

'The Mad Cow is Me'

Throughout the 1990s, when Carol Rama sought to further understand her own identity, the artist refrained from appealing to figures of femininity and instead explored the figure of the animal infected with 'mad cow disease' (bovine spongiform encephalopathy): the mucca pazza. The characteristic Carol Rama motif and use of materials (the rubber, the hessian cloth of mail bags, the chests, the tongues, the penises, the dentures) are now reorganised to form an anatomy that no longer constitutes a body. Nevertheless, Rama would describe these works as self-portraits: 'These are extraordinary self-portraits, extraordinary, not because they are beautiful, but the idea of these tits and bull dicks, this way of seeing the anatomy of everybody in shared parts, extreme.' The artist affirms, 'The mad cow is me', adding, unexpectedly: 'And this has given me a joy, an extraordinary joy.'

The likeness between the human and animal that Carol Rama brings out clearly in her work is not only metaphorical. The outbreak of mad cow disease, which can be transmitted to humans, reveals the bio-cultural, ritualistic, economic and sexual links with the animal. Scientific research confirmed that the origin of the illness was a result of the inclusion of the remains of sheep, goat and even cattle meat in the animal feed. This realisation of how animals can exist purely to be consumed was already present in 1980 when Carol Rama revisited the figure of Dorina in her work *La macelleria* – only this time the artist transforms her into a butcher. Represented with the face of a swine, the Dorina-butcher is an animal-human version of both Goya's *Saturno devorando a su hijo* (*Saturn Devouring his Son*) and Pasolini's *Medea*. This is the passion according to Carol Rama. The urge to devour in order to possess. All the while knowing that we are devouring ourselves.

In Carol Rama, the mad cow is a figure of hysteria that lies beyond humans – an animal variation of the Holocaust. It also references towards the AIDS epidemic. Mocking the standardised binaries of human/animal, masculine/feminine, healthy/ill, the artist seems to be affirming a radical animalism in the face of the socially accepted ideas of what it is to be human, masculine, healthy. There is no humanism in the feminism of Carol Rama. Carol Rama states the universality and superiority of the animal, the feminine, illness and death – all embodied in the figure of the dying cow. The animalism of Carol Rama is an expanded feminism, not tied to human nature.

The recognition of Rama as an artist would not arrive until she was awarded the Golden Lion award for her life's work at the Venice Biennale, one of the most prestigious international art exhibitions, in 2003. The predictions of the Guerrilla Girls would come true in the case of Rama: 'The advantages of being a woman artist are knowing your career might pick up after you are eighty; being reassured that whatever kind of art you make it will be labeled "feminine"; being included in revised versions of art history.'

Carol Rama reclaims another narrative of the history of art and emerges now as key to understanding the developments within representation in the 20th century and the work of a later generation of artists such as Cindy Sherman, Kara Walker, Sue Williams, Kiki Smith or Elly Strik.

Curators: Teresa Grandas and Paul B. Preciado (MACBA, EMMA, IMMA and GAM); Anne Dressen (MAMVP).

Exhibition conceived by the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) and the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris (MAMVP), organised by MACBA and co-produced with PARIS MUSÉES / MAMVP, EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art, IMMA – Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin and GAM – Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Torino.

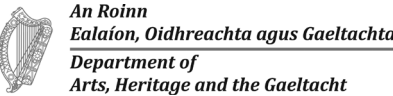
The Gallery Guide is an edited version of an original text written by Teresa Grandas and Paul B. Preciado. Edited by Rachael Gilbourne, Assistant Curator: Exhibitions – Projects & Partnerships, IMMA. The original version is available on the Carol Rama exhibition page on [www.imma.ie](http://www.imma.ie)

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The exhibition is accompanied by a fully-illustrated catalogue with contributions by Anne Dressen, Maurizio Cattelan, Melissa Logan and Alexandra Murray-Leslie (Chicks on Speed), Lea Vergine, Teresa Grandas, Paul B. Preciado, and an interview by Corrado Levi and Filippo Fossati with the artist, amongst others. Available at the IMMA Shop on the first floor of the main galleries.

Further reading is available online at [www.imma.ie](http://www.imma.ie)

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Front cover:

Carol Rama in her atelier  
home, Turin. © Photo: Pino  
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Carol Rama, Torino.

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The Passion According to Carol Rama



**Ignored for decades by official art history, Carol Rama can now be considered as essential for understanding 20th century artistic production. With a selection of almost two hundred works, this exhibition offers a guide through the artist's many creative moments. Neither exhaustive nor retrospective, this exhibition is the most extensive presentation of Carol Rama's work to date. It attempts to recognise and restore a life's work still unknown but nevertheless slated to become classic.**

**Visitors are advised that this exhibition contains adult themes and some explicit imagery.**

### Political Anatomy

Born in 1918 to a family of industrialists in Turin, Carol Rama never received any academic artistic training. Ingrained in her early work are the traces of her experiences of institutional confinement (it is believed that her mother was admitted to a psychiatric hospital) and death (her father committed suicide). At the beginning of this exhibition is a series of three rooms that gather a large selection of the figurative watercolours from the 1930s and 1940s. When these works – signed as Olga Carolina Rama – were first exhibited in 1945, they were censored as 'obscene' by the Italian government. The figurative subjects of Rama's watercolours are far from the Fascist ethos that glorified the rural landscape, the family or the machine as the embodiments of national progress. Carol Rama confronts this ethos by inventing a desiring political body that resists the socially accepted ideals of gender, sexuality, and mental and physical normality imposed in Mussolini's Italy.

During Fascism, the female body – as well as that of other minorities such as the 'inferior races', 'the mentally ill', 'homosexuals', 'the deficient', 'the abnormal' and 'foreigners' – came under attack by a government that imposed intolerant legal systems. Works that depict desire of

animals, Appassionatas and Dorinas with amputated limbs and stuck out tongues: these are the sick and institutionalised bodies that the work of Carol Rama makes visible, elevating and praising them with vital and sexualised representations. Rama reclaims their power to act politically and to experience pleasure.

Carol Rama confronts iconic, yet clearly patriarchal, works by artists such as Courbet and Duchamp. She does so first by opening up the viewable horizon: the viewer no longer looks through a crack – there are no limits – what is visible is there to be seen, face-to-face. Next she equips the sexualised body with a face, a gaze, a mouth and a tongue. This body is no longer a desired body but rather a body that desires, that acts: here is a political agent. Finally, the vagina is no longer an orifice open to material or visual penetration by the male gaze. Rather it is from these orifices that snakes, pieces of shit or tubes spring forth.

Rama would interpret the censorship of her first exhibition as a warning – an 'invitation' to abandon these bodies as images and begin what was, to use the artist's own words, an 'abstract war'. In the 1950s, Rama became involved with the Concrete Art Movement, and its strong emphasis on abstraction. According to the artist she did so, 'to provide a certain order' and 'limit the excesses of freedom'. Her work would be signed, from this moment on, as Carol Rama. The name Olga, like the work that had been censored, was eliminated.

Around the mid-1950s, Rama began to undo little by little the geometric style of the Concrete Art Movement while also experimenting with new materials and techniques. The energy of the body emerges once again but this time transformed into vibrations that traverse the canvas. The vertical lines of the sketch in *Diagramma*, 1960, and the numerous *Untitled* works produced towards the end of the 1950s, suggest the physical

registers of an electric apparatus, such as a seismograph - which measures and records details of earthquakes, like force and duration. The markings in these works are nothing other than the artist's own body, which is both vulnerable and strong. Like the seismograph, the body here translates the movements of the earth and the activity of the brain into inscribed matter.

### Bricolage: Organic Abstraction

In the 1960s, Carol Rama became involved with the experimental poetry movement Novissimi and especially the writer Edoardo Sanguineti. In 1962 Sanguineti gave the name 'bricolage' to a new series of Rama's work in which various organic and inorganic elements were assembled to form new images in a process that applied a kind of Mary Shelly 'Frankenstein' principle. The Bricolage series – an example of the sensory language of Rama – can be seen as an equivalent to the poems of Sanguineti, which mix several languages (Latin, German, French and Greek) as well as styles of language (the colloquial, the political rhetoric of Marxism, pornography, advertising and the language of mass media) in a non-linear way, to the point of creating an entirely unique flow of writing. There are also echoes of the Italian experimental writer, Nanni Balestrini's *Cronogrammi*, and the cut-ups of Brion Gysin and William Burroughs. The works of this period reorder organic and inorganic material, equations from the nuclear bomb, names like Mao Tse Tung or Martin Luther King, in order to make artefacts that are both alive and made unnatural. Here, these texts and images are no longer intended to be read, or merely seen, but rather they are designed to be 'experienced' with all of the senses. Carol Rama's use of materials – a mass of metallic thread, animal claws piercing canvas, red paint splatters and black stains –is both abstract and animal – aesthetic compositions and wounds through which it is possible to interpret traces of

aggression. The artist experiments with the capacity of imagery, objects, and colours to solidify, creating a series of metaphorical bodies dispersed across the canvas surface. The passion becomes abstraction. Carol Rama becomes associated with the invention of new art terms; sensurrealism, concrete-visceral art, porno-brut.

### Reading Rooms

In the centre of this exhibition are two Reading Rooms – two black box spaces showing documentary materials that relate to the artist Carol Rama. These materials include two film projections and one slideshow of still photography. There is also a discreet selection of publications for visitors to browse. One of the films is a series of interviews with the artist herself, as well as with her colleagues, life-long friends, and admirers. Titled *More, even more (Di più, ancora di più)*, the 2003 film was directed by Simone Pierini. The second film is a collage of short lo-fi clips showing examples of Italian Mannerist design and architecture, taken from the exhibition *Carlo Mollino – Maniera moderna* at Ausstellung im Haus der Kunst München, 2011-2012. The compilation of still photography is by Roberto Goffi and Pino Dell'Aquila, and features images of the interior of Carol Rama's studio and home.

### Queer Arte Povera

By the end of the 1960s, the Italian art scene was saturated with the male figures of the so-called Arte Povera, such as Alighiero Boetti, Giuseppe Penone, Pino Pascali, and Michelangelo Pistoletto, with the rare exception of women like Marisa Merz. As a woman-without-a-man who was surrounded mainly by homosexuals (the painter Carlo Monzino, the homosexual artist and activist Corrado Levi, Guido Carbone, Gianni Vattimo, amongst others), Carol Rama remained on the outskirts of the Italian art scene between 1960 and 1970. However, if we pay close attention

to her work of this period, it is impossible not to see parallels and resonances with what the Italian critic Germano Celant would call for the first time in 1969, Arte Povera.

For Celant, Arte Povera was the transformation of industrial materials and ordinary consumer objects through the artistic process. Povera, as opposed to Pop, achieved this without appealing to the imagery of mass culture. Previously used objects lacking any value (papers, broken plates, wood, stairs, wheels, cartridges, saws, and so on) are reclaimed as noble materials with which the artist initiates an immediate and intimate relationship and constructs new forms. The elaboration of natural forms, the use of industrial materials, the attention to the relationship of art and personal opinion, the privileging of popular and traditional craft forms – all of these resources that are characteristic of Povera are present in the work of Carol Rama. While Celent never included Rama's work, it is now impossible to approach her Bricolage series – made with screws, sacks and inner tubes and tyres of a bicycle – as a comparison to Povera.

Not only did the work of Carol Rama include bicycle tyres, but also prosthetic feet and legs, taxidermy eyes, eyelashes, hair, skin, fingernails and teeth, electrical fuses and batteries, medical appliances, enemas, and syringes. With Carol Rama, somewhere on the road between Povera, junk art and Nouveau Réalisme (a European counterpart to Pop Art), paint becomes semen, blood, or milk and the canvas – as with the work *Le siringhe (The Syringe)*, 1967 – a body addicted to paint transfusion. Her work is more visceral and dirty than poor. Rama's Povera was a Queer Povera. Carol Rama understood that not only the inorganic materials but also that the body itself should be recuperated and materially altered. Excluded from the Povera scene, the work of Rama remained invisible.

### Still Well-defined and Vulnerable Organisms

In the 1970s, Carol Rama connects with her life experience once again through an intensely sensitive approach to materials. In this period, the artist works almost exclusively with the rubber from bicycle tyres – a material she knows well because her father owned a small bicycle factory in Turin. Rama treats rubber as the taxidermist works with skin: the artist dissects the tyres, transforming them into a two dimensional surface, creating forms through assemblages of colours and textures. The natural latex (also present in the soft sculptures of Claes Oldenburg and Richard Serra) of Rama's tyres – distressed by light and time, punctured and flat, flaccid and decomposed – are like our bodies: 'Still well-defined and vulnerable organisms.'

In 1980, the Italian curator Lea Vergine 'discovered' the work of Carol Rama and included a selection of her early watercolours in the group exhibition *L'altra metà dell'avanguardia 1910–1940*, a show that brought together the works of more than one hundred women artists. Paradoxically this 'discovery' served once again to make invisible the work of Carol Rama. This occurred in two ways. On the one hand, the curator 'recognised' Rama on the condition of presenting her as a 'woman'. Furthermore, this recognition is based on the presentation of her watercolour works from the 1930s and nothing else, eclipsing Rama's later career. In this way, Carol Rama (who was 62 years old at this stage) could not even have been contemporary with herself. Curiously this retrospective approval of the watercolours would lead Rama to recover her figurative style and 'reproduce' the early motifs of Dorinas and the Appassionatas, which, other than in their creative context, appear now as ghostly markers of the trauma of being erased from history.