

Silvia Giambrone - FIGHTING WORDS

"Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o-er wrought heart and bids it break"

APA. Shakespeare, W. (1992). *Macbeth*, act IV, scene III. Wordsworth Editions

Rape is not an incident. It is not something that just *happens*: it is an integral part of the sexist culture and of the means of control by which patriarchal society represses and influences women's freedom. It is a steady shadow, it is the sword of Damocles that accompanies the life of every woman.

"A female definition of rape can be contained in a single sentence. If a woman prefers not to have sexual relations with a particular man and the latter chooses to act against her will, there is a criminal act of rape"¹. It is a simple concept which, however, does not take into account one of the bedrocks of patriarchal society: the woman is an acquired property, she is the cornerstone upon which to build the "father's house", a subordinate being to possess. In order to never forget the place where gender violence originates, in 2019 the Chilean feminist collective *Las Tesis* marked its group performance with these words: "the Patriarchy is a magistrate and our body is the accused. It says that I'm the problem justifying his system/ Patriarchy points the finger and judges us unpunished/ And our punishment is this violence that I live/ Femicide, impunity for the killer/ It's the abuse, it's the rape/ And the guilt it is not mine, neither within the house, nor on the street/ You are the killer, You are the rapist / The police officers, the judges, the State, the Church / The oppressing state is a male rapist"². The authors of this text³ point the finger at the state authority and at its legal system; it is history itself that teaches us that the State, capitalist and sexist, is the main instigator of inequalities: "As the regulator of economic and political domination, the State is the epitome of all the imperialist, patriarchal and capitalist

¹ Brownmiller, Susan. "Against our will: men, women, and rape." *The Family Coordinator* 27 (1978): 321.

² On November 25, 2018, in broad daylight, in Valparaíso, the cultural capital of Chile, it is staged live in the streets and squares of the city. The performance of the Chilean collective *Las Tesis* is a show that fills every corner of the city, but it is also a very explicit protest against the violence that brutally affects women. Especially there: in 2018, in fact, the *Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean* (Cepal) denounced that a woman is killed every two hours in the region.

³ Dafne Valdés, Sibila Sotomayor, Paula Cometa and Lea Cáceres are the women who composed *Las Tesis*. The collective, born in 2018, aims at making feminist theories visible through a body language, musical, performative and replicable by the community.

oppressions and exploitations"⁴. Throughout history, the triumph over women through the means of rape has always been considered one of the gradients with which to measure military victories: through sexual violence, the soldier could prove his virility, his success and, at the same time, he could obtain a tangible "reward" for the service rendered (it is in fact no coincidence that the superhomist philosophy of the Third Reich had chosen to coerce Nietzschean thought in such a way to contrast the German male-soldier with the woman understood as an accessory figure or as a means of amusement).

Every rape is an exercise of power, however this power also exists outside of war contexts and in societies that do not involve slavery. As a matter of fact, some rapists have an additional weapon: they can afford to operate in institutions that work to their advantage and in which the victim has little chances of obtaining justice.

Wherever there is a hierarchical and authoritarian structure, the latter acts in order to generate relationships of dependence, to weaken the resistance of the victims, to distort their perspective and confuse their will. A similar dynamic can be found in the rapes committed by some celebrities coming from the cinema world, sports or powerful men (many of this violences do not even reach a courtroom or, if they do, they nevertheless remain unpunished); it can also be seen in the more subtle ones made during a first date with the victim; or even in those made by men who have had previous relationships with their victims. In all these cases, the victim's active resistance is often nullified by a combination of psychological and social factors.

Rape is the form of violence which is most feared by women: from the adolescence to the old age, every female human being lives side by side with fear. Coming home at night, crossing a parking lot in the dark, being in a train compartment alone or locked in an elevator with an uneasy looking man: all these possible situations are potentially dangerous and women are fully aware of that, as well as they know that the phrases like "she wanted it", "she was drunk" or "that skirt was too short" unfortunately remain effective weapons to weaken their accusations. A common thought is that rapes are mostly committed by strangers, but in reality most of them take place in the so-called "inner circles"; the person responsible is most often a known person: a friend, a colleague, a family member, a partner or an ex-partner. A 2016 survey on attitudes towards gender-based violence in the EU revealed "an alarming data: 11% of the interviewed agreed upon the fact that violence against a known person should not be illegal. By law or in practice, if a victim has not physically resisted the rape, they are not necessarily allowing it. Just

⁴ Vergès, Françoise. "A Feminist Theory of Violence, A Decolonial Perspective." *Pluto Press* (2022).

because a woman has no visible wounds or she has showed no resistance, it doesn't mean that she wasn't raped. As a matter of fact, to remain helpless in the face of sexual violence is a common physiological and psychological reaction⁵. Gender-based violence is part of every woman's life: 80% of Italian teenagers have been victims of *catcalling* or harassment, symbolic rapes that contribute to fuel fear and insecurity.

Silvia Giambrone is an artist and a militant with a strong feminist background who explores the minefield of abuse and domestic violence through her work. By using different means of expression such as video, performance, photography, embroidery and sculpture, the artist examines the addiction to violence understood as a sick part of an apparently immutable family ritual, something so internal to the fabric of life that can be no longer recognized as such. Her work is a sort of treatise on domestic archeology, a digging into relationships in order to reveal their fragile balances; it is a rough underlining of abuse, sometimes aesthetically disturbing or rather satisfying in spite of its obvious angularity. The artist forces the viewers to reflect on the relationships and imbalances of power that poison human connections, and she does so through works that are ferocious forays into our private life and that make it even more evident how violence, to paraphrase Hannah Arendt⁶, is often almost banal in its manifest wickedness. Her work is a call to reflect on the domestication of violence as well as to dissolve the taboo that hovers around it by revealing its subtext: the drive to subjugate others is based on a socially accepted emotional and relational grammar to which we are so addicted that we can no longer succeed to recognize it as such. As happens with what usually surrounds us in the everyday life, it is no longer easy to notice it nor pay attention to it after a while. In Silvia Giambrone's works, the objects of common use acquire a sinister meaning, they are then charged with an existential anguish because “[...] in [her] works the objects and the furniture, in the words of Jean Baudrillard, have in fact first of all “the purpose to personify human relationships, to populate the space that they divide” (Baudrillard 1972, p. 20)”⁷. The family dimension is still the cornerstone of this new series of works in which even the muffled world of childhood becomes a field of both resistance and struggle. The embroideries of the instructions to fight/survive violate the innocence of the nursery and they carry out a conceptual operation of brutal unmasking of the taboo that restricts sexual

⁵ Cfr. <https://www.amnesty.it/5-cose-sapere-stupro/>

⁶ Hannah Arendt, Hannah. “Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil.” *Penguin Classics* (2006).

⁷ Raffaella Perna, cfr. <http://www.arabeschi.it/raffaellapernailtrauma-del-domestico-video-performance-e-oggetto-nellopera-disilvia-giambroneunadelle-frasi-co/>

violence to silence; through this way, this kind of disclosure is also transformed into a warning for future generations. “*In the event of gang rape remember that one of the groups could turn into an ally. Try to work out who is the cockiest and most sure of themselves and attempt to flatter them*”, “*Your handbag is an armory. Use nail files, keys, ballpoint pens, hair combs, aerosols.*”, “*Make full use of the body’s blunt extremities: head, elbows, fists, feet. Bite everything you can get your teeth into; tear up ears, mouth, nose.*”, “*Urinate. Vomit. Defecate. If possible*”. These are some of the phrases used: they are composed of brutal, violent words, which teach how to defend oneself by fighting. These are brutal words as it is violence itself that is cruel. It is useless to philosophize when the need is to survive. These are phrases that violate silence, that strongly stand in the way of evil in order to bring some truths out from the darkness where they are often confined. These are as much uncomfortable as they are needed to overcome that same violence that has generated them. The bravery to pronounce them, to embody them, to pass through them and to put them back into the world is a *necessary* act of courage; if we want to be able to testify the existence of a culture of violence, the push to get rid of the expressive modesty that they bring with them is indeed equally indispensable. Speaking of violence by using brutal words is the only possible way to overcome the taboo that surrounds this manifestation and which is an integral part of human nature. On the contrary, the video *TRAUM* shows domestic violence from the point of view of those who survived the abuse, of those who have been in the position of the victim and find themselves re-experiencing the trauma through the story. Recently, neuroscience has highlighted how much the trauma devastates the functioning of the mind and the body. The abuses suffered in childhood happen to cause irreparable damage to the psyche of the victims to the point of damaging their social functioning. Regarding this, Bessel van der Kolk⁸, who is one of the most important pioneers in the research and treatment of traumatic stress, writes: “Trauma keeps being a healthcare problem of gigantic proportions, it is probably the biggest threat to the well-being of our society. [...] And trauma calls for other traumas; people who have been injured end up hurting others”⁹. In *TRAUM*, Silvia Giambrone recounts the story of someone who fights not only against her own traumatic memories, but also against the weight that these come to assume during the journey of existence: the scar left by traumas has indeed become part of the identity

⁸ Bessel van der Kolk has founded the Brookline Trauma Center, in Massachusetts, and he directs the Complex Trauma Treatment Network.

⁹ Bessel Van Der Kolk, Bessel. “The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma.” *Viking* (2014): 397-398.

and it ended up altering the world's shape. The trauma confines, isolates and seizes the person within a bubble of surreality. Getting out of that isolation is, therefore, a real fight against an inner enemy. The performative dimension is necessary as the public, by acting as a witness to the violence, certifies its existence. The artist answers to the need to be able to control something uncontrollable through the act of reading; and indeed she reads, in a completely detached way and with a monotone voice, the points written on a thin sheet of ceramic as if they were part of a list. After each pause, the sheet is dropped on the floor: the sound of the breaking ceramic not only certifies the reality of the trauma, but it transforms it into a collective event that can no longer be denied and that is both painful and liberating at the same time. It is a ritual of sharing what one possesses and, in this particular case, what one owns is suffering: since our humanity is inextricably linked to that of the others, pain becomes the wound to heal collectively and, concurrently, the tool to push the violated person away from her loneliness. "[...] we are social beings whose brains are interconnected to facilitate the sharing of activities, be it work or recreational activities. Trauma destroys the ways of social engagement, it interferes with cooperation, education and with the ability to function as productive members of a group."¹⁰.

There is also a small work on display that acts as a conceptual counterpoint to the others. It is a divination card on which a rose is depicted: according to the ancient tradition of secrecy of the *Sub Rosa Tacita Dicta* (expression extrapolated from the Latin phrase *sub rosa dicta velata est*, namely "what is said under the rose can not be revealed"), this flower symbolizes the bright and positive side of silence. In ancient times, the rose was the flower dedicated to the Egyptian god Horus, renamed by the Romans Harpocrates: he was the god of secrecy and silence, the keeper of secrets. Therefore, when a rose was placed on a table, those present were obligated not to divulge what had been said or heard. Since then, the expression *sub rosa* indicates something that is said or done in secret, in confidence. The holiness of silence is therefore conceptually linked by Silvia Giambrone to that core of resilience that everyone has within themselves, that same hard core that cannot be affected by external agents and that allows humanity to move forward despite the horror. That secret part that Borges describes as "[...] the central heart that deals not in words, traffics not with dreams and is untouched by time, by joy, by adversities."¹¹.

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¹⁰ Van Der Kolk, Bessel: 399.

¹¹ Borges, Jorge Luis. "Two English Poems." <https://www-ccs.cs.umass.edu/cris/texts/two-english-poems.html>