

AMANDA
WILKINSON

KETTY LA ROCCA

The Ritual of Gesture

1 September – 27 September 2018

Private View: 31 August , 6–8 pm

In our culture gestures only underline information, serving as a supportive means of expression ... even though a greater wealth of mystic, ritual and fantastical elements – the legacy of mankind and thus irreplaceable – is also to be found in gestures.

Ketty La Rocca, 1973

Ketty La Rocca (1938-1976) is one of the most important Italian conceptual artists to have emerged from the 1960s. She lived and worked in Florence, initially as a leading member of Gruppo 70, a group of artists devoted to visual poetry and 'verbal-visual investigations'. Her early collage works were explorations of language in relation to the stereotypical imagery of everyday life with an emphasis on subverting the patriarchal depiction of women in contemporary culture.

This exhibition focuses on two crucial series of works from 1973-74, toward the end of her tragically curtailed life, the *riduzioni* and the *craniologie*. These works expand on a video piece La Rocca made for the 1972 Venice Biennale *Appendice per una supplica* ('Appendix to an Appeal') investigating hand gestures as an alternative language, a form of communication based on bodily expression. Such alternatives were necessary in a male-dominated world in which, she believed, women have access only to a 'language that is both alien and hostile to them.'

Deriving from her personal struggle to establish a voice as a female artist in 1960s Florence, La Rocca's unique melding of the verbal and the visual, of writing and gesture, was based on the conviction that 'it is better to embroider with words'. In each of the *riduzioni* a found photographic image is subjected to a series of transfigurations, via the act of handwriting, so that it gradually dissolves into abstraction, whereas in the *craniologie* she repeatedly scribbles the pronoun 'you' across reproductions of x-rays of her skull, on which images of various hand gestures are also superimposed.

In certain *craniologie* the gesture of pointing seems to be directed at artist and viewer simultaneously as if the construction of her own identity becomes possible only in dealing with the other: 'The you has already started at the border of my I.' In others La Rocca uses ancient African masks in lieu of images of her own head, thereby extending the historical and cross-cultural resonance of this idea of bodily gesture and figurative expression. The long white face of the Fang Ngil mask, used for initiation ceremonies, was a legendary source of inspiration for modern artists in early 20th-century Paris, whereas the Chokwe mask was used for mystic ceremonies related to marriage and fertility.

In the *riduzioni* works presented here the image of the wedding gown likewise invokes the idea of ceremony and ritual. So too does the image of the woman in her boudoir, the naked woman's pose suggesting duality – we are gazing at the woman but she is also gazing at herself in the mirror. This reflexivity is also evident in other *riduzioni* where La Rocca has used images of herself in the act of making her own works. While her fascination with the dynamics of the gaze anticipates Laura Mulvey's classic essay on the subject in 1975, her distrust of language is also evident in a letter to the critic Lucy Lippard in which she expresses comparable misgivings regarding 'the danger of speaking' and 'the delusion of the image'. La Rocca's visionary response to this expressive quandary was to produce works in which the image is at once 'devoured by language' and distilled into productive ambiguity.

Amanda Wilkinson would like to thank Martina Cioni, Michelangelo Vasta and the Estate of Ketty La Rocca for their help in realizing this exhibition.