Living Differently, Seeing Differently: Carla Accardi’s Temporary Structures (1965–1972)

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Italian second-wave feminism and its legacy has been the subject of renewed critical attention across a number of disciplines in recent years. Among the most significant contributions have been studies examining the influence of women’s groups across Italy on both national and regional political discourse.\(^1\) Beyond this focus, efforts have also been made to write a more global history of Italian second-wave feminism by underscoring the relationship between national and international women’s movements in the postwar period.\(^2\) At the same time, there has been a growing interest in the writings of key Italian feminist theorists, as testified by the republication of the entire art critical output of Carla Lonzi, as well as the publication of writings by women associated with the Italian feminist-autonomist tradition, such as Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Giovanna Franca Dalla Costa, and Leopoldina Fortunati.\(^3\)

Through campaigns known internationally as ‘Wages for Housework’, and coordinated in Italy by the Padua-based Lotta Femminista (Feminist Struggle), which counted Federici and Dalla Costa amongst its numbers, these women have been committed to the restructuring of reproductive labour, foregrounding the domestic in their attempts to rethink the nature of work in capitalism.\(^4\)

That this discourse has enjoyed something of a revival in the last decade, not least within artistic practice, suggests the relevance of Italian feminism to a discussion of the relationship between art, feminism, and the domestic, and the timeliness of revisiting this question now.\(^5\) I want to reflect on this relationship as it relates to the practice of the artist Carla Accardi during a period that encompasses her involvement in the collective Rivolta Femminile (Feminine Revolt), from the summer of 1970 when the group published their Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile. One of the first separatist feminist collectives to appear in Italy, it would serve as a model for similar groups across the country in subsequent years.\(^6\)

Despite Accardi’s founding role, her relationship to Rivolta Femminile and its legacy remains marred by what were irreconcilable differences with her co-founder Lonzi, leading to a split within the group in 1973. This was in part based on a fundamental conflict in their perspectives on art’s place within feminism.\(^7\) Lonzi regarded the two as ultimately incompatible. In an entry in her diary Taci Anzi Parla: Diario di una Femminista, Lonzi reflects on the experience of writing Autorisatutto (1969), the book that marked her departure from the circuits of artistic production.\(^8\) She writes of the fourteen artists who had been her interlocutors: ‘what disturbed me was that they viewed me as a spectator . . . perhaps they thought, I was more intelligent, more sensitive, better at recording, certainly more honest, but that is as far as it would go, an ideal spectator’.\(^9\) As the feminist philosopher Maria Luisa Boccia has pointed out, there is an analogy to be made here between the ideal spectator referred to by

4. Reproductive labour encompasses the unwaged domestic and affective labour that enables waged labour to take place. See Silvia Federici, Revolution at Point Zero, Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle (Oakland, CA: PM press, 2012), p. 6. See also the following for a discussion of ‘immaterial’ labour to which these debates have problematically been connected in recent years: Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (eds), Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 261. For analyses of the developments of Autonomia (or ‘Autonomia Operaia’ as it was initially known) from its origins in ‘Operarism’, see Steve Wright, Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism (London: Pluto Press, 2002); Harry Cleaver, Reading Capital Politically (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2009), esp. pp. 64–77. See also Pier Vittorio Aurelia, The Project of Autonomy Politics and Architecture within and Against
Lonzi, and woman’s role in society as mere passive spectator and not active participant. Her refusal of art was in part a refusal of its reliance on a spectator as an intrinsically gendered role.

In contrast, and throughout her involvement in Rivolta Femminile, Accardi continued to practice as an artist. After Rivolta Femminile disbanded she even went on to establish the Beato Angelico Cooperative in Rome between 1976 and 1978, whose express aims were to unite art and feminism. In subsequent decades she would, however, renege on any association of her practice with feminism, most adamantly so with reference to the series of temporary ‘home’ structures she made between 1965 and 1972. It suggests a rather complicated relationship on the part of the artist with her own involvement in the history of Italian feminism. Despite Accardi’s distancing from that milieu, these works seem to want to reimagine the domestic in ways that suggest at the very least a cursory engagement with feminist debates. In what follows I want to read these works a little against the grain, given her later statements, to ask in what ways Accardi posed the relationship between art, feminism, and the domestic.

Specifically, I want to explore how her commitment to art, in contrast to her co-founder Lonzi, could speak to a utopian possibility for feminism. Beyond Accardi’s own ambivalent statements about her work and in light of the current interest in Italian feminism, which does not resonate now for exactly the same reasons as it did in the 1970s but has been taken up and retooled, perhaps artistic practice operating in the same context should be approached in a similar fashion?

I begin with a photograph from a series taken in the countryside around Alba in 1965 (Fig. 1a). Standing between Lonzi and the artist Luciano Fabro, Accardi assumes a tongue in cheek pose that unmistakably refers to a shelter of sorts, a pose replicated in Fig. 1b. These photographs were taken at a time when Accardi was making Tenda (1965–1966) (Fig. 2), a work that has since been claimed as the first art environment to have been made in Italy. Accardi went on to make three further environments by 1972: Ambiente Arancio (Orange Environment) (1966–1968) (Fig. 3), Triplice Tenda (Triple Tent) (1969–1971) (Fig. 4), and Cilindrocono (Cylindercone) (1972) (Fig. 5).

If, at first sight, they appear as a heterogeneous body of work – a tent, a yurt, a large cylinder, and an installation comprising what Accardi described as ‘nearly the contents of a room’ – they are all made from the same transparent Sicofoil material, a derivative of acetate, and together they mark a striking phase in the artist’s practice, registering a decisive shift into three dimensions.

Connecting these works explicitly to the question of habitation, the critic Laura Cherubini asks Accardi if ‘the idea came . . . to be your own architect . . . [as] the form is that of a house?’ Tenda also has the secondary meaning of curtain, which literally evokes the idea of homemaking and connects the work to a broader conception of textile as the first aspect of architecture put forward by Gottfried Semper in 1851. If in recent years Accardi has made works that directly reference the home and the furniture traditionally found in that space, then the artist has nevertheless been reluctant to label her work in this way. Referring to her environments of the 1960s Accardi would say ‘tear down walls . . . I can’t stand houses’. More recently, she has restated this claim, describing a dislike for the modern home of that time which she found to be ‘ugly’ and ‘heavy’, as she put it, further explaining: ‘I had been an admirer of the Bauhaus, but I saw that people lived in houses that were tacky.

Particularly notable is that, despite her rejection of the notion that her structures straightforwardly reference ‘home’, Accardi has consistently spoken...
Fig. 2. Carla Accardi, *Tenda*, 1965–1966, paint on Sicofoil, 215 × 220 × 140 cm. Private Collection, Turin (Photo: Courtesy Studio Accardi, Rome).


of them as offering a different ‘way of living’. Summing up her practice in 1972, Accardi explained:

The objects that I made recently are, broadly speaking, tents ... [they] hold a certain fascination for me; they interest me because they represent a way of living [that is] symbolically different – [a] life lived in the open, in contact with nature, with air and light, free and without the superstructures of civilisation.18

On another occasion, Accardi reiterates this when she recounts that ‘behind’ Ambiente Arancio ‘was the drive to push one towards something unknown that could become a different kind of living’.19 Far from the idea of living in any conventional sense of the term or according to prevailing social and sexual norms, Accardi’s reference to ‘superstructures of civilisation’ reads as an unmistakable complaint against patriarchy. It connects the domestic more directly to the family and specifically a rejection of its bourgeois nuclear model. At the same time, the choice of the term ‘superstructure’ is intriguing as it is also worth remembering that the family was a particularly live issue within feminist interpretations of orthodox currents of Marxism and psychoanalysis, where the inadequacy of the way the family was addressed became a main preoccupation.20

Despite these allusions, Accardi’s statements remain largely rhetorical; after all, she hardly offers a comprehensive blueprint for an alternative existence, but this of course was partly the case. Rather than simply dismissing the statements made by Accardi as merely rhetorical, I want to ask how this utopian thinking might play out on the site of the work at a material as well as conceptual level. What does it mean for Accardi to remake her home as a tent, and specifically to do so out of plastic? Most obviously here the domestic not only becomes charged but is altogether transformed into a problem about how to live. I want to ask both what made it possible, necessary even, to speak in these terms of alternative existence, and how this rhetoric might indicate what was at stake for Accardi in reformulating the lived experience of the home into another mode of living entirely? As Frederic Jameson put it in his response to the view that any utopianism could only ever be ‘hostage to our own mode of production’, in fact ‘the best Utopia can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment; and ... therefore the best Utopias are those that fail most comprehensively’.21

Accardi rejects the motif of home and by extension the domestic in favour of utopia, something that is ultimately unattainable. The trade-off is revealing; Accardi risks everything for a future unknown and a promise which she ultimately fails to deliver on beyond what might be described as a ‘maquette’ or model for living through her tents. This approach connects with the utopian strategy adopted by Federici in Wages Against Housework. Hers is effectively an impossible demand, a revolutionary struggle whose fulfillment would signal the end of capitalism, would ‘break capital’s plan for women’.22 The point is that such demands need to be understood as a provocation to imagine possible alternatives rather than a concrete vision.23 Indeed this is the reason it is so difficult to discern what Accardi meant by the idea of ‘living differently’; the artist was only ever able to define it in the most provisional of ways or in negative terms – most obviously as not a home understood in terms of conventional domestic architecture.

Living differently is of course living against the norm but what are the utopian tropes that Accardi is working with here and, moreover, how might this relate to feminism? It is of course hardly surprising that she should couch
her environments in these terms. The desire to live ‘differently’ chimed with the moment of their making, capturing the imagination of a mid-1960s generation. It took shape through attempts at communal living and redesigning architecture that challenged notions of the home and domestic as fixed, known sites.24 In fact the rhetoric of alternative existence to which Accardi refers is perhaps best encapsulated by the image of the ‘hippie’ commune, or the intentional community, as this has been called, and enshrined in the form of the nomadic shelter.25 While communal societies have a long history extending beyond the period under consideration, the moment when Accardi began to make her temporary structures has been described by commentators as one gripped by ‘communal fever’.26 Whilst Accardi’s notion of living differently is not reducible to the idea of collective dwelling, the image of the commune belongs to a broader imaginary whose visual vocabulary and makeshift logic the artist taps into through her work. For her exhibition in 1968 at the Marlborough Gallery in Rome, she made a series of small maquettes of her environments that were shown together in the corner of the room and on the floor (Fig. 6). A drawing by Accardi from 1970 further evokes this idea of communal living and suggests that her temporary shelters were conceived or at least subsequently imagined as a body of work (Fig. 7). The drawing offers a vision of a pre-industrial community, a sparse landscape in which Tenda, Trippice Tenda, and Cilindrocono each feature.27 Such visual tropes raise the question of how Accardi’s utopian horizon was bounded. If her visual vocabulary might hint

27. In an interview with Lonzi, Accardi refers to the following nomadic culture as one of the sources of inspiration for her tents: ‘the tent derived from an idea that came to me when you showed me those images of the Turkish tents from the Museum in Krakow. It made me think that those Turks took beautiful tents on their war travels, and set them up at moments that I imagine must have been very difficult.’ Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, p. 296.
at a so-called primitive communism, to what extent was the artist’s vision of a future based on non-Western or seemingly ancient models?

Certainly René Grousset’s major study on nomadism, *Empire of the Steppes*, gave the lives of nomadic and semi-nomadic people a currency at this moment when it was republished in 1970, but perhaps the point here is that this drawing comes to stand for an archetypal community, one of so many that were formed throughout this period, and which together have come to stand as a symbol of protest and resistance against what was viewed as the dominant form of society – or at the very least an expression of dissatisfaction with the status quo. In this respect, Italy would take its cue from the American Beatniks, with an underground press and diverse communities appearing throughout the country.28 One of the most famous of these communes in Italy and closely connected to *Mondo Beat*, the first journal founded by the underground press in Milan in 1966, would be the scandal of the short-lived tent city, Tendopolis or ‘New Barbonia’ (a conflation of the derogatory Italian word for the homeless (‘Barbone’) and Babylon (‘Babilonia’)), as it came to be called by the hostile press, of via Ripamonti in the outskirts of the city in 1967 (Fig. 8).29

Fig. 7. Carla Accardi, *Untitled*, 1970, pencil on paper, unknown dimensions. Studio Carla Accardi (Photo: Courtesy Studio Accardi, Rome).


29. For an overview of the way that the commune in via Ripamonti was established and subsequently demolished see the first-hand account given by De Martino in De Martino, *Capelloni & Ninfette*, pp. 8–9, 13.
Accardi was not alone amongst her contemporaries in couching her work in these terms. Experiments in this period within architectural design would come in the form of a wide range of inflatable, tensile, lightweight, and temporary structures. Similarly, throughout the 1960s, artists in Italy were appropriating the form of the hut or temporary shelter through visual as well as conceptual references. Tenda, which Accardi had begun making as early as 1965, pre-dates many of these examples and has even been suggested as something of a prototype for works by artists such as Mario Merz and Luciano Fabro. Accardi’s Tenda, Ambiente Arancio, and Triplice Tenda all take the image of home as a starting point but they also resolutely reject sedentary dwelling. The forms her environments take are a central theoretical trope in the 1960s; they coincided with a moment in which anti-architecture offered political, intellectual, and material possibilities within postwar artistic practice and more broadly within a postwar Europe. That these temporary structures and by extension the provisional and alternative modes of existence they suggest have proved fertile ground in philosophical and ideological narratives of the period is implicitly acknowledged by the artist. When asked whether her environments specifically engaged with the idea of nomadic existence, Accardi points to interpretations that had already been offered by Germano Celant and Achille Bonito Oliva. Accardi’s Tenda, Ambiente Arancio, and Triplice Tenda all take the image of home as a starting point but they also resolutely reject sedentary dwelling. The forms her environments take are a central theoretical trope in the 1960s; they coincided with a moment in which anti-architecture offered political, intellectual, and material possibilities within postwar artistic practice and more broadly within a postwar Europe. That these temporary structures and by extension the provisional and alternative modes of existence they suggest have proved fertile ground in philosophical and ideological narratives of the period is implicitly acknowledged by the artist. When asked whether her environments specifically engaged with the idea of nomadic existence, Accardi points to interpretations that had already been offered by Germano Celant and Achille Bonito Oliva. The reference to ‘mobility’ is invoked repeatedly by Celant in discussions of Accardi’s environments, as when he writes: ‘it is true that Tenda, the big umbrella, the bed, respond to the desire for a precarious space, a temporary and mobile architecture, a tipi or a tent that can be easily moved by the individual to accommodate their way of life’. However, Accardi seems wary of any such over-determined readings of her work. If the nomadic shelter had once been articulated in terms of a cult of origins in architectural thinking or elsewhere in terms of fantasies of a lost plan, then Accardi’s tents can also be understood as registering a broad shift away from this conception in the 1960s with the temporary shelter reconceived as a matter of design. Despite the straightforward connection with the image of the nomadic shelter and the overstated associations of her work with

33. Bramanti (ed.), *Carla Accardi*, p. 34.
34. Bramanti (ed.), *Carla Accardi*, p. 34.
36. Bramanti (ed.), *Carla Accardi*, p. 34; Obrist, ‘Carla Accardi’, p. 98.
nomadism, there remains much that is compelling about this body of work. Accardi rejects the idea of home understood in terms of fixed domestic architecture, and in doing so she is able to appropriate the utopian rhetoric of living differently which is associated with these forms. I want to argue that this rhetoric is made to speak to her artistic practice, and to the possibility of artistic renewal.

Of particular importance is the fact that Accardi’s environments are made almost entirely of transparent plastic material. Although this aspect of Accardi’s practice has not gone unnoticed in the literature, it has not been adequately examined alongside the utopian rhetoric with which Accardi framed these works.38 The artist used this transparent material almost exclusively throughout the second half of the 1960s and in subsequent decades, and it is a choice that she foregrounds repeatedly in statements made about her environments and her working practice. These concerns can be understood within the context of a broader debate about a new way of seeing that developed in the postwar period in the USA and which was subsequently taken up in Europe within artistic as well as architectural practice and urban theory. As Letizia Modena explains, these debates comprised nuanced discussions on the urban environment as site of aesthetic experience, quality of life, and social welfare.39 One of the key threads of the debate, to parse Modena, focused on the phenomenology of the urban setting and the role of art and architecture in ‘revitalis[ing] the imagination of city dwellers’.40

Within architectural and urbanism discussions from the 1960s onwards in Italy, critical assessments of utopia were often focused on conceptualising it in relation to the imagination (including this new way of seeing) and visual perception. Crucially, lightness played a fundamental role in the interdisciplinary field of utopian studies and numerous analyses were devoted to the intricacies of visual perception, imagination, and cognition and significantly to lightness of materials.41 Accardi appropriates this lexicon and makes it speak to her own condition of working as a woman artist. By considering Accardi’s practice alongside statements the artist made about her temporary dwellings, I want to ask how this material signalled a new way of working and what new possibilities it offered for transforming her practice, before considering how the artist aligns this new way of working to her own feminist project.

How to Make a Home

That Accardi should turn to plastics to make her alternative homes is hardly surprising. It does, however, rub against those images of a pre-industrial community invoked by the artist, hinting at an altogether different utopian horizon: the techno-utopia of postwar consumer capitalism. It was precisely in this period that new housing typologies were delivered in this material. The first all-plastic house had already appeared in 1956 in France designed by the architect Ionel Schein, with subsequent competing models produced in the USA and Russia underscoring a global belief in this material’s potential to fulﬁl the utopian dream of a new domestic architecture.42 By the time Accardi began making her ﬁrst environment in 1965, plastics had long been advertised as a new wonder substance, heralding the house of the future in a postwar plastic world; manufacturers promoted plastic in largely utopian terms as a means of offering a radically different existence – one in which housework could be virtually eliminated through labour-saving materials and objects destined for use in the home.43

41. Modena, Italo Calvino’s Architecture of Lightness, p. 12.
Accardi, however, was keen to reject any connection to this consumer-orientated world despite the obvious associations of her temporary homes with the world of fashion and interior design for which Italy had, by this point, become famous. If the artist had couched her environments in utopian language then she had expressly described how she had not wanted to create ‘false things to dupe people’.\footnote{Lonzi, ‘Discorsi: Carla Lonzi e Carla Accardi’, Marcatre’, vol. 23–5, June 1966, p. 193.} If plastic was proclaimed as the material capable of imitation par excellence then the artist had somehow wanted to recuperate it from its connotations of mass production, and reclaim the potential for it beyond the merely derivative. Accardi’s use of plastic had initially elicited some criticism but she would defend her choice, explaining in an interview with Lonzi that she had wanted to ‘ennoble’ it.\footnote{Lonzi, ‘Discorsi’, p. 193.} Such comments on the part of the artist betray a concern to distinguish her art from other kinds of production (when visual and material distinctions were no longer possible), and the artist from other kinds of roles (such as art critic or designer). Perhaps the point is that Accardi’s temporary homes seem to draw from a range of contradictory historic and contemporary references as she works through the complex question of how it might be possible to even begin to conceive an alternative existence.

Crucially, reimagining the idea of the domestic in this material also went hand in hand with what it meant to rethink the transformative potential of her work. As I want to argue, it was the way that Accardi would conceive of the import of this possibility and its significance for painting that suggests a utopian promise for feminism. When Accardi began to make Tenda in 1965, it signalled an important transition in scale from the individual panels the artist had been painting previously, Accardi had spoken about Tenda as the first work she made that could be walked into.\footnote{Adachiara Zevi, ‘Carla Accardi: Segni Galleggianti’, L’Architettura: Cronache e Storia, vol. 38, 1992, p. 888.} Her practice did not, however, alter significantly when she began making her first environment. Rather, the move into three dimensions ultimately constituted an expansion of her painting practice. As Accardi explains it:

> The tent is not an object because if I wanted to make an object I would have had to make one that was intriguing, invented, new, I would have had to try to astonish people; no, for me the tent was an obvious thing, I had thought of it as an extension of painting.\footnote{Daniel Soutif has carried out the most exhaustive technical research into Accardi’s use of Sicofoil. Daniel Soutif, ‘La Vie en rose – Carla Accardi, Tripple Tenda, 1969–1971’, Les Cahiers du Musée National d’Art Moderne, vol. 98, winter 2006, pp. 47–8.}

_Tenda_ is constructed out of thirty-six painted panels, whose assorted shapes – triangular, rectangular, or trapezoidal – together form _Tenda’s_ A-Line structure, anticipating the shaped canvases that the artist would go on to make in later years. Each panel of _Tenda_ is made with two sheets of Sicofoil fixed within a Perspex frame. Sicofoil resembles plastic film and resists absorption, so the speed and force with which each brushstroke is made is registered on its surface. Accardi had applied water-based fluorescent colour to the reverse sides, all over and monochromatically, with hot pink or acid green waves. These lines of different thickness run perpendicular to each other so that when placed back to back within a single panel they overlap and appear to interact in a rippling effect, creating a wave-like pattern that befits the supple quality of the material (Fig. 9) with vertiginous results (Fig. 10).\footnote{Daniel Soutif has carried out the most exhaustive technical research into Accardi’s use of Sicofoil. Daniel Soutif, ‘La Vie en rose – Carla Accardi, Tripple Tenda, 1969–1971’, Les Cahiers du Musée National d’Art Moderne, vol. 98, winter 2006, pp. 47–8.}

Accardi’s experiments with transparent plastic had begun as early as 1964 when the artist turned to Perspex and then to Sicofoil, which she used exclusively thereafter.\footnote{Lonzi, ‘Discorsi’, p. 193.} Two years later in an interview with Lonzi, Accardi referred to that moment as a turning point: ‘I had a crisis, which had its origins in the way I had lived.’\footnote{Lonzi, ‘Discorsi’, p. 193.} Accardi describes her way out of this crisis in terms of a release from the traditions of post-war painting. Crucially, here Accardi conflates her work with her life – the crisis in painting is defined in terms of a crisis in the way she had ‘lived’. Accardi’s temporary homes become shorthand for
the way in which she conceives of her practice in this period, where visibility, transparency, and lightening came to stand for a certain openness, liberation, and freedom in art but also in life. In this context, the refrain ‘living differently’ can be seen as part of an ongoing avant-garde project in the sense that it carries forward familiar utopian cries to unite art and life. But it also takes a distinctive turn – a domestic turn – which is quite at odds with that legacy.

In the same interview Lonzi describes how Accardi had needed to find a way of distancing herself from painting.51 According to the critic, Tenda offered a way of doing this, and adds that it had allowed the artist to reflect on the conditions of painting.52 For Accardi, the solution to this crisis would come through the discovery of transparent material and the possibilities this presented for ‘lightening’ her work. At the time Accardi put it in this way:

[I had been] mistaken about those preconceived ideas . . . those post-war canons, believing with good faith in everything that others had said . . . at the time I took it out on my work . . . I had said ‘it doesn’t matter, it’s worthless, it isn’t important.’ After that moment, I can truly speak about lightening my work . . . it comes from having been through a kind of trauma, from having uncovered all those mythologies connected to painting.53

The ‘lightening’ that the artist had sought to achieve is rendered both palpably and figuratively with Sicofoil, ‘the inspiration . . . the start of it all’ she calls it, explaining how she had ‘wanted to make everything . . . transparent . . . so [as] to unveil the mysteries of art. It was the sixties.’54 Transparency is foregrounded in Accardi’s origin story as it takes centre stage in her conception

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Fig. 9. Carla Accardi, Tenda (detail), 1965–1966, paint on Sicofoil, 215 × 220 × 140 cm. Private Collection, Turin (Photo: Courtesy Studio Accardi, Rome).
of a new way of working. When she speaks of transparency, she equates it with being contemporary; ‘it was’, after all, ‘the sixties’. There is ongoing tension in statements such as these between the search for an alternative way of life and Accardi’s desire to be absolutely contemporary, as if the artist were interrogating how far these two overlap or how far they might be a way of saying the same thing. Similarly, when asked to reflect on her use of colour in an interview with Maurizio Calvesi for *Marcatrè*, she writes: ‘I . . . have always been aware of the fact that today no landscape exists without neon and fluorescent lights and it is for this reason that I arrived at these colours.’

By drawing on her contemporary environment, Accardi seems to want to ask how far the material and social conditions of the present could offer utopian
possibilities for the future and implies that being contemporary in the right way might in fact deliver a means of living differently.

Additionally, when Accardi speaks of ‘unveiling the mysteries of art’, the properties of plastic offer an antidote, in a literal sense, to the perceived encumbrances of painting. As she puts it, ‘you could see the frame’. Her choice of language to describe her work in terms of ‘lightening’ speaks closely to the logic of subtraction, echoed throughout this period within artistic practice. The significance of ‘lightening’ in Accardi’s work extends to her notion of living differently as premised on ‘contact with nature, air and light, free from civilising structures’. As already mentioned, this vocabulary allies her work to a widespread debate prevalent across the disciplines in Italy on the relationship between lightness and utopia, perhaps the most famous examples of which were elaborated later by Italo Calvino in *Invisible Cities* (1972) and *Six Memos* (1988) in close dialogue with the architectural and urban theory of the preceding decades.

Moreover her attempt to ‘unveil the mysteries of art’ would be echoed in later years by Rivolta Femminile. In a statement published in 1971, they put it in the following way: ‘The artist expects woman to mythicize his gesture[,] until a process of liberation occurs’. Anticipating Rivolta Femminile’s criticism that the mythologisation of art was symptomatic of female repression, Accardi’s notion of lightening offers an initial response to the form that liberation would need to take. This process, whose aims were to ‘unveil the mysteries of art’, involved putting her work in dialogue with the surrounding space. *Rotoli* and *Coni* (*Rolls and Cones*) (Fig. 11) are some of the first experiments that emerge from this development, anticipating the larger scaled environments which Accardi started making soon after.

A photograph taken in the Rome studio in 1966 reads almost like a production manual for these works; the *Rotoli* and *Coni* dispersed around the room offer themselves as clues for the likely transformation of the flat sheet in the centre, suggestively curled at one end (Fig. 12). A material more closely associated with commercial packaging than with art making, Accardi would buy Sicofoil at the local stationers, Vertecchi, where, as she explains, ‘it was normally used for shoe boxes, it was sold by the roll and . . . I used to buy [the] entire roll’. If the form of the *Rotoli* recall those rolled units of Sicofoil’s mass production, then the effects are quite unlike those that might be expected of modular, geometric sculpture in this period as it came to be associated with industrially produced materials. *Rotoli* have none of that monumentality to which their column-like structure would seem to refer. Difficult to define, they share a vocabulary with sculptural and painterly practices but the results elude both these categories. At once, they release sculpture from its associations with volume and weight, and painting from its adherence to a ground.

Accardi explores the fullest flexibility of this plastic material – and the kinds of visual lighting effects, metaphorical anti-gravitational effects, as well as the range of colours that could be produced on its surface. Certainly, the installation shots taken of *Rotoli* and *Coni* outdoors seem to recall this, where dispersal and concentration of light deflected off the curvilinear surface project an array of patterns and colours onto the surrounding floor space, producing what seems like an animated surface (Fig. 13). The same light effects that permeate and deflect off the shiny, pliable surfaces of *Rotoli* and *Coni* are also visible in *Tenda* and would be replicated in the other environments that Accardi made between 1965 and 1972. In ways that resonate with the provisional nature of Accardi’s temporary homes, and which she had hinted at when she had spoken of ‘tearing down walls’ – another veiled allusion to patriarchy – the notion of demystifying
the work of art went hand in hand with a physical and material challenge to existing borders alluded to by the tent motif.61

The artist presses the transparent surface to its limits, in ways that bind her practice to a knot of concerns around optics and identity. Indeed, Accardi’s practice might be better understood through metaphors of visibility. The artist emphasises the protective, decorative, and interactive possibilities of surface in ways that redefine the relationship between the work and its surroundings, and additionally, the way that those surroundings come to be viewed through the work. This distinctive aspect of her practice did not escape the attention of critics at the time; for example, in 1966 Lonzi described Accardi’s brushstrokes as signs ‘belonging to the unity of our visual experience’.62 The critic offers a structuralist reading of Accardi’s environments in which she insists that the painted signs that characterised the artist’s practice and that here appeared to float in space, had begun to assume a significance in relation to their surroundings.63 Lonzi seems to be saying that the meaning of Accardi’s painting would be determined by this relationship. Liberated from their frames, the painted panels that comprised the work can no longer claim to occupy a separate or autonomous space but rather seem to want to ask what it might
mean to live with art differently, in a more interactive way. The all-over painting typical of the artist’s practice in the 1950s comes, with the arrival of Sicofoil, to resemble camouflage or animal markings, pressing these concerns around vision further: the logic of camouflage, after all, traces a line between identity and concealment but also of the possibility of adapting to a given environment.64 Sicofoil dramatises these possibilities of interaction with the surrounding space. It also blurs the boundary between material and skin that had long informed Accardi’s practice.

If Accardi’s temporary environments can be understood as short hand for the idea of living differently then this, I argue, is premised on a different way of seeing. This takes on a variety of meanings in relation to Accardi’s practice, from her search to uncover the mythologies of painting, to ‘see the frame’ as Accardi had put it, right through to redefining the encounter between the viewer and her work.65 This also connects to the political stakes of seeing differently and the practice of autocoscienza (consciousness raising) whose aims were in part about the possibility of a new vision of the world. Accardi’s experiments with optical effects take on an additional meaning in her environments as they relate to privacy and shelter.66 She had referred to her environments as ‘transparent tents’ and the drawing that dates to 1970 suggests the three pink tents nestled together in decreasing size, one inside the other (Fig 14). The inner and outer panels of each tent interact in such a way as to transform the painted wave-like pattern on their surfaces into a lattice. It suggests the different ways in which transparency could be made to work – here as a form of enclosure, and to disorientating effect. If Accardi offers a model of living differently, then it is proposed as an idea of unsettled, unfixed space. Accardi had spoken about this before Celant would famously articulate it in semiotic terms. See for example Udo Kultermann, *The New Painting*, (New York: Praeger, 1969), p. 44; Corrado Levi (ed.), *Una Diversa Tradizione* (Milan: Clup, 1985), pp. 140–5; Bramanti (ed.), *Carla Accardi*, p. 20.

66. This has been connected to the politicisation of the private sphere by Leslie Cozzi in ‘Spaces of Self-Consciousness: Carla Accardi’s Environments and the Rise of Italian Feminism’, *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2011, p. 68.
over the role of the artist, which had dominated debates in the postwar period in Italy.\textsuperscript{70} Crucially, it also hints at Accardi’s faith in the utopian possibilities of art. Her aim to transform optics in painting was to assume a social and political scope beyond the canvas. In so doing, Accardi set out to dismantle what would later be articulated by Rivolta Femminile as the patriarchal and hierarchical structures of art. Through her transparent Sicofoil tents, Accardi proposed her practice as offering a model – and at the very least an imperative – to carry out that same critical project in life as in art.

Living Differently, Seeing Differently

Accardi remakes a model of home guided by the imperative to figuratively and materially ‘lighten’ her environments and, by extension, the dwelling space. This was literally achieved through the use of Sicofoil and, as the artist was at pains to point out, through a lot of hard work. But what were the implications of this move and more specifically how did this speak to the utopianism with which she framed these temporary shelters? For the artist this choice of material was explicitly connected to a new way of working, one defined in terms of a process of stripping back, anticipating the entirely transparent works that Accardi began making in the 1970s. Accardi sums up this way of working when she explains that it had allowed her to ‘take away, take away, take away’.71 The concept of lightness that underpins this attitude takes on a further significance as it is couched by Accardi in two key terms that would be elaborated through Rivolta Femminile, with which she was involved as founding member from the 1970s: ‘authenticity’ and ‘liberation’. As Maud Anne Bracke explains, these terms took on a pronounced meaning in Italy both inspired by the cultures of 1968 and their ‘year zero’ impulse as well as the influence of black liberation for Italian feminism, and were central to the project of defining sexual difference.72 This is how Accardi put it in 1966:

[T]aking everything away, might also have left nothing. But, perhaps, if a person has a certain attitude, takes a certain amount of care in trying to understand, yes, to see things in a new way, emptied out, in the end taking everything away will not result in nothing, something remains: for me it was an experience that I liked, that I enjoyed . . . I have the right to do something in whichever way I choose, the simplest way, to experiment, and if by making and trying to live each day in a way that was not vulgar, to remove everything, this thing remains . . . I risk making empty things, I risk losing things, unable to make works because an element is missing. But I don’t think so.73

Of the four environments that Accardi realised, *Triplice Tenda* is the most ambitious, and she describes making it as a ‘slow process’, as ‘two years of difficulty’ both ‘with the material and its [Triplice Tenda’s] production’.74 Importantly in the artist’s conception, the material lightening of the ground was never at the expense of technical difficulty. Accardi describes it here as meticulous work, and elsewhere she has spoken about the ‘huge problem’ involved in making *Triplice Tenda.*75

Accardi made much of the effort involved in working on the floor. *Ambiente Arancio*, made with seven wooden stretchers wrapped in Sicofoil sheets and arranged flat on the ground, makes a feature of the floor in a distinctive way, just as Accardi’s own approach to painting had by 1953 become floor-bound and distinguishable by its repeated all-over patterns. She described making *Tenda* as a summer spent ‘working on the floor, painting all these panels by hand with the overlapping pink and green’.76 A series of photographs by Ugo Mulas taken of the artist in her studio in Rome in 1967 (Fig. 15) shows Accardi at work on her hands and knees; she literally builds her temporary homes from the floor upwards. In another photograph from this largely unpublished series she appears as if literally scrubbing the floor as she negotiates the unwieldy panels that comprise her plastic environments. Accardi works directly on the ground but with none of the heroics associated with the Abstract Expressionists as they have come to be read. And while these shots of Accardi by Mulas exhibit nothing of the theatrics enshrined in photographs by Hans Namuth of Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings, she does share in the anti-heroic and anti-humanist tradition that might be associated with their working practice, connected as it was with the ground, rather than with something that stands upright.77
on the floor in ways that evoke the kind of labours involved in homemaking – that is as if she were literally scrubbing the floor – it is as if Accardi were trying to domesticate her gesture.

When Accardi speaks about her own practice she echoes the ambivalence and often troubled relationship with female domestic work as it had come to be regarded in the 1970s as both ‘trivialised and degraded categories of “women’s work” outside of the fine arts’, but also as an ‘arena for self-expression in the face of oppression’.78 Accardi writes: ‘we know that women work with repetition. My paintings took a long time to make. I would make them on the floor like a rug. Repetition is an inherent fact of oppression … but it needs to be revived, to be recovered and made into a liberatory gesture.’79 She takes a mode of working long associated with the conditions of female oppression and declares it a distinctive feature of her own practice. Moreover, she claims to transform those repetitive operations into something ‘liberatory’. To borrow from Candance West and Don Zimmerman, it is as if Accardi were appropriating the gestures of the domestic, only to refuse the activities of a life connected to that space and by extension the subjectivities constructed through those roles.80

The artist’s practice has from the outset elicited multiple interpretations.81 By the mid-1970s, the politics of Accardi’s tents would be recognized and claimed as a feminist critique by both Lonzi and Sauzeau-Boetti.82 In an important though little-known contribution to the narrative of postwar women’s art in Italy, Sauzeau-Boetti makes a case for a productive space on the margins. She reads Triplice Tenda through the lens of psychoanalysis, in pre-Oedipal terms, writing in 1976: ‘at the time she had a vision of primordial existence and feminine desire … the mother, love before castration and the involvement of the rival father’.83 Framed by Accardi’s own participation in consciousness-raising groups, Sauzeau-Boetti describes a turning point in the artist’s practice in the following way: ‘the end of the 1960s represented a moment of intense introspection for Carla, the search for her own historical condition, the immersion in the dream/sign and continues, ‘Accardi’s feminine sign … is a move through a certain appropriation of culture … a different way of being in the world.’84 Sauzeau-Boetti evokes the spatial organisation and formal logic of Triplice Tenda to read its pink labyrinthine space as a psychic metaphor and the temporary structure as symbolic resistance to civilisation, referring specifically to the ‘law of the father’.85 This association of civilisation in masculine terms was not of course limited to feminist discourse, though it was famously articulated explicitly in these terms by the Milan-based radical feminist collective Demau (Demistificazione dell’autoritarismo) which held meetings jointly with Rivolta Femminile throughout the 1970s.86 Their focus was turned towards the experience of women in patriarchal society, and they called for a politics outside of its civilising and explicitly masculine norms.

Informed by these early feminist readings of Accardi’s environments, Leslie Cozzi has recently analysed Accardi’s ‘quasi-domestic’ structures as prototypes for the kind of anti-institutional spaces proposed by organised feminism and appropriate to the consciousness-raising groups with which Accardi was involved as member of Rivolta Femminile.87 At stake in Cozzi’s analysis is the desire to foreground the significance of Italian feminism amongst women artists in this period. She argues that Tenda, Triplice Tenda, and Ambiente Arancio are the artist’s response to the aims of that movement as they unfolded in Italy. Cozzi claims that Accardi’s environments and the institutions of Italian feminism were predicated on the notion that ‘a new consciousness could be facilitated if a separate institutional structure were provided to nurture it’.88 This later became a central tenet of Italian feminist thought.89 Accardi’s environments are understood
as occupying a space somewhere between the private, as it was called for within feminist thought, and the public, as autoconsienza became an ‘active political tool’. To parse Cozzi’s argument, Accardi’s environments trace a shift within her own development of feminism from individual to group endeavour. Triplice Tenda marks the transformation of this development as a communal space and a prototype for those alternatives established by Rivolta Femminile.

Cozzi is right, I think, to connect Tenda, Ambient Arancio, and Triplice Tenda to the aims of radical design, which was also committed to offering alternative ways of living in this period. In this way, Cozzi proposes a much-needed reading of Accardi’s environments that binds these works to social and political concerns and sees them as visual instances of the call for an alternative existence – and after all, these environments do overlap chronologically with Accardi’s involvement in Rivolta Femminile. Accardi, however, has expressed ambivalence in recent years towards these kinds of interpretations that emphasise her involvement in feminist politics. She has repeatedly stressed her departure from the politics of organised feminism. Two decades earlier, Accardi claimed that her transparent objects and environments preceded her interest in feminism and that her involvement with feminism only coincided with her grey works of the 1970s. The point perhaps is that to read her works strictly through the lens of her political involvement fails to acknowledge the importance of aesthetic concerns as they were foregrounded by the artist and the question of how those aesthetic concerns might themselves be able to speak to politics. How might it be possible, then, to examine her political involvement with Rivolta Femminile through the lens of her artistic practice rather than the other way around?

If Tenda, Ambient Arancio, and Triplice Tenda could offer another way of living, then this, I argue, was principally played out through Accardi’s way of working, and the concomitant experience of viewing her work. For Accardi, as already noted, this is predicated on a different way of seeing. Sicofoil offers a distinctly new way of working – and transparency is literally and symbolically equated here with that new approach of peeling away or stripping back. Elsewhere, and perhaps in a way that seems at odds with the repeated brushwork technique and resulting dense wave-like patterns that distinguish her environments, Accardi affirms that ‘to me it was more important to take away than to add’. For Accardi this attitude also carried with it a moral imperative. She describes her new approach as underpinned by ‘the right attitude’ and as working with the right degree of ‘care’. Furthermore, it is underscored by the need to try ‘to understand things properly’, and crucially, ‘to see in a new way, by emptying out’. Accardi seems to be saying that understanding things properly or seeing things in a new way becomes possible through an emptying out. Importantly, Accardi wants to explore what remains as a result of this process – whether the effect of stripping back could reveal something radical or fundamental. This thinking informs the way Accardi conceives of artistic production, which she couches in terms of authenticity but also as redefining an everyday existence, though it obviously also connects closely to the aims of consciousness raising, not necessarily as an organised practice but as the idea of a political consciousness based on a process of stripping away, a revelation.

This process of taking away extends to the viewing encounter. It is as if the artist wants to elicit a similar set of responses in the viewer when she writes: ‘In front of the things I make the viewer could feel a kind of lack and emotional poverty’. Accardi literally removes the obstacle posed by the canvas, making works whose constituent elements are all visible. In an interview with Marisa Volpi she reiterates this when she explains: ‘My works are almost entirely aesthetic, visual objects: the tents, the umbrella, the sunbed have a lightness for...
those that look at them, if the [viewer] looks at them in a straightforward way, and wants to liberate [themselves] from the heavy and conventional objects which surround us.\textsuperscript{98} As mentioned above, one of the crucial differences between Lonzi and Accardi’s perspectives was the role of art in feminism. For Lonzi the two were incompatible precisely because art replicated the patriarchal structures of society by relying on the role of spectator. Accardi’s response seems to want to redefine those roles, as when she claims: ‘I wanted to understand what lay behind it [art] and I wanted for people not to feel stuck in front of a work. I found that to be too automatic a position. I wanted the audience to be shaken.’\textsuperscript{99}

Undoubtedly the viewing encounter is transformed with transparent plastic, as Accardi explores what it means to view an object and to have the object negotiate the terms of the encounter for the viewer. Looking at something is of course different to looking through it and these environments transform that process. But if Accardi had ambitions to make everything transparent, then how did the use of plastic transform those relations?

Sicofoil animates the dynamics of vision; it implies alternative points of view with works that can literally be seen from all sides and it insists that art has to speak to that space around the work. It also interrogates the act of looking, and the different aspects that impinge on that experience. The effects of this move are far-reaching. Accardi not only physically situates her environments in relation to the surrounding space but also makes them a function of viewing that space. It is this, above all else, that seems to take on a political significance in Accardi’s practice of this period, anticipating rather than directly mapping on to the way in which these concerns would subsequently be articulated through Rivolta Femminile. For the artist, this renewed interest in a politics of vision went hand in hand with what it meant to be a woman artist, as when she writes: ‘already in ‘64 I began a study ... to lighten ... especially to demystify the picture and for me this demystification had a feminine content’.\textsuperscript{100}

Another way that Accardi negotiates the experience of space is through recourse to memory, weaving these works into her own life story (she speaks of having dreamt of \textit{Tenda} as a child).\textsuperscript{101} But she also does this by locating these works in the imaginary, insisting that \textit{Tenda} ‘is a thought’, perhaps in the same way that utopia is not a place. With reference to \textit{Ambiente Arancio} Accardi insists, ‘before anything, it was a fabrication of my imagination’.\textsuperscript{102} Accardi seems to be describing a different kind of interaction with the viewer, one that relies on a conception of the work as \textit{mise-en-scène} rather than immersive environment. In her account of the different kinds of viewing encounter that emerged with installation art in the 1960s, Claire Bishop characterised the dream/fantasy divide as a way of distinguishing between installations that function more like tableaux – that is, where the viewing subject is indirectly solicited to imagine being part of the work, in contrast to installations where the viewer is immersed in an environment. Accardi flirts with these distinctions: \textit{Ambiente Arancio} seems to address itself directly to the viewer, in a way that appears to function like a dreamscape, but by describing \textit{Ambiente Arancio} as ‘rarefied’ she relies on a conception of the work as tableau or \textit{mise-en-scène} as well as a space or place in which to project those reveries. In doing so Accardi seems to suggest not only that the locus of this alternative might be found in an attitude – a particular perspective taken in relation to things – but also that the ability to conceive of an alternative existence might be just as important as its realisation.

As the complex and inherently paradoxical experience of remaking home testifies, the domestic becomes a site of an impossible utopia in this period as
Accardi grapples with the question of how you might ever begin to start living differently. Accardi highlights the floor-based and repetitive labour involved in remaking her temporary homes while at the same time emphatically refusing to take part in productive labour. Rather, she speaks of ‘taking pleasure in making a useless object’, rejecting means-end rationality. In doing so, she wants to advance an altogether different model of working, transforming the kind of labour normally associated with oppression in the home into something liberatory. If her artistic practice has anything to say about the relationship between feminism and the domestic it is this. Her alternative homes signal new possibilities for both her practice and the experience of viewing the work. With the same stroke she unmakes home and undoes painting, asking both of her work and her life what it might mean to think of an alternative. Through her emphasis on transparency and commitment to lightening, she materially and metaphorically finds a way of challenging myths of art as masculine and, by extension, the domestic structure of female oppression. In doing so she raises the question of what the utopian possibilities of feminism might be without giving clear-cut answers. Instead, through her practice she offers a set of guiding principles and suggests an ethical approach to her work that, if adopted, could form the basis for thinking and working otherwise, through the formation of alternative models for living.