christianity) to conceive a piece of contemporary art on the subject; Chiara Fumai's project presented instead a deconstruction of the ideals of this group, developing a complex vocabulary of allegorical elements that reverberate throughout the works.

Photographs capture the artist's naked body, reminiscent of St. Mary. On the lower part of the triangular light boxes, the artist depicts her favorite astral location: the "Witch Head Nebula" in the constellation of Orion, nebula that serves as a background to the two photographs.

The video work *Per Vas Nefandum*, in the same room, has the same background, while the Bible, wig and dress on display here are props of this film. These props are protected from impure spirits by three iron arrows, *Hangers*, whose design comes from paleo-Christian symbols meant to preserve an environment from the wicked.



Chiara Fumai, *Astra/Body*, 2018, exhibition view, Chiara Fumai, *Peppis I Will Never Release 2007-2017*, Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, 2021, Photo © Eia Dlakowska.





Chiara Fumai, Nico Fumai: Being Remixed, 2017, exhibition view, Chiara Fumai, Poems / VIII, Never Release 2007-2017, Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, 2021, Photo © Eia Bialkowska.

Shut Up, Actually Talk, 2012

18

Room 5

This installation presents the ghostly materialization of the performance created for *The Moral Exhibition House*. The video features the freak show performer Zalumma Agra reciting *I Say I (lo dico io)*, an extremely beautiful and complex philosophical manifesto about radical feminism written by Carla Lonzi and Rivolta Femminile (Female Revolt, Italian feminist group) in 1977.

The Moral Exhibition House, 2012

19

Room 5

The Moral Exhibition House is a performance-based project initially presented at Documenta 13 inspired by 19th-century pseudoscientific fairground spectacles. Making reference to the Hegelian dialectic, the story of modern spiritism and occultism, William Blake's illustrations and the theosophical interpretation of the Lucifer myth, as well as the redefinitions of "WE" and "I" by Rivolta Femminile (a radical feminist group founded in Rome in 1970) Fumai actively implicates the viewer in an atemporal dimension, providing a feminist answer to the witch's house of the Kassel-based Grimm Brothers.

Fumai focuses on two women: Annie Jones, the most famous "Bearded Lady" of the Victorian era, and Zalumma Agra known as "The Star of the East", presented as the purest specimen of Caucasian race in the Barnum circus.

In the first room of the house the public witnesses *Shut Up. Actually, Talk* (2012), the subversion of a philosophical cabinet through an act of "political ventriloquism" based on Carla Lonzi's manifesto *Let's Spit on Hegel* and few Rivolta Femminile's writings, among which the manifesto dated 1977 *I say I*, was transformed into the demonic possession of Zalumma Agra, on occasion of the performances. In the second room, *The Prodigy of Nature* (2010), a collection of letters of admiration written to Annie Jones, to whom the artist gave voice during the performance through their reading. Liberating these so-called "freaks" from their past, Fumai gives them a public voice for the first time.

There is Something You Should Know, 2010–11

Room 6

20

There is Something You Should Know was inspired by a legendary, undocumented performance by the experimental filmmaker and visual artist Jack Smith (1932–1989) at Genoa's bar La panteca volante in 1981.

The work consists of a simulation of the existence of an esoteric group known as S.I.S. (“Scuola Iniziatica Smithiana”), whose purpose was to recreate the conditions for the reconstruction of Smith's legendary performance through a seminar. The group opposed the dominant materialistic culture, unable to truly understand Smith's visionary work, with alternative learning techniques of modern esoteric groups, lucid dreaming theories and astral projections. The process of initiation, the uncertainties about its functioning and the complexity of S.I.S. can be understood as an allegory of the discovery of an artist's imaginative universe: extremely articulate yet very magical and incommensurable enough to become a strange sort of cult as a tribute. The normal aspects of the piece (the sect, the theory/practical lesson, the Atlantean myth, the magic word, the refuge in the world of ideas, transcendence) reinterpret forms and procedures of some modern esoteric groups. Such groups present inexplicable, mysterious but extraordinary analogies with Jack Smith's visual and philosophical imagination.

The Book of Evil Spirits, 2015

Room 7

21

The Book of Evil Spirits brings together a number of characters whose narratives Fumai has embodied in her performative practice. In creating this catalogue, Fumai enlisted the help of Eusapia Palladino, a 19th-century internationally renowned psychic and medium whose séances were attended with conviction by such individuals as Nicholas II of Russia, and Nobel-laureates Marie and Pierre Curie. By calling on a medium—and becoming one herself—the artist bypasses common cultural structures, as well as her own narrative method. Fumai has borrowed from an array of historical characters, often women from marginal positions, known for voicing their dissent: among the others, the writer and activist Ulrike Meinhof, the bearded lady Annie Jones, the philosopher Carla Lonzi, and Eusapia Palladino, the artist's muse.

In *The Book*, Palladino convenes the spirits of Fumai's motley crew of evil spirits—activists, terrorists, freak-show performers, philosophers, all at one point alter-egos of Fumai herself—who collectively represent the fears of a bourgeois society. The artist's camp parody is itself obscured by knowing anachronism and occasional bursts of uncontrollable stage violence. The events are observed and narrated by the French scientist Camille Flammarion, Palladino's contemporary and a scholar of mediumship, who takes turns with himself in affirming and discrediting what he sees.

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ Arrivederci!

The Return of the Invisible Woman, 2014

Room 8

22

The Return of the Invisible Woman is a surreal report of what happened in 1973 during the last performance of Vito Acconci, *Ballroom*, at the Galleria Schema in Florence, from the viewpoint of a member of the audience, an unknown woman who, in fact, interrupted the show. Inspired by the dark humor of sadomasochistic literature, Fumai narrates her point of view as if the self-lesionism of the extreme body art of the 1970s would have driven an audience member to desire a Mistress/Servant relationship with the performer. On a copy of *Venus in Furs*, the artist has embroidered the dialogues between Acconci and his Dominatrix and recreated the typical settings of a BDSM (acronym for bondage, domination, submission, sadism, masochism) tale, such as *Story of O* by Pauline Réage. As the artist said, *The Return of the Invisible Woman* is very much an intellectual declaration of love to the most extreme aspects of Acconci's performance art.

Der Hexenhammer, 2015

Room 8

23

“Either you're part of the problem or you're part of the solution. There is nothing in between”. This is the phrase spoken by two female figures dressed in 16th-century costume as they administer communion to a third woman in the disquieting, surreal scene depicted in this wall painting. The quote was a favorite of the German terrorist Ulrike Meinhof, while the figures come from an ancient grimoire (book of magic). Meinhof's rebellious spirit and political activism are linked to the imagery in the medieval treatise against witchcraft titled *Malleus Maleficarum*, which was published by the Dominican friars Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprengler in 1478 (*Der Hexenhammer* is its German translation). In this wall painting, Fumai also included some of the scripts for a performance in the form of collage and automatic writing, including the figure of the terrorist into her universe and the history of women's oppression.

One Strangling Golden Hair (Tribute to Vera Morra), 2013

Room 8

24

One Strangling Golden Hair shows an integral cast of the artist's body made with dried glue on a sheet created by cutting and re-sewing a dress by Valentino from the video-performance Chiara Fumai Reads Valerie Solanas. This work is a tribute to the experimental self-portraits realized by the artist Vera Morra, who died prematurely in the 1990s, and it was composed especially for the collective exhibition *Ari mortis* held in 2013 in the Museo del Novecento in Milan.

Free Like the Speech of a Socialist, 2011

Room 8

25

In this work, the artist imitates the accent, voice and the way of presenting dematerializations of the illusionist Harry Houdini (1874–1926), using parts of different performances collected in the recordings and manuals left by the magician. During one of his shows, a woman would be taken from the public, tied up and handcuffed by Houdini and his assistants. On the overlaid track the artist screams through a distorted megaphone parts of Rosa Luxemburg's letter to her feminist and socialist friend Sophie Liebknecht. Writing from her prison cell in Breslau, in this text the revolutionary woman reported both her suffering and the tortures inflicted by soldiers on a buffalo, introducing thoughts about the equality of the species that were later theorized by the Animal Liberation Movement. The speech ends with the disappearance of the woman and Houdini's declaration: "The chair is now free like the speech of a socialist".

Follow This You Bitches, 2013–17

26

Room 9

This work is an enlargement of the seal Chiara Fumai used to sign her correspondences, a unicursal heptagram (a seven-pointed star drawn with a single solid line) taken from the “star of Babalon”, designed by Aleister Crowley in 1904 for *The Book of the Law*, a sacred text of the British occultist. Babalon is a goddess, archetypal antagonist of abstinence and of sexual purity as salvation: a symbol of female liberation.

The seven points of the star represent the seven letters of the name Babalon, the seven planets, the seven veils, and the seven chakras. Chiara Fumai deviates this symbol of obscure power in her own way, encircling it with her name and the slogan “Follow This You Bitches” used by the singer Cher to challenge younger female pop stars during her *Living Proof: Farewell Tour* in 2002.

This Last Line Cannot Be Translated 2017

27

Room 9

Developed in recent years this large mural interweaves lines and words of the invocation of a “mass of chaos”, forming the jagged contours of stalactites and stalagmites of an imaginary cave. The wall design includes symbols, seals, a dissected and decomposed deity and instructions for the use of a ritual of protection against the aggressive forces of patriarchal hierarchies. A very complex work in its genesis, it was initially conceived to be shown in the exhibition *Si Sedes Non Is*, curated by Milovan Farronato at The Breeder Gallery in Athens in 2017 on the occasion of Documenta 14. The Church of Chiara Fumai, the institution that today manages the artist’s archive and estate, was able to reconstruct the artwork for the Venice Biennale thanks to an accurate philological work conducted on the notes, drawings and correspondence held with the artist.

Nico Fumai: Being Remixed, 2017 Room 10

28

WARNING! NICO FUMAI'S CAREER AND MUSIC IS A PRODUCT OF IMAGINATION. ALL THE CONTENTS AND HISTORICAL REFERENCES OF THIS TALE ABOUT ITALO DISCO ARE REAL, EXCEPT FOR THE FACT THAT THE RECORD COVERS AND THE MUSIC HAS BEEN PRODUCED/MANIPULATED BY THE ARTIST USING FAMILY ALBUM MATERIAL AND FOUND RECORDS.

In times of the re-discovery of the great Italo disco phenomenon, electronic new wave music produced in Italy in the 1980s, whose musical innovations were often videoed being performed by mimers, Chiara Fumai traces the movement's historical roots starting from the Italian song-writing tradition, introducing the musical career of the legendary southern Italian singer and composer Nico Fumai (the artist's father), a pioneer of the New Romantic Dance movement and author of the rarest records of Italian love songs. Comparing Nico Fumai's musical production to the work of Giorgio Moroder and Claudio Simonetti, revered Italo disco pioneers, Chiara presents her point of view regarding the genealogy of the controversial musical phenomenon, focusing her critique on the complex relationship between the artist and the audience in the post-production era, the process of abstraction through the personal biography and the lack of attention to the contents by the public.

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08.05 — 03.10.2021

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A project co-produced with

In collaboration with

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d'Art
Contemporain
Genève

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de fundación montemadrid

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