

From Sexual Difference: A Theory of
Sexual - Symbolic Practice.

The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective
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Epigram

Don't think you have any rights. That is, don't obscure or deform justice, but don't think that one can legitimately expect that things happen in a way that conforms with justice; especially since we ourselves are far from being just.

Vertical superimposition.

There is a bad way of believing we have rights, and a bad way of believing we do not have any.

—Simone Weil, *Notebooks*, II

~~this writing-on-the-wall before me, could not be shared with them—could not be shared with anyone except the girl who stood so bravely there beside me. This girl had said without hesitation, 'Go on.' It was she really who had the detachment and the integrity of the Pythones of Delphi. But it was I, battered and disassociated from my American family and my English friends, who was seeing the pictures, who was reading the writing or who was granted the inner vision. Or perhaps in some sense, we were 'seeing' it together, for without her, admittedly, I could not have gone on."~~

The description of the vision goes on until the moment in which, writes H. D., "... I shut off 'cut out' before the final picture, before (you might say) the explosion took place. But though I admit to myself that now I have had enough, maybe just a little too much, Bryher, who has been waiting by me, carries on the 'reading' where I left off. Afterwards she told me that she had seen nothing on the wall there, until I dropped my head in my hands. She had been there with me patient, wondering, no doubt deeply concerned and not a little anxious as to the outcome of my state or mood. But as I relaxed, let go, from complete physical and mental exhaustion, she saw what I did not see. It was the last section of the series, or the last concluding symbol. . . ." "She said it was a circle like the sun-disk and a figure within the disk; a man, she thought, was reaching out to draw the image of a woman (my Nike) into the sun beside him."

Nike, or Victory, was the last of the figures to appear on the wall, and the author had described her minutely: "She is a common-or-garden angel, like any angel you may find on an Easter or Christmas card." She was made of light like the first three symbols, which she also called "my three cards." "But unlike them, she is not flat or static, she is in space, in unwall'd space, not flat against the wall, though she moves upward as against its surface. She is a moving-picture and fortunately she moves swiftly. Not swiftly exactly but with a sure floating that at least gives my mind some rest, as if my mind had now escaped the bars of that ladder, no longer climbing or caged but free and with wings."

"The Professor translated the pictures on the wall . . . as a desire for union with my mother." Without contradicting him, H. D. gives a different interpretation, or rather two different interpretations, for the writing which appeared on the wall. "We can read or translate it as a suppressed desire for forbidden signs and wonders, breaking bounds, a suppressed desire to be a Prophetess. . . . Or this writing-on-the-wall is merely an extension of the artist's mind, a picture or an illustrated poem, taken out of the actual dream or daydream content and projected from within. . . ."

In any case, it was a fundamental experience, an experience in which the stuff of past life was transformed into writing. It gave H. D. the feeling that she had a poetic vocation, together with the certainty that all this was possible because of the woman who was beside her and who, at the decisive moment, ~~said to her: "Go ahead."~~

CHAPTER ONE

Now we want to tell how what those great women gained for themselves became a gain for us as well. It will be, necessarily, a partial telling. Among the things we cannot explain, because we have no documentation for them, one at least must be mentioned, and that is the effect that every woman's real mother has on her. Our mothers gave us the idea that the female gender can attain greatness, that first ingenious idea which we then asked her—almost always in vain—to confirm. Most of the time, she knew nothing more about it, or if she did know something more, she was so confused about it that she made things harder for us.

The first groups: Demau and Rivolta femminile

~~The first declaration of Italian feminism is dated December 1, 1966, and is entitled "Manifesto programmatico del gruppo Demau" [Manifesto of the Demau Group's Program].¹ Demau was the abbreviation for "demythification of patriarchal authoritarianism." Actually, neither the group nor its declaration had much to do with demystifying authoritarianism.~~

The main subject of the declaration, and of the texts that came after it—in 1967, "Alcuni problemi sulla questione femminile" [Some Problems on the Woman Question], and in 1968, "Il maschile come valore dominante" [The Masculine as Dominant Value]—was the contradiction between women and society. There is contradiction, because women are a problem for women. It is a contradiction, then it follows that society in turn is a problem for women.

This was the new view put forward by Demau. Women are a social problem, the problem which at the time was called "the woman question," and which cannot be solved until women on their part pose it as the problem which society is for them; that is, it cannot be solved as long as one goes on thinking and reasoning about women from the socio-historical point of view without ever turning the perspective upside down and putting women, putting ourselves as women, in the position of subjects who rethink history and society, starting with ourselves.

follow. The women's movement started with the practice of small consciousness-raising groups, which was also its first political form. In these small, women-only groups, women could talk freely about their experiences, provided that they remained within the limits of what they had personally lived through. It was thanks to this strict adherence to personal, lived experience that women's difference was finally able to appear. But what did not, could not, appear was the idea that a woman has in herself the will to exceed the limits of her personal experience precisely in order to be faithful to it—which is her true, proper transcendence.

The practice of *autocoscienza* began to spread at the beginning of the '70s, in part thanks to Rivolta femminile, which followed the example and ideas of American feminism. The "Manifesto di Rivolta femminile" borrowed several ideas from American feminism as well as the certainty that it was interpreting an incipient mass movement. However, it did not depend on the practice of consciousness-raising for either its content or its language, just as the Demau articles did not, for obvious chronological reasons.

Autocoscienza, the first invention of feminist politics

The political practice of consciousness-raising was invented in the U.S., we do not know by whom, toward the end of the '60s. In Italy it was called *autocoscienza* [self-consciousness], a term adopted by Carla Lonzi, who organized one of the first Italian groups to adopt that practice. Groups of women met to talk about themselves, or about anything else, as long as it was based on their own personal experience. These groups were intentionally kept small and were not part of larger organizations. From 1970 on, groups of this kind were formed in every part of the industrialized world. The women's movement cannot be identified with the practice of *autocoscienza*, but the latter certainly contributed in a decisive way to make feminism a mass movement. It was a simple, ingenious practice.

Equality had not yet been attained when women began to have to bear the brunt of their new social standing as equals of men, together with that of continuing discrimination. It was too much; suddenly the prospect of becoming real equals with the opposite sex lost its attraction. Many turned their backs on that possibility and blazed an entirely different trail, that of women's separatism. Women have always been accustomed to meeting among themselves to talk about their problems far from masculine ears. *Autocoscienza* was grafted onto this widespread, though little-appreciated, social custom, and gave it political dignity. This is the way, it was said, that we participate in politics; other ways do not suit us, neither those of the great organizations nor those of democratic representation—and not even the new ways invented at that time by the youth movements to participate directly in the political process. In the one, as in the others, what we know and want is denied expression, or the necessary freedom of expression.

The small *autocoscienza* group was the social site where, for the first time, women could talk about their experience openly, and where this talk had acknowledged value. Before, that experience had been invisible, lost human material which the social body consumed almost without knowing it and to which it attached no value; it de-valued it. In Milan, *autocoscienza* was the predominant political practice between 1970 and 1974. Even groups such as Demau that had been formed with different characteristics adopted this technique.

Three publications which came out in those years attest to this: *Donne e' bello* [Woman Is Beautiful], which was published in 1972 by the Anabasi group organized two years earlier, and the first and second issues of *Sottosopra* [Upside Down], which came out in 1973 and 1974 respectively, on the initiative of several Milanese groups. The Anabasi magazine, which came out only once, contains almost nothing but American and French texts. The two issues of *Sottosopra* are devoted mainly, as the subtitle explains, to the "experiences of feminist groups in Italy."

The editorial that introduces *Donne e' bello* expresses the general feeling which is associated with the practice of *autocoscienza*: "We women," it begins, "have never really communicated with one another." Our first reaction is to "feel that problem as something personal," but it is a mistake to do so. In reality, our isolation derives from the "divisions between women created by men." Masculine culture has imposed on women an "oppressive straitjacket of models." Because of the "solitude" of our lives, these models have given each of us "the feeling that we are misfits, antisocial, neurotic, hysterical, crazy." "Isolated and unhappy," women tend to "think of their problems as personal defects." Those problems are, instead, "a social and political phenomenon," because they are common to all women. This discovery "has led to the movement," a great movement: women have begun "taking action all over the world."

However, the press falsifies the meaning of the movement; it attributes "ridiculous aims" to it in order to "mask the real reasons for our struggle." Men are not willing to modify "the present social status quo that guarantees them the monopoly of power." On the other hand, the editorial states, "we are not at all interested in sharing this competitive kind of power. . . . The masculine models are completely extraneous to our interests." We do not want to imitate men; on the contrary, we are pleased to "have been born female." "A new solidarity" has been created among women, one "from which we want to exclude antagonism, competition, and the mania for commanding and overpowering others." What we want is "to be able to experience the pleasure" of being women, and naturally "without having to submit to the yoke of subjugation and oppression which now afflicts us all."

They refuse, adamantly, to use others' ideas: "We want no intermediaries, no interpreters," that is, men. "We no longer believe what men, politicians or journalists, scientists or husbands, say about us, about our destiny, about our desires and duties" (the whole sentence is underlined). But what if the inter-

mediaries were women, like the authors of the editorial and the essays they are presenting? This hypothesis is not taken into consideration. The collection of essays is merely "an invitation to women to express themselves," an aid in "overcoming their initial inhibitions." Feminism makes an exciting proposal: "Let us get rid of unacceptable structures and assumptions, so that true thoughts and feelings can flow freely." Women must no longer conform to others' opinions; we have finally attained the "freedom to think, say, do, and be what *we decide to*, including the freedom to make mistakes," which for some women was "the most liberating thing." The editorial ends by asking its readers for contributions. Like the *autocoscienza* groups, this journal offers "a space for talk, where everything that each of you says is important and increases the level of you, and other women's, consciousness."¹⁰

The practice of *autocoscienza* was backed by a partly explicit, partly implicit theory which is evident in the text we have been quoting. First of all, there is the notion of the small group, which was fully developed by American feminists. The editorial does not mention it, but the journal includes several essays on the subject. Second, there is the thesis that personal experience (and therefore also the words that express it) has intrinsic authenticity. That authenticity is thought to be absolute, in the sense that there is no possible authenticity for women except in what they experience themselves. This position conflicts with the fact that, according to the editorial, there are women who spontaneously think and act in wrong ways (for example, they are competitive, or they feel guilty when they dedicate time to themselves). This apparent difficulty is solved by the positing of an external agent: women are subject to these conflicts within themselves or in their relationships because of what men say and do.

The idea of a female mediation between oneself and the world is not, as we saw, taken into consideration, in spite of the fact that the journal is committed to explaining the ideas (of which some are theoretical) of women to other women. In the context of *autocoscienza*, this was no incongruity. The practice of *autocoscienza*, in fact, presupposed and promoted a perfect reciprocal identification. I am you, you are me; the words that one of us uses are women's words, hers and mine. Of course, this is valid to the extent that the woman who is speaking has attained self-consciousness, since consciousness is the political act in which one discovers and affirms women's common identity. When that common identity is recognized, it has the power of uniting women among themselves as much as, and better than, any organization could.

Lastly, *autocoscienza* groups thought that words have a liberating effect. That idea may have come from psychoanalytic therapy, in a revised version. In fact, the liberating effect comes from words exchanged in groups and among women, without the help of interpretation, because what women suffer from, basically, is not speaking for themselves, not saying by themselves what they are and what they want, but saying it instead to themselves, with the words of others.

Look at yourself and change

If we compare the content of the first feminist documents (those of Demau and Rivolta feminine), which were not inspired by *autocoscienza*, with the content which this practice caused to emerge, it is striking how much more the theme of women's oppression is stressed in the latter and how, on the contrary, thought devoted to reality is not expressed there, except for matters having to do with women's condition of subordination to men. It must, however, be added that the theory-practice of *autocoscienza* was devised in such a way as to be able to be shaped by individual women. There were some groups, starting with Demau and Rivolta feminine, that limited the consideration of experiences with men so as to focus attention on other relationships or to illuminate moments of autonomy in women's lives.

In the first issue of *Sottosopra*, there are relatively few articles which reflect the practice of *autocoscienza*. These are very good, as are the things we sometimes say without having to search for the right words. The other, more numerous essays are discussions of feminist politics.

Some feminists had wanted this "newspaper," as it was called, in order to satisfy the "most important need, for knowledge and exchange among already extant groups," and thus to be the means for the formation of "a feminist *movement* which is something more than the more or less well known existence of various groups of women." The introductory note explains that they propose to "construct a reality that differs from the small group, something yaster, more complex, which is not an alternative, of course, but simply has different functions from those of the small group." The small group is where self-consciousness is attained, while the movement must satisfy the "need to do something which has an effect on the reality in which we live."¹¹

The desire to modify social reality existed, therefore, but according to the authors of this introduction, the small group was not able to satisfy it. Rivolta feminine contradicts this view in that same issue: it claims to exist and consist exclusively in "its *autocoscienza* groups."¹² So does an article by Demau that says: "we do not want to turn away from women; hence we will continue to exist as a small group."¹³

The journal contained several other contradictions as well. It could do so because its intention was to "faithfully reflect the true state of the movement," which it presented, however, not as riddled by internal contradictions but as "made up of many unconnected groups doing very different things." The journal proposed to both reflect and change this state of affairs by fostering knowledge and confrontation between the groups.

Faithful reflection was therefore understood to be an instrument of change for the reality it mirrored, an idea which arose from the very heart of the practice of *autocoscienza*. Each woman, finding her exact reflection in a fellow woman, discovers that she is different from what she thought she was and

recognizes in her new image what she had always been without knowing it. *Autocoscienza* had that power and that limit: it could not show differences between women because "I am you, you are me." If differences arose, they were noted insofar as they were able to bring about reciprocal change, so that reciprocal identification could be again set up and was reinforced by this experience. Those were the years when sexual difference was confirmed this way: by the search for oneself in one's fellow women.

Although rarely mentioned explicitly, the practice of *autocoscienza* influenced the tone of the whole first *Sottosopra*, as it did the Anabasi review; both were conceived from the practice of a small group where every woman could speak knowing that her words would be listened to and not judged. According to the explicit statement of the editors, any woman and any group of women not connected to male organizations could publish material in *Sottosopra*. The editors promised not to turn down any articles. All those sent to them were guaranteed publication. This was done, and new, unforeseen problems cropped up.

The second issue, which came out in 1974, opened with a "debate on the role of *Sottosopra*." The first article was written by Lotta femminista [Feminist Struggle], a political group well known because it fought for salaries for housewives. In this article they affirm peremptorily that if the review wants to talk about "experiences," as its subtitle proclaims, then it must talk above all "about feminist activism in factories, in neighborhoods, in consulting rooms; and make use of all available information about the actual state of oppression and exploitation of the female masses."¹⁴

This is followed by the troubled "contributions of several Milanese feminists who have followed the progress of *Sottosopra*." By "followed the progress" must be understood: packaged. They are editors in the sense we explained above, that is, those women who were wholly responsible for the venture, from printing to distribution, but who had no editorial powers. They had given these up as a calculated political risk. One woman reaffirms the idea: "Making a collection of experiences will serve as an incentive to personal responsibility and activity." Others begin to have doubts because the first issue of the journal did not attain the results hoped for: "A year has passed since *Sottosopra* first came out, and the expanded debate we need so desperately has not yet taken place. . . ."

Doubts about the paper itself are also expressed. "When we were discussing the first issue as well as the second," one woman writes, "I was one of those who insisted that *Sottosopra* had to publish everything," but there are some "risks: for example, the risk of boredom (because of articles which are too long or old hat), of repetition (several pieces on the same subject), of giving too much space to those who are stubborn enough to demand it." This may be an allusion to Lotta femminista, which, though it had its own publications, sent *Sottosopra* long articles which were all a bit alike, and moreover defended positions, such as salaries for housewives, which the editors opposed. Another woman put her finger on the real problem, the contradiction which is created by the fact that, in guaranteeing space to women's words, you may end up impoverishing them owing to the effect of a "static coupling of proposals and views which are angled differently."

In spite of these doubts, it was decided to bring out the second issue "more or less following the same project as the first."¹⁵ The result was more voluminous and more boring than the first. It included quite a few articles which, taken singly, would have been lively and original. But as the aforementioned reader observed, their static coupling stifles them. As a matter of fact, it proved impossible to find enough people to produce *Sottosopra* according to the original formula. A "journal group" survived which, however, did not succeed in producing anything concrete. There were other issues of *Sottosopra*, but their project was different.

The original idea of producing something new by adjoining different views was abandoned for reasons that had less to do with the journal than with the politics that shaped it. The effect of boredom, or worse, of powerlessness, generated by this collection of so many different experiences began to weigh on even the small *autocoscienza* group.

The sense of growing dissatisfaction is evident in many texts published in the second *Sottosopra*. They mostly say that *autocoscienza* is all well and good, but it is not enough. So they try to figure out what to add or how to strengthen and develop it. To take only one example, "Esperienza alla Fedà" [An Experience at the Fedà Factory], written by women who had joined women workers in an occupied factory: "Going personally to see what was happening fulfilled the need we felt to go beyond the work of *autocoscienza* done in groups. We recognize that that is an essential method of attaining consciousness individually and collectively, but by itself it is not enough," because "it makes us aware, but does not give us the instruments for change; it does not help us develop the contractual power we need to transform society, but only consciousness and anger."¹⁶

Actually, by now the practice of *autocoscienza* was producing a feeling of impotence for the simple reason that it had exhausted its potential. It was a limited political practice which could not be prolonged after it succeeded in making women conscious of being a separate sex, a sex neither subordinate nor assimilable to the male. It had removed woman's difference from the position of being spoken (by others), and had put her in the position of speaking for herself. Problems and contradictions grew out of this practice which the practice itself could not deal with, much less solve. Its very way of working—women listening to each other tell about feelings and events they had experienced in common—was limited. It was fascinating, by virtue of the fascinating discovery of her own self which each woman made in the mirror that was her fellow woman. There was certainly no hint of boredom or feeling of impotence in that act of discovery. But the appearance of boredom was a signal. Something new, not repetition, had to follow a discovery to keep it alive.

There are many signs of dissatisfaction in the essays which document this phase of passage, but no real criticism of *autocoscienza*, at least not by those who had thoroughly practiced it. They abandoned it simply because they had found something new to follow it. It must be said, however, that not everyone abandoned it. Rivolta femminile and many recently set-up groups kept the practice for several more years.

Those were years of triumphant feminism when new groups were continually being formed. Because it was so well known and ingeniously simple, *autocoscienza* was a practice that many women adopted spontaneously as they came close to feminism, so much so that in the women's movement *autocoscienza* was considered a sort of initiation rite throughout the '70s (though not later).

This practice left women's minds with an enduring delight in reasoning while remaining in contact with perceptible reality, and with the ability to use that contact with reality in elaborating theoretical thought. Without that delight and that ability, the original forms of "female transcendence" referred to by our first theorists might not have been discovered. The first issue of *Sottosopra* gives a good example of this in the article entitled "La nudità" [Nudity].¹⁷ There are others, such as "La violenza invisibile" [Invisible Violence],¹⁸ in the second issue.

"La violenza invisibile" takes a position which is more anguished yet closer to the disappearing practice of *autocoscienza*. As it was dying out, the practice of women getting together to talk about their personal experiences generated, as we saw, a sense of dissatisfaction. Some said this was because it did not furnish us with the means to change the reality around us. But the article on "invisible violence" points to another, quite different complication. Out of those now-repetitive discussions, that harping on the painful aspects of the female condition, grew a dimly perceived anguish which had roots deep in places where the reasoning of political consciousness did not reach. This anguish was the fear of solitude, dependence on men, the absence of mother's love, the weakness of desire. . . .

In search of concepts: our meetings with the French women

The *autocoscienza* phase ended with a double, opposite movement of the female mind: introversion toward its obscure regions ("La violenza invisibile") and extroversion toward society ("Esperienza alla Fedà"). Two theories, Marxism and psychoanalysis, could aid the female mind in its double movement. At the time, quite a few people thought that these two theories were compatible in some ways, in spite of their obvious differences. However, they presented an additional, serious, and unsolved problem for us. In both theories, the difference of being women was conceived of from a neutral-masculine point of view. For Marxism, women make up an oppressed social group whose liberation depends basically on the class struggle. For Freudian psychoanalysis, our difference from men is reduced to our lacking something men possess. In other versions, our difference disappears in an ideal complementarity between the sexes.

The details are not important here. The point is that the female mind needed concepts with which to think itself and the world, but the concepts which

human culture offered were such that they denied that she was (inasmuch as she was female) a thinking principle.

In order to show that woman is the original principle of herself, the theory of *autocoscienza* excluded, as we know, any form of mediation. "From now on, we want no screen between ourselves and the world," reads the manifesto of Rivolta femminile, because "behind every ideology, we glimpse the hierarchy of the sexes."¹⁹ Thus feminist thought was in a bind: it needed instruments with which to relate to itself and the world, but in order to save its own authenticity, it could use only the one, *autocoscienza*, which had become, however, unsatisfactory for many women.

In Milan, the women who found themselves in this situation did the following: they used the theoretical instruments that their culture offered and thought up a political practice that would adjust them so that they could serve to signify the original human difference in being a woman. In doing this, the Milanese women were inspired by the example of a group of French feminists known as Politique et psychanalyse (Politics and Psychoanalysis) which was organized in Paris in 1968.

The 1973 *Sottosopra* has a section devoted to foreign experiences where a brief article, "A proposito di una tendenza" [Concerning a Trend], by the French women was published. We are not a group, they write, but a current within the women's movement which is characterized by a social and ideological practice. "These two different levels of practice, in order not to be blind, anarchical, dogmatic, falsely revolutionary, idealist," must come to terms with Marxism and psychoanalysis. "Inventions are not made out of nothing; spontaneous generation does not exist." They therefore rejected *autocoscienza*, which, in fact, they had never practiced. They specify that it is not a question of privileging other theoretical discourses over our own political practice, but of "going through them again": "The available instruments of thought are already stamped with the masculine, bourgeois mark, just like everything else that surrounds us, for example, the most ordinary language. (Neutral language does not exist)." And they will stay this way "until we take them apart and analyze them so that we can go beyond them." How? "Starting from concrete contradictions on the ground level, on the level of the body, we will work hard to transform this social, political, ideological reality that censors us. . . . That transformation is a process of continual production of knowledge by and about women in themselves/for themselves."²⁰

In 1972, the French women organized two international meetings, one of which lasted a whole week, at La Tranche (Vendée) under the auspices of the MLF [Mouvement de libération des femmes], and a five-day meeting near Rouen, which was organized entirely by Politique et psychanalyse. Several Italian women participated, and were thus able to get a concrete idea of the "laborious transformation" which the above article mentions; they were greatly impressed by it, both intellectually and emotionally.

A woman who calls herself "a comrade from Milan" ends the account of her stay at La Tranche (an account that appeared in the 1973 *Sottosopra*) with

these words: "I became thoroughly convinced that we women, myself included, are not simply an oppressed caste that rebels; we are not only capable of making a correct analysis in order to work out an effective strategy; we are not just comrades in a struggle for liberation. . . . There is all of that, but it is leaved, you might say, made splendid and happy and powerful, by the evidence, which I experienced, that women for women can be creatures on whom you can depend, to whom you can entrust yourself, with whom you can play flutes and tambourines all night long, and have fun dancing, discussing, making plans and making them come true." Up till then, the writer tells us, she had done these things only in male company.

"I discovered," she ends by saying, "that one can, that one really needs to, 'fall in love' with women," and she adds a note to say that she uses quotation marks because the expression "fall in love" is often misused, but she cannot think of any other. "This was the first, completely new, step forward with respect to our old consciousness of common oppression, a step which led me to joyously recognize *myself too* in other women, and to reconstruct my identity, not just in pain and anger but with enthusiasm and laughter."²¹

The relationship of one woman to another is unthinkable in human culture. The female instrument which transforms the world is the practice of relationships among women: this is, in short, the invention of the women of *Politique et psychanalyse*. They theorized about and practiced female relationships of such human complexity that nothing was excluded—body, mind, pleasure, money, power. . . . All of the human potentialities in a woman were admitted, and everything was observed most attentively. The analysis of what took place among women was made with theoretical instruments, especially those of psychoanalysis, which were, however, adapted to this unforeseen use.

Again in the 1973 *Sottosopra*, there are comments by several Milanese women who had participated in the Rouen meeting and then met to discuss it. Living in a community of women was an extraordinary experience. The most amazing discovery was of the intense eroticism present there. It was not lesbianism, but sexuality no longer imprisoned in masculine desire. "We talked very little about our relationships with men," and a lot instead about the relationship with the mother. That was not a new theme: "we had come to consider it the fundamental relationship," but without considering its "sexual dimension." "The first censorship, the first repression of sexuality, takes place in the relationship with the mother." Even in women-only groups, sexuality is involved, in a relationship with other women there are "traces of one's relationship with the mother." Love between women "is a recouping of female sexuality."

"Many of the women we met," the Milanese women continue, "openly asserted they were homosexuals" and gave their political work as the reason for this choice: "the French women say: our demonstrations of affection serve to reclaim our sexuality." One woman comments: "The atmosphere was certainly not particularly pleasant; it was, instead, one of contradiction and tension. My anguish derived from the fact that I found myself face to face with women who

were honestly trying to find themselves and who were not afraid to lose themselves, striving in a constant search, a constant critique." Another woman, less inclined toward anguish, realized that "those women have an easier way of moving, talking, and above all *projecting a different life for themselves*, something almost never done in our country. They are women who give you the sensation that they can reshape the world." Alluding to a problem that was beginning to torment feminists, the problem of "the other women," she notes that "the French women did not need to talk about others because they were themselves already important."²²

In contrast with the prevailing opinion, one of the Milanese women said that the French group gave her a "feeling of unreality owing to the absence of an engagement with reality which is, in fact, a masculine reality." According to her, "many women struggle to encounter male reality, to change it, and want to *keep* this dialectic going." She says "keep," whereas, as someone else noticed before, "the French women say that historically there has never been a true dialectic between the sexes." The latter is also the position of Demau and Rivolta feminine. More specifically, Carla Lonzi theorized that there is no possibility of dialectic between woman and man and that the liberation of women comes from their assertion of difference, not from overcoming it.

The woman who said "keep" felt (something which at the time was not noticed or discussed) that "the issue of homosexuality—proposed by the French women—is not a theoretical matter but a kind of affective, sexual life of the whole group." From this "life," during the five days of the meeting, she received an "ambivalent sensation" of attraction, envy, and uneasiness, and she concludes that "to repropose the question of the mother in such a radical, sexual form may mean being swallowed up again for many women, turning back" (to the primitive forms of the relationship with the mother).²³

In order to understand her ambivalence, perhaps we should keep one circumstance in mind. The French group was headed by a woman who was not in a position formally distinct from the others, and yet had a personal prestige and an eminence within the group which no one, neither she nor the others, tried to hide. The Italians noticed this and were surprised by it: "We asked, 'Antoinette'—that was the woman's name—'seems to be your leader. How come?' 'That's true,' one of them answered, 'she is our leader; she's the one who has a certain power, we admit it. Let us also point out, however, that what we want to do is face this contradiction.'" The Italian commented: "They are aware of the problem, of the decisive role this woman plays"; she, on her part, "is all intent on her own liberation and continually unloads her own contradictions onto the group." The conclusion is that "Antoinette is the leader of the group; however, she is also the promoter of her own destruction as leader: this fact is rather dramatic. . . ."²⁴

The idea that one woman might occupy a preeminent position with respect to others had no place in feminism. The theory and practice of *autocoscienza* was such that it did not need it in order to work. It is true that in actual fact the women's groups were almost always set up by decision of one or two individu-

als, who then, precisely for this reason, occupied a position in the group which was not comparable to that of the others.

The Italians were aware of this. However, it did not constitute "something to be theorized," but was simply an aspect of the "life" of the whole group, unmentioned therefore, and negligible to the extent that the classical feminist group did not express the sexual component of women-only meetings, except in the form of sisterly affection, in accordance with the well-known concept of sisterhood theorized by American feminists. The French, instead, took note of the sexual component in all of its manifestations, including that of power.

Some of the Italians understood that there was strength well worth appropriating in this ability to act politically without idealizing women and their relationships, and they tried to find a way to learn what the French had to teach. In 1973, the French were invited to a small meeting at Yariotti, on the Ligurian coast. Five or six of them came, as well as about fifty Italians, mainly from Milan and Turin. Homosexuality and relationships between women were discussed, in French. There was dancing to the beat of the usual tambourines: the French women preferred them to other musical instruments. During the day, one talked; in the evening, one danced. The same format was followed a year later at the large national meeting at Pinarella di Cervia.

During those years, 1972-74, *autocoscienza* was practiced a great deal and, as a matter of fact, was a new experience for many women who, having heard the message of feminism, wanted to translate it into political action. There was nothing new in feminist politics at that time except its growing in number. The predominant political form of Italian feminism was, and continued to be, the small group of women who meet to talk about their most ordinary experiences in order to understand themselves and the world.

But through this form of political practice, and without replacing it, a new practice was being elaborated: it was called the practice of relationships among women. The phrase was mentioned for the first time in a text published at the beginning of 1974: "Feminism's protest against the male-master is visible, but the rest is not, that is, our existence as women together, the practice of relationships among women, the possible liberation of our bodies which has already begun to take place, of emotions hitherto frozen or fixed univocally on the male world, and the struggle to find a language for [women's] joy."²⁵

The text, entitled "Mater mortueta," published in *L'erba voglio*, no. 15 (one of the journals of the antiauthoritarian movement), was a polemic against the importance being given to the fantasy of an imaginary "mother who satiates and devours." In masculine thought, this figure was called in to explain, in psychoanalytic terms, the harmful phenomena typical of consumer society. As we have seen, it was a figure that could be used against feminist groups and female relationships in order to try to negate their rational political significance.

Our meeting with the French women helped us to find answers to several pressing questions. Other effects were to follow more slowly. The main problem was to understand the significance of, and decide how to use, the female energy that had been released by the attaining of political consciousness. Briefly put,

many women no longer devoted to men and to (having) children all the time and energies they had before. What was to be done with them? The answer was in the facts, for time and energies had been spontaneously rerouted in the direction of the women themselves and of other women. However, like every other human act, this rerouting too needed the validation of a meaning, and this was given to it precisely by the politics of relationships among women.

There was less and less talk in women's groups about personal relations with the opposite sex. By now, they were a "problem on the wane" for some, while others considered them rather a secondary problem or one to be put off, as opposed to the "new thing," which was to live and know oneself in relation to one or more women: "It's all new, with a woman" (*Sottosopra* no. 1, 1973). Women joked about slogans such as "Woman Is Beautiful"; they became impatient with the feminism of protest and vindication: "The first phase is one of protest against man, but little by little, as you progress in feminist consciousness, it becomes less and less the main concern."²⁶

Under the banner of this new politics, a period of female socialization began which continues to the present day. The early days were exciting, of course. There were, as usual, meetings and discussions, but even more appealing were the parties, dances, dinners, vacations, trips. Everything was organized as well as possible, at times extremely well, and in the midst of all these happenings there were friendships, loves, gossip, tears, flowers, and gifts. It was an unusual way of doing politics, which revealed to many women that the system of social relations could be changed—not in the abstract, as we have all learned is possible, but in the concrete, inventing new ways to spend our own energy.

The practice of the unconscious

Compared to women's meetings in *autocoscienza* groups, the more varied and intimate encounters that were promoted by the new politics produced profound changes in places where the words of *autocoscienza* could not reach. There were new things happening, which only partly corresponded to the political knowledge we had already gained. There were old things, which we had learned in connection with men, and which were identically repeated with women.

Some women turned to psychoanalysis for help when they came up against this difficult nexus of repetition and modification. This occurrence, almost irrelevant if one considers the small number of persons involved, was, however, a sign that there must be a bigger problem: we were shifting something without knowing what it was—"the change that we expect from our political action comes from elsewhere," for example, in a session of psychoanalytic therapy. There was "a risk in turning things upside down," the risk, that is, of doing politics with our "personal fantasies" while "the real political problems connected to our condition as women" are treated in analysis "as a personal illness and neurosis" (*Sottosopra* no. 3, 1976).²⁷

Some women followed the example of Politique et psychanalyse and in-

vented a new technique which was called "the practice of the unconscious." Two Milanese groups worked on it for two years, 1974-1975, and then two other groups did, in Turin and Rome. It was a practice difficult in itself and difficult to explain. It was invented in order to endow women's speech with those experiential contents which affected it unconsciously and, consequently, threatened to weaken it. We knew that this was true, because of certain ideological stresses and strains in our discourse, because listening to each other was boring, because we oscillated between inside and outside without finding the connection between the two, but what was blocking out the speaking of experience remained somewhat of an enigma.

It was decided to work on this by transferring the psychoanalytical technique of listening into the political context of relationships among women. We analyzed those behaviors which revealed the greatest disconnection between the spoken words and the real motives behind them, such as aggressiveness, the violent rejection of aggressiveness, silence, recrimination. Unspoken or disallowed aspects of women's lives were brought to light, e.g., one's complicity with masculine domination, one's continuing dependence on men, one's anxious search for approval. Above all, fantasies were analyzed, because fantasies "constitute an aspect of reality which is not secondary, but through which both the repetition of the same and the possibility of change have to pass."

On analysis, those fantasies were found to be intrusive and rudimentary, all of them revolving around drastic alternatives. It was evident that the fantasy of acceptance/rejection dominated in relationships between women. Female experience appeared to be a mute body swathed in a cloud of fantasies: a real body in lively, perceptual contact with the real world, but almost altogether lacking the means of symbolic reproduction of itself in relation to that world; human experience given up to the interpretation of others, incapable of self-interpretation. Not knowing how to say it, she prefers to imagine what she is and what she wants. "The symbolic level is precluded to us women."

The existence we are searching for, then, must be sought at the symbolic level, so that we succeed in saying by ourselves what we want, think, desire within ourselves, and not in imitation of, or in reaction to, what others say. The first discovery of feminism was confirmed and made more valuable by this. It is true that women basically suffer by not telling about themselves starting from themselves, and by telling about themselves starting from what others say about them. However, even if man's speech has such a power to interfere in a woman's life, we now saw that this did not depend so much on blatant and forceful dishonesty, or even on our having internalized external violence, as we previously believed. It was subtler than that: man can interfere because he knows the byways, because he knows how to use mediation and thus make his desires felt in a given reality. "Our desire seems to be able to come to light only with the appearance, the imposition of the other's desire."²⁸

The problem of the relationship with the mother assumed a central position. If the female mind remains in the power of the most elemental emotions, if there is an unsurmountable infantilism which disappears only with the intervention of masculine authority or imitating men, it means that something of the

ancient relationship with the mother remains unresolved within ourselves. There was nothing new in this idea, if one thinks about psychoanalytic theory. However, the context gave it a new meaning. Something had changed in social reality—free relationships between women. And the ancient infantile demand of having the mother all to oneself reappeared in that context: it returned to play itself out toward another destination, a destiny different from the one socially prescribed and made up of loss, disillusionment, recrimination.

We had to interrogate our deepest emotions, start all over again, not resign ourselves to the fact that the male child corners the mother's affection in our culture. Perhaps the mother who bears a female child wants, hopes, to give (her) history a new, different outcome. One sign of this was the fact that women no longer wanted to, or could, banish aggressiveness from women's groups. "By cutting aggressiveness out, everything is kept quiet on the surface, even if inside us, among us, something in the depths of our being becomes ever more menacing; something repressed, and prohibited women from time immemorial, is left out. Women are tenderhearted, they all say. Should we listen to what they all say or to that novel, extraordinary something that is happening among us?"²⁹

The practice of the unconscious had a limited following. Its advocates tried to spread information about it, first with a flyer run off on a ditto machine. This was "Rapporto analitico e movimento delle donne" [The Psychoanalytic Relationship and the Women's Movement], which appeared in September 1974 and was followed immediately by a printed article (from which we have quoted) entitled "Pratica dell'incoscio e movimento delle donne" [The Practice of the Unconscious and the Women's Movement], which reproduced part of the previous text and added new material; this was reprinted in full in *L'erba voglio*, nos. 18-19, in January 1975. Lastly, its adherents held a small national meeting at San Vincenzo on the Tuscan coast in the spring of that year.

These repeated presentations are an indication of how difficult it was to explain the concept, on the one hand, and to understand it, on the other. Some women, it must be said, were frankly against it, for instance, the "twenty-two feminists" who expressed their disagreement in a letter addressed to the editor of *L'erba voglio*. They protested above all against the specialized language which "does not jibe with the feeling of sisterhood we looked for in feminists," and they accused the women who use it of "scaring away a large number of women." They were referring, to be exact, to the Feminist Collective of Via Cherubini, which had been organized in Milan in 1972 and of which both the adherents of the practice of the unconscious and the twenty-two signers of the letter were members.³⁰

The meeting at Pinarella

Some idea of the work done in those two years was communicated to the women's movement on the occasion of the second large meeting at Pinarella di Cervia held in November 1975. The practice of the unconscious with all its

attendant intricate arguments was not explained, but its more immediate political implications were.

A woman who participated in "the large, 'individual-collective' practice of the unconscious' group" tells us that "a new dimension was slowly emerging: I was no longer alone, but neither was I comforted by that unity among women which absorbs one into the affective mire I knew so well, that suffocating sensation of not being able to be different because this would break up that maternal unity which cannot tolerate transgression or any countergroup." The writer, who signs herself Serena (Roma), states that she arrived at Pinarella "exhausted" by the battles she had had with her group in the enlarged collective, battles against "going out" in favor of "finally going inside," without, however, knowing how to do it.

"The new dimension," she goes on, "was being able to be present, wholly, with all my contradictions and schizophrenia, for which I could not ask the group's maternal acceptance. . . . Seeing the others for the first time without the projection of identification we used to make in order to be close, but instead being there, in our differences; we helped each other, criticized each other—I can't seem to convey the idea, but what I mean is that perhaps, after years and years, we finally began to know one another."

The writer keeps on saying that she cannot convey in words what she experienced, and yet she does quite well, for example, when she remarks that "after the first day and a half, something strange happened to me: there were bodies under the heads that spoke, listened, laughed; if I spoke (with what tranquil serenity and unassertiveness did I talk to two hundred women!), somehow in my words there was my body, which had found a strange way of speaking itself."³¹

Serena's is the lead article of *Sottosopra* no. 3, which was published in March 1976 and devoted to the Pinarella meeting and the issues raised by the practice of the unconscious. The "strange way of speaking itself" was nothing but the symbolic representation of self. In the language of the practice of the unconscious, that symbolic birth takes place with the assistance of an "autonomous mother," that is, a mother no longer imagined as good/bad, no longer assailed by the fear of rejection when asking for acceptance, a mother speaking outside the dominant symbolic (the so-called law of the father) because finally interpellated by a female desire that articulates itself in words. This "mother" can be one's real mother or any woman or group of women, or even society as a whole.

More simply said, women are afraid of exposing their own desire, of exposing themselves when they do so, and this induces them to think that others prevent them from desiring; thus they cultivate and manifest desire as that which is prohibited them by an external authority. Female desire feels authorized to signify itself only in this negative form. Just think of the politics of equal rights, carried out by women who never put forward a will of their own but always and only claim what men have for themselves and is denied to women. The figure of the "autonomous mother" meant that, in order to exist, female difference must find legitimation by itself and must take risks for itself.

It is not an accident that the politics of equal rights was being slipped into feminism, even though it was in conflict with its basic ideas and arguments, which are all connected to the thought of sexual difference. Within feminism, the politics of equal rights had no theoretical grounding but was nourished by the weakness of female desire, its reluctance to expose itself, its lack of symbolic authorization.

At Pinarella the problem was addressed under the heading and in the traditional terms of the relation between the individual and the collectivity. But the only thing traditional was the heading; everything else still had to be invented. In fact, as the tapes of the debates show, centuries of masculine thinking about the relation between the individual and the collectivity had gone by almost without touching the female mind. This should not surprise us since that philosophizing was not meant to touch it, and men intended to be personally responsible for women's relation to society. As one woman puts it: "as soon as we draw near to feminism, we deny all the 'normality' there is behind us [in our past], and we place ourselves into a condition of ab-'normality' which we experience and suffer from. We leave behind our relationships with man, who is not only our sexual reference point but also our mediation with all that is social."³²

At the start, some of the women found it difficult to talk in such a large group and complained about it: "I thought I would be able to talk easily, starting with my personal problems, but instead today . . . I thought it would be possible for me to talk in a group, but I see that it isn't, and I explain this to myself by saying that each of us has specific problems, and the requests she makes don't always arouse immediate interest, so they end up being dropped. . . ." "In the small group," on the contrary, the feedback is "more immediate and much less alienating."

Others noted, and complained still more bitterly, that some women talk without difficulty, in spite of the big group, and prevail over the others: "This morning I felt very bad; I wasn't able to talk, to follow the arguments, to understand . . . some people carry on an argument that the others aren't able to understand . . . [they have] a greater cultural power of verbalization and self-assuredness." The same woman, however, wants to believe that in reality all women are prey to her own feelings of insecurity, and she says so: "I think that actually we are all insecure, but some of us succeed in hiding it better."

Other comparisons and identifications followed: "There was one girl who didn't understand . . . and was anxious to go on discussing a certain issue . . . a terrifying, crazy, aggressive reaction broke out against her." After a vivid report of the facts, the burning question was asked: "Why doesn't this aggressive reaction ever get directed toward the people who are regarded as possessing more valid cultural credentials?" The pain of being treated with contempt, which is tolerated in male society, becomes unbearable in a women's group. Finally, But the appearance of this pain risked overwhelming every other thought.

Judging from the taped debates, the "big group" at Pinarella worked mainly on the creation of forms and reasons for an autonomous female sociality, one,

that is, which does not depend on masculine mediation. The word which occurs again and again in these tapes is *immediacy*. "A woman comes here with all the weight of her personal history on her mind and a fundamental need for answers." And rightly so, because our politics are constructed from that history and from that need, but acting politically requires the setting up of a "collective dimension," and there is no collective dimension if each woman is unable to "bear" that "her problem will not be immediately addressed." We want to transform "our lived experience" into political material, and from this wish derives a "contradiction, which must be reconciled, between the immediacy of individual lived experience (desperation, joy . . .) and the collective as a whole." For our discourse to be collective, we must avoid "the immediacy of desire and experience" while succeeding, however, in putting desire and experience into "circulation." "The problem is that desire and the demand for love are presented in an abnormal form so they clash with the different reality of other women." Some say, then, that "acceptance" is necessary. No, reply others, "attention" is necessary.

"If we want to use the material that comes from different people," we must "accept the partiality of our personal experience, and avoid, for example, insisting on the total affirmation or acceptance of ourselves." Demanding to be totally accepted "seems to disguise precisely a desire to be rejected. . . . The collective is created when you succeed in breaking out of the kind of logic that claims your experience is everything."

The obstacle was, therefore, our close tie to what we ourselves felt and lived through. There was also, however, one valuable side to this attachment, and it was a loyalty to one's own sex. The fear of separating from one's own experience and thus losing oneself was not senseless. "We are in a situation in which everything regarding the body and hence affective life in all its various aspects, the fantasies that we carry within ourselves, the compulsion to repeat certain attitudes, all this has been denied and separated from all the rest. Politics and culture have grown, and still grow, out of a basic denial which is the denial of women's bodies, and starting from the body, from sexuality, all possible levels of women's existence have been denied. . . . the separation of politics from psychology, of the personal from the political, is a separation we find already in effect."

A politics which was not called politics

The means for unifying the double, contrary movement of the female mind in search of itself and of existence in the world was not discovered at Pinarella, or anywhere else during those years. On the contrary, the practice of relationships among women had the effect of accentuating divisions, as we realize when we read the observations of Lea (Milano) in *Sottosopra* no. 3, 1976, after she had spent a memorable vacation with some other women in Carloforte, Sardinia.

"The seascape and the company of women remain sweet memories, but a

specter of death and madness keeps me from thinking about them. I felt a senseless envy of my friends returning from Portugal [at that time, 1975, an attempt at social revolution was taking place in Portugal], who had seen 'the world,' who preserved a certain familiarity with the world. I felt I was a stranger to their experience, though not indifferent to it. Our consciousness of our reality/diversity as women cannot become indifference to the world without plunging us anew into nonexistence. . . . Our political practice cannot do us the wrong of reinforcing our marginalization. . . . How can we get out of this impasse? Will the women's movement have the strength and originality needed to uncover the *history of the body* without succumbing to the temptation of infantilism (an increase in dependency, omnipotence, indifference to the world, etc.)?"³³

However, where previously there was oscillation and uncertainty, a new way was now opening up: "now I know the conditions to lay down for relationships," the same woman declares. The way was the one just described, of a female sociality based on relations among women. Man is otherness for woman, the other who both mediates and negates her difference. Not so another woman, who is both different and like. Man can put you in relation with the whole world, indeed, but not with your own self, which is what another woman can do, and this compensates for the fact that she is a social mediatrix of modest proportions. Nevertheless, in the presence of a strong women's movement, she is no longer so modest a mediatrix.

The exercise of female mediation requires each woman to take note of the differences among women and come to terms with them, even when they are differences in power. In the Pinarella discussions of 1975, at a certain point we find a bold affirmation: "It is not a shock to anyone that here too, as everywhere else, relations are power relations."³⁴ This was false. The fact was shocking, and worse still, it carried the danger of pushing female experience back into its previous silence inside a cloud of fantasies of the kind "in reality, we are all insecure."

Thus progress was slow with respect to the ideas that cropped up every once in a while about female transcendence, about the desire to be social protagonists, about disparity and trust between women, about the symbolic. These ideas remained pending so long as the idea and the practice of a necessary female mediation between women and the world did not take effect. For this is a world, let us not forget, that is not simply unknown to women as it is to every human being born into it; in addition, a woman first apprehends it as a world which neither knows her nor wants to know her, unless she acquiesces to what has already been planned for her by others.

The practice of the unconscious applied to what was "negated" about being a woman, whether it was totally negated or relegated to a chapter on feminine psychology, in order to turn it into political reason. "It is important," the Pinarella records tell us, "that our practice take on this contradiction as well, the contradiction of giving preference to that which has been negated."³⁵ This meant that our politics would move in a direction contrary to that of every other

politics. It also meant parting from those feminists (some were present at Pinarella) who argued for mobilizing around such objectives as the legalization of abortion or the setting up of family planning centers.

Feminism had begun with the hunch that it was possible to engage in political action in a manner that was not called or perceived as politics. As a result of this first gamble, the women's movement gained a momentum that favored those who now wanted to try another experiment: that of giving social form to, and transforming into political content, the very aspect of human female experience that women themselves found difficult to put into words. From 1976 on, this work of transformation took on new forms. It was, in fact, around 1976 that the so-called *practice of doing* among women began.

In its original form, the practice of the unconscious presented several difficulties. We have already talked about how difficult it was to explain its characteristics to others. Worse than this was the fact that it tended to end up in interpretation and commentary instead of direct social change. It had, of course, produced one notable effect in keeping feminism from turning into an ideology which served as a front for a politics of equality. It had pushed the inquiry into female experience beyond conventional representations, including those produced by feminism.

But such critical inquiry was constrained within rather narrow boundaries, because "the context of contradictions"—as we shall see later—was getting smaller: "the one concerning man was hushed up, and the one concerning children was made a private matter, as was the problem of work; all these contradictions remained outside our analysis."³⁶ To the list of problems which were not faced, we would add the problem of power when it takes female form. Another whole book could be written, with the material on hand, about the vicissitudes of the female mind when confronted with the figures of its own power, real or imagined, loved or hated. The subject matter of discussion was shrinking, and discussion was becoming commentary and interpretation. Women adopted the practice of doing, as we shall see, to change this negative course of events.

The women's movement differs from other political movements in that it rapidly changes its practices. This characteristic is especially evident in Milanese feminism, where it takes the form of downright experimentation. Political practices change for different reasons and in different ways from one time to the next, either to try a new approach to an old problem or because an unforeseen problem crops up. There are practices that are mutually exclusive—such as the practice of the unconscious with respect to *autocostruzione*; there are practices that can coexist, and practices that require other specific ones, like the practice of doing and the practice of relationships among women.

This shifting of practices has not created problems of continuity as yet, possibly because women risk their human wholeness starting from an undeniably partial position. However, problems of existential continuity crop up; almost always, in fact, a change of political practice results in a partial alternation in the group between those who leave a new position because they no

longer see themselves in it, and those who instead take it up because they do see themselves in it. This is normal, of course, but causes problems for those who experience human relationships according to the model of the family, where alternations are determined essentially by death and birth.

The custom has been to give a name to each practice. The name, obviously, indicates the new idea that is being tried out. However, it also has the effect of emphasizing the artificiality of the situation. Some experimentation and artificiality is perhaps inevitable in women's struggle for a free social existence. For sexist domination is based on natural and social grounds without solution of continuity. To appeal to nature would be useless, since the answers it gives depend on the social interpretation which deduces women's human destiny directly from female anatomy. On the other hand, it was soon clear that there was no use in appealing to society either, since it contained no contradictions which required the free social existence of women for their resolution.

The latter point needs to be commented on. At the beginning of feminism, women did not think that way, and there are still many fighting for women's liberation who do not think that way. At the beginning, for example, it was thought that men too would have something to gain from the cessation of sexist domination. It was thought, that is, and is still thought by some women, that society as it was needed female freedom, and hence one needed only point out the existing contradictions in order to obtain a free social existence for women. According to them, the current contradictions in a development based entirely on technology are at the forefront of all the other social contradictions that beg for women's presence in the government of society.

An analysis of the evidence proves this view wrong. Society certainly needs women and, in moments of crisis or emergency, also needs to refer to female difference. But the feminine which is invoked in moments of crisis or emergency, today as yesterday, is a feminine without liberty. It is called in in those instances when society needs women more than men because of the sexist division of labor, such as when it needs caretakers rather than owners, conversation rather than exploitation, etc. The social need for a female presence does not go beyond this ambiguous appeal, where one cannot discern what truly corresponds to female experience and what is merely a stereotypical representation of it.

The difference in being a woman has come into free existence not by working through the contradictions pertaining to the social body as a whole, but by working through the ones each woman experienced in herself and which did not have a social form before receiving it from female politics. In other words, it is we who have ourselves invented the social contradictions which make our freedom necessary.

The first and fundamental invention was to open up, within society, the separate spaces, places, and times of an autonomous female sociality.