

THE DIVIDED SELF: IMMERSING IN THE COMBINATIVE GENIUS OF CHIARA FUMAI

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When thinking of the word 'genius', an endless array of masculine names usually comes to mind, from Leonardo Da Vinci to Albert Einstein, from Ludwig Van Beethoven to Federico Fellini and the list goes on. That the word genius has always been a quality attributed to men, is in fact, not a mystery. The very etymology of the word itself only confirms this linguistic tradition.

The term genius derives in fact, from the homonymous Latin masculine noun and it is typically used to refer to someone possessing extraordinary intelligence. However, back in ancient Rome, the word also indicated a person's tutelary deity or spirit and this interpretation was inextricably connected with its Greek hyponym *daimon*, which referred to a creature halfway between divine and human.

In what seemed to be a recent pleasant coincidence, reading the latest essay by Elisa Cuter, *Ripartire dal Desiderio* (2020), the term *daimon* reappears, this time explained as something that guides you and takes you out of yourself, or in short, attracts you elsewhere.

It is precisely this Greek term, with its inner mediator connotation between different temporal and spatial dimensions, that unsurprisingly evokes the feminine, and in particular one female personality, who throughout her life has always been animated by it, Chiara Fumai.

Chiara Fumai (1978 – 2017) was a successful Italian DJ turned contemporary visual artist, whose practice insatiably and enigmatically intertwined performance art, occult spiritualism, rituals, and anarchical feminism. Across her works, she repeatedly positioned her contradictory identity on the fleeting line that straddles genius and madness, revelation and delirium, adopting the instinctive, irrational and hysterical language which has always been labelled as feminine.

In a conversation with Milovan Farronato, one of the curators of the retrospective on Chiara Fumai, *Poems I Will Never Release (2007-2017)*, first shown at the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, and now at the Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci in Prato, an anecdote reveals how the concepts of *feminine* and *daimon* have always been manifested in the artist's ontology. Fumai in fact, used to affectionately refer to the curator and friend as a 'sister', as she believed that he possessed a *female daimon*, an enriching element, by virtue of which she welcomed him into the ranks of sororal relationships that she used to connect with the living, the dead, sometimes fictitious, other times mythological characters.

Francesco Urbano Ragazzi, the curator duo who also curated the retrospective, during our interview, brilliantly portrayed Fumai's *daimon* as "a presence that was always floating in the air, a trans-historical spirit made of many souls, not being encapsulated in any given time, but being able to move and re-establish dialogues that were not possible right up to that moment". They named it *combinative genius*.



Shut Up. Actually, Talk (The world will not explode), 2012, Group performance on the roof of the Fridericianum featuring Zalumma Agra and the Stars of the East, words by Carla Lonzi ("Let's Spit on Hegel," 1970) and Rivolta Femminile ("I Say I," 1977), 60 min., Courtesy Chiara Fumai, Commissioned by dOCUMENTA (13) and produced with the support of Fiorucci Art Trust, London. Photo: Henrik Strömberg

Indeed, as Alison Gingeras brilliantly suggests in her article "Chiara Fumai and the Dead Feminist Society", Chiara's genius has inevitably been a *minor* one, in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of "Minor Literature": a practice that refrains from being categorized under the dominant and mainstream language of its society, while escaping interpretation and emphasizing the **political!** Fumai's minor position – an Italian anarchist feminist performer in a Catholic, patriarchal country, whose art scene primarily revolves around commodifiable works – seems in fact, to perfectly reflect the Deleuzian concept.

As Francesco Urbano Ragazzi explains: "Chiara's genius is literary, but in a very broad sense: in her practice there are extremely high and philosophical sources that meet other vernacular ones, yet these elements are mixed and re-signified". As in the practice of collage, putting together things from different centuries and from different authors suddenly takes on a new meaning within a new context and a new temporal space.

Along the same line, Fumai's heroines, whom she continuously reincarnated in her performances, sometimes belonged to the margins of history, other times they were women who have been actively engaged in politics and the arts. Yet, in the

end, whether for their unconventional and radical ideas or for the roles that they had been relegated to, the artist's pantheon of women consisted of a circle of invisible muses.

It is precisely through her practice that Fumai decided to bring these women back to life, to finally offer them the voice, power and historical recognition that they deserved. In the position of a time-traveling magician, the artist drew agency and inspiration from them, while building new narratives at the crossroad between occult spirituality and militant feminism.

Fumai's women were in fact, on the one hand, committed, cultured, revolutionary women, who have left behind a robust body of writings, such as the German far-left terrorist and journalist Ulrike Meinhof, the American radical feminist and author Valerie Solanas, famous for her SCUM Manifesto, or the Italian art critic and feminist activist Carla Lonzi, co-founder of Rivolta Femminile. On the other hand, there were marginalized women, who have been relegated to silence: the Italian medium Eusapia Palladino for her illiteracy, Annie Jones and Zalumma Agra as they were considered circus freaks, monsters of Barnum's theatre.

Another crucial and equally revolutionary characteristic of all of Fumai's muses, is that they

1. Alison Gingeras, "Chiara Fumai and the Dead Feminist Society", published on Affidavit on December 4, 2017: <http://www.affidavit.art/articles/chiara-fumai>.

were criminals. Eusapia Palladino was a scammer, as well as an internationally renowned medium, Valerie Solanas was a playwright, but also a murderer, Ulrike Meinhof was a journalist, but also a terrorist and the trend continues. As Francesco Urbano Ragazzi explained in our conversation, “Chiara has introduced into the history of art an imaginary that perhaps never existed or was extremely marginal, namely that of violence carried out by women. The masculine imaginary instead, has always portrayed celebrated powerful and violent men. Chiara therefore wanted to work on this taboo of extremely violent women to explore if violence is a legitimate means of revindication, and this remains of course an open question”.

Yet, the genius of Chiara Fumai was rooted in how she resurrected these women in her performances through original and immersive performance methods, to the point that the artist completely subdued her own presence. In fact, during her performances Fumai used to identify herself so deeply with those characters, whose spirits appeared to inhabit her body, that she seemed to almost lose her own subjectivity. This is evident, for example, in *Chiara Fumai reads Valerie Solanas (2012)*, one of her best-known performances where the artist, mirroring the first campaign of Italian politician Silvio Berlusconi, completely reincarnated the dead anarchist Valerie Solanas, when reading her S.C.U.M. *Manifesto* (1968). It was as if Fumai’s body had given way to that of the deceased writer: the artist insolently transmitted her statement dwelling intensely into each syllable, in front of a wall painting that read ‘A Male Artist is a Contradiction in Terms’. Similarly, in *The Moral Exhibition House (2012)*, another performance-based project, we witness Fumai subduing her own persona in order to host the ones of her heroines. In this project, originally presented at Documenta 13, the artist built a feminist version of the Grimm Brothers’s witch house by incarnating two women who were part of P.T Barnum’s 19th century American Museum: Annie Jones, the famous Bearded Lady of the Victorian era and Zaluma Agra, the “Star of the East”, who was presented as the purest case of Caucasian race.

This type of performance was not designed to be reproduced by someone else, unlike the ones, for example, of Marina Abramovic, who correlates her happenings with rigid protocols to be then reproduced by others. Chiara’s performances, therefore, were epiphanies. The artist herself did not usually repeat her performances often and when she did, they were always modified, retranslated in a different way.

“Chiara Fumai loved to perform by putting herself at total risk,” reveals Milovan Farronato, “as she was in some way attracted by the idea of being on the brink, on the verge of failure.”

Hence why, she always ended up being exposed to the elements. For example, once on the Frideri-

cianum roof at Documenta 13 where she shouted the words of Carla Lonzi along with those of others, a football match final was taking place at the same time, and so, she had to use her voice to overwhelm the general chaos. “Her performances,” as Farronato elucidates, “often occurred in non-designated places or in promiscuous environments.” It is exactly in their unpredictability, in their being always swayed by surrounding occurrences, that Fumai’s performances were not repeatable.

In the same manner, Chiara Fumai’s characters were also sometimes fortuitous. Occasionally, she could simply appropriate transitory narratives of the most disparate persona, who then continued to grow in the background of the artist’s voices as a result of her ability to metabolize stories. In the exhibition *Arimortis* in 2013, for example, one of the curators, the artist Roberto Cuoghi, imagined Fumai resurrecting the artist Vera Morra, who died prematurely from anorexia-related complications. Fumai, despite not knowing the artist, decided to recreate one of her last works, made when she was still a student in the Accademia: a cast of her fragmented body created with vinyl glue. Chiara replaced Vera’s body with her own, therefore making a cast with significant variations. For example, her head was no longer attached to her body, but removed and placed on her right hand as if it were being supported and carried by the hand. This wretched simulacrum was then placed on a Valentino dress, that she had worn to impersonate Valerie Solanas in the video-performance, which later earned her the Furla Award. But the dress was no longer in its original form, and instead had been torn, fragmented and arranged in small pieces.

It is worth noting a few observations on the exhibition too, as through the vest of a recognition of the Italian art under the lens of *Via Farini*,² it manifested itself as an investigation of artistic excesses and nonacceptance. “The exhibition proposed the capacity of the artist to go beyond shores where the right medium was no longer the norm, but where both unfulfilled and plethoric expressions of their imagination can have all the space and right to manifest itself,” states the curator Milovan Farronato. The same catalogue of the exhibition, *De Incontinentia*, referred precisely to the idea that genius and madness can occur through forms of creative hypertrophy.

Returning to Chiara Fumai’s heroines, it is imperative then to understand these sisterly relationships as an incubator not just of the main characters of her artistic practice, but also, as Milovan exquisitely reminded me, of “ancillary proteins”, satellite personalities who also contributed to the construction of the artist’s imagery.

Going back now to what I believe is at stake when reflecting on Chiara Fumai on the razor’s edge between genius and madness, I would dwell precisely on her characteristic contradictory identity. What Fumai’s disposition for multiple person-

2. Via Farini is an exhibition space open to experimentation located in Milan, which offers documentation services on the visual arts and organizes residencies for artists and curators.

alities and ventriloquism has surely emphasised, is the concept of the self as a space that needs to be freed and deconstructed, until it is almost erased, until we no longer know what we are made of. In the wake of Carla Lonzi, the artist embraced a process of “undoing”, not only of her identity during her performances, but mostly of the canonical ideologies of the overpowering system.

As Andrea Bellini, director of the Centre d’Art Contemporain Genève, which hosted Fumai’s retrospective earlier this year, underlines in the catalogue *Poems I Will Never Release, 2007-2017*, the unbecoming of oneself or the fragmentation of one’s own subjectivity is in fact, the prerequisite for writing a *new cosmogony*.³ It is perhaps following this line that we can understand how the figure of the madman is often associated with those of the genius or the prophet, the latter, in particular, being a character that appears familiar to the artist. Undoubtedly, Chiara Fumai, in the guise of a prophetic medium who can predict the future, has anticipated themes that are very relevant today, from feminism to the concept of fluid identity.

However, in Fumai’s practice, this fragmentary aspect of the self is accompanied by a comical or surreal component, aimed precisely at questioning the traditional canons that conventionally establish what is true from what is not. The artist herself, in an interview with the curatorial duo Francesco Urbano Ragazzi, exposed the ironical game of ‘true fiction’ intrinsic in her practice, by explaining her scepticism in the division between true and false: “I rather believe in the fact that logocentric and materialistic thought tends to reduce many subversive aesthetic experiences to very poor scientific categories, and that it does so exclusively for the purpose of *its own supremacy*”.⁴ And it is precisely this predominant thought that the artist tried to deconstruct with her performances, intended not as a suspension between true and false, but rather between the simplicity and complexity which inevitably emerge from any radical stance.

“There is a vision of truth as a spherical object,” Francesco Urbano Ragazzi elucidate, “where the very concept of culture and counterculture, avant-garde and tradition are often very close, and consequently extremely controversial characters find themselves at the crossroad between these two dimensions, which express both one side of the culture and the other.” This dialectic is very present in the work of Chiara Fumai, precisely because there is always this retaliation between things, for which it becomes difficult to establish whether there is truth or not. Questioning the truth means carrying out an operation of extreme fiction, so the falsification of truth and the verification of falsehood establish the dialectical process at the base of the work of Chiara Fumai.

Yet, this blurred line between truth and fiction which became so persistent in her practice, where she imagined herself visited by the ghosts of her

heroines, that she often referred to herself in plurality, slowly became reality and all these voices that she was used to hearing eventually never left her.

On this note, the performance at Querini Stampalia comes to mind, where the artist performed a double role. While playing the part of the room guide, she became suddenly possessed by the women represented in the paintings. It was during this very performance that under the influence of the ghost of the doge’s wife Elisabetta Querini Valier, Fumai ended up revealing, through the language of the deaf and dumb, the last words spoken – and abandoned in an answering machine – from an anonymous Italian terrorist:

“Maybe it is because I have no history, maybe it is because whatever I see as my story otherwise appears to me as a dress resting on my back that I cannot shake off. Therefore, I start to think about the act of exploding, of fragmenting myself. It means that I cannot detach myself from my dismissal and my subordination if I do not break with the enemies I have unmasked, if I do not recognize my anger and if I cannot make it explode, together with my violence, against the ideology and the arrogance that oppresses me. If I do not find in other women my same desire to free myself, to attack, to destroy. To destroy, and to overthrow all walls and barriers.”

It is perhaps on these terms that we will ever be able to comprehend her will to die and the tragic act of her suicide, which took place in 2017 in a commercial gallery in Bari, uncannily named Galleria Doppelgänger: as a true final act of liberation. As if Fumai’s own radical nature saved nothing including herself, the end of her life assumed then the connotations of a necessary step in her process of undoing.

3. Andrea Bellini, “Alien Presences and Writing in the Work of Chiara Fumai” in Chiara Fumai. *Poems I Will Never Release, 2007-2017*, edited by Francesco Urbano Ragazzi, Milovan Farronato, (Rome: Nero Edizioni, 2020).
4. <http://atpdiary.com/exhibit/chiara-fumai-praga/>