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Abstract: This essay offers a reading of Mario Mieli's militant political project through the theoretical lens of performativity. Performativity, suspended between, and fully incorporating both the linguistic and the theatrical, courses through Mieli's cultural production. I begin with a discussion of the role of the *travestito* within the context of Mieli's involvement in the emergence of gay theater in Italy in the late 1970s and its necessarily political valences. I then move on to discuss a performativity that is particular to Mieli's cultural production: to dare, elaborating on the performative structure of Mieli's insistence that to dare is also to give of oneself. I conclude by reflecting on Mieli's figuring of the actor as masochist. For Mieli, masochism makes it possible to dissolve the individual self in favor of a liberated communal self, a subjective process that is enabled through daring acts.

Keywords: Mario Mieli, performativity, masochism, perversion, queer performance, gay liberation.

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Mario Mieli, ovvero il maestro masochista: Performative Elements of a Perverse Militancy¹

MATTHEW ZUNDEL

Queer performance [...] is about transformation, about the powerful and charged transformation of the world, about the world that is born through performance.²

Tutti gli esseri umani conosceranno se stessi, e non più dal punto di vista individualistico, che sarà stato superato, bensì da quello transessuale-intersoggettivo, comunitario: la coscienza avrà annullato le barriere tra Io e non-Io, tra corpo e intelletto, tra il dire e il fare.³

Introduction

In writing this essay I realize that introducing Mario Mieli to those less familiar with his work is a fraught task. This is mainly because the *Elementi di critica omosessuale* / *Elements of a Homosexual Critique* tends to be the first work that people encounter when they learn of Mieli's name, a fact especially true in the anglophone academy thanks to a brand-new translation, *Towards a Gay Communism: Elements of a Homosexual Critique*, which came out with Pluto Press in summer 2018. This new translation comes in the wake of renewed interest in Mieli's writing spurred by a petition among Italian queer activists to reissue the 2002 Feltrinelli edition of *Elementi*.⁴ Feltrinelli's 2017 republication has been followed by a wave of new cultural materials: a show inspired by the *Elementi* called, "Abracadabra—incantesimi di Mario Mieli," (Abracadabra—Mario Mieli's Enchantment) written and performed by Irene Serini, was performed at Milan's Teatro Out-Off during the 2017/2018 season; Mieli's posthumously published autobiographical novel, *Il risveglio dei Faraoni* (The Awakening of the Pharaohs), was republished in 2018; a collection of Mieli's political writings compiled by Paola Mieli and Massimo Prearo was just released with Marsilio press; and a film is currently in post-production about Mieli's life entitled *Gli anni amari* (The Bitter Years), directed by Andrea Adriatico.⁵ Despite all of this new material the *Elementi* is something of a center of gravity for understanding Mieli as it is the volume in which he articulated much of the theory that animates the rest of his work. New readers of the book will no doubt be attracted to Mieli's articulation of a "gay communism" as a resource for thinking through current issues between queer theory and global marxism today.⁶ Indeed, this is what first brought me

¹ I want to thank the organizers and attendees of the "Queer(ing) Anglo/Italian Theories and Practices" workshop at the University of Verona in April of 2017 for their insightful engagement with me at an early stage of this project. I want to especially thank Kate Travers, Giulia Sbaffi, Gianna Albaum, Emily Antenucci, Alfo Aguado, and the rest of my colleagues at New York University's Italian Department for their constant feedback while I puzzled through my argument. I also want to thank the anonymous reviewers whose kind and generous remarks greatly influenced the final form of this article.

² Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, xiv.

³ Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 242-243, emphasis his. "All human beings will know themselves, and no longer from an individualistic point of view, which will be overcome, but rather from a transsexual, intersubjective and communitarian one: this consciousness will break down the barriers between Ego and non-Ego, between self and others, between body and intellect, between [saying and doing]." Adapted from Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism*, 254-255. I modified the translation slightly to emphasize Mieli's original use of the verbs to say (dire) and to do (fare). For all citations from Mieli's *Elementi* I will be using the new English edition cited above. All other translations from the Italian are mine, unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Cornelio, "Ristampare 'Elementi di critica omosessuale' di Mario Mieli."

⁵ Serini, "Abracadabra—incantesimi di Mario Mieli"; Mieli, *Il risveglio dei Faraoni*; Mieli and Prearo, eds., *La gaia critica*; "Gli anni amari. Diario di bordo del film di Andrea Adriatico su Mario Mieli."

⁶ Helpful starting points in this regard are: Floyd, *The Reification of Desire*; Liu, *Queer Marxisms in Two Chinas*.

to study Mieli. What makes any introduction to Mieli fraught is the fact that any study of his work must consider his experience as a queer person in Italy during the 1970s: the materiality of queerness forms the fundamental groundwork from which his politics, and therefore his theoretical writings, arise.

To call Mieli queer is something of a risk. Tim Dean argues that, “If he were writing today, Mieli would doubtless present himself and his perspective as queer,” while Teresa de Lauretis is less convinced, writing, “Mi chiedo se a Mario piacerebbe la teoria queer, e mi rispondo sì e no” (I wonder if Mario would like queer theory, and I answer: yes and no).⁷ Dean and de Lauretis’ differing responses testify to the complexity of queerness, whether it is attached to the presentation of the self or as a label attached to theoretical methodology, which encompasses a range of sexually minoritarian identifications at the same time as it refuses the stability of any identity. Throughout this article the reader will notice a slippage in terms between my use of queer, gay, homosexual, and perverse, to describe Mieli and his militancy. To relegate Mieli to one immobile identificatory label would create a flawed understanding of Mieli’s self-presentation, which was multiple and complex. In my view, there is a variability to gender and sexual identifications implicit in the term queer. I therefore have chosen to move between identificatory terminology as fluidly as Mieli had in his own writing and performance. This certainly should include queer but should not be reducible to it.⁸

In this brief introduction I condense much that would require substantially more space to be considered satisfactory. With these initial paragraphs I limit myself to a few essential points that will help the reader to situate my main reflections on Mieli’s politics of performativity: Mieli’s image among academics and activists; the use of his name towards conservative political ends today; and his refusal to let others hold authority over his voice.

Born in Milan in 1952, Mario Mieli came of age during a period of immense social and political change in post-war Italy. In 1971, three years after the explosive student protests in France, and two years after the Stonewall Riots in New York, he travelled to London and took part in the activities of the newly formed Gay Liberation Front (GLF) there. A year later he helped to co-found the first gay liberation collective in Italy: FUORI (Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzione Italiano / United Italian Homosexual Revolutionary Front), which built itself on the model of the American and British GLF groups as well as the French FHAR (Front homosexuel d’action révolutionnaire / Homosexual Revolutionary Action Front). Throughout the 1970s Mieli made a name for himself as one of the most creative and important intellectual voices of the Italian gay liberation movement, publishing often in countercultural magazines of the period, (both those directly related to gay liberation and broader titles), such as *FUORI!*, *Lambda*, and *L’erba voglio* (I Want the Grass). His reputation as the main intellectual figure of the Italian gay liberation movement was solidified in 1977 when he published his *Elementi di critica omosessuale* with Einaudi.

Since the early 2000s a number of scholars and queer activists have provided productive and engaging introductions to Mieli’s theoretical work.⁹ Within these introductions there tend to be two

⁷ Dean, “Foreword: ‘I Keep My Treasure in My Arse,’” in *Towards a Gay Communism*, xii; de Lauretis, “La gaia scienza, ovvero la traviata Norma,” in *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 265.

⁸ For more on the use of queer in relation to Mieli see, Prearo, “Le radici rimosse della *queer theory*,” 95-114; Pustianaz, ed. *Queer Italia*. Mieli was, however, aware of how the term was used in English during the 1970s and its negative connotation, though he seems wary of its political potential. Working from Larry Mitchell’s book, *The Faggots and their Friends Between Revolutions*, Mieli notes the distinction made between “queer men” and “faggots” where the queer men do all that they can to fit into masculinist norms so as to avoid the violence their “effeminacy” tends to provoke, while the faggots actively work to disrupt those violent norms. See Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 205; Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism*, 213.

⁹ An essential list would include: the essays in the appendix of the 2002 Feltrinelli edition of Mieli’s *Elementi di critica omosessuale* reissued in 2017, written by Paola Mieli, Christopher Lane, Teresa de Lauretis, Claude Rabant, Tim Dean, David Jacobson, Gianni Rossi Barilli, and Simonetta Spinelli; Prearo, “Introduction,” in *Towards a Gay Communism*, xv-xxiv; De

images of Mieli: one seen from the perspective of the queer theoretical context and the other from that of contemporary gay activism in Italy. For those engaged in queer studies scholarship we often encounter him as “il più importante teorico del movimento gay italiano”¹⁰ (the most important theoretician of the Italian gay movement), while for those fighting for gay rights in Italy he is largely known by way of the cultural center—Mario Mieli: Circolo di cultura omosessuale (Mario Mieli: Gay Cultural Center). The two images create different impressions. The former focuses on Mieli primarily as theoretician. The second calcifies Mieli’s name and image as a metonym for a bygone era of gay liberation. From both images a more comprehensive view begins to emerge: today Mieli is an icon of the Italian gay liberation movement of the 1970s, exemplary not only for his provocative social transgressions but also for his ability to communicate these transgressions in an exciting theoretical polemic, the *Elementi*. That being said, I take seriously Lorenzo Bernini’s recent call to resist figuring Mieli as “un’icona, un santino, una statua di cera nel museo della trasgressione queer” (an icon, a saint, a waxwork statue in the museum of queer transgression).¹¹ Though Bernini was addressing a general audience at the Antigone bookshop in Milan, his words remain just as important for academics interested in the genealogies of queer thought. Showing an uncritical adoration of Mieli’s work runs the risk of turning his theoretical bent into an orthodoxy. Mieli did not envision himself as a glorified leader of the gay liberation movement: he sought to be one of many voices from within the movement. Theory for Mieli, was a means to create a movement, a tool-kit for spurring revolution. To create a theoretical figure out of his name with which we identify, or that we might replicate, was not his intention. Moreover, turning Mieli into a theoretical icon for whom we might become disciples flattens out the complexity of his cultural production. Mieli did theorize, yes, but he also wrote and acted in a number of theater pieces, wrote poetry, was actively engaged in shaping the gay liberation movement as it developed in Italy, and most importantly he helped gay men to adopt the feminist practice of *autocoscienza* (consciousness-raising) as a communal effort at creating self-consciousness in the decade.¹² Scholarship on Mieli tends to begin with his freudo-marxist theoretical frame, it usually discusses his theoretical inconsistencies, and wonders about the stakes of putting Mieli and other “canonical” figures of queer theory in conversation.¹³ This form of “queer knowledge,” however, forgets the profoundly personal origins of Mieli’s cultural production, stemming from the practice of *autocoscienza*. As Massimo Prearo notes, “Mieli [...] does not aim for theoretical coherence, scientific ambition, or the willingness to turn his [*Elementi di critica omosessuale*] into a critical step of an academic career. The knowledge from which Mieli is driven and which puts his reflection in motion is not made of concepts, but rather of experiences that the author elaborates, discusses, reformulates and disseminates.”¹⁴ As the epitaph from Mieli’s *Elementi* above makes clear, this knowledge is of the self—but not an individualistic self. Instead, Mieli’s theoretical project attempts to articulate a communal self, a transsexual self, or, we might argue, a self that is at once singular and plural.¹⁵

However, the task of introducing Mieli is fraught not only because his theoretical persona offers only an ephemeral glimpse into the complexity of his life’s work and its imbrication in the Italian

Laude, *Mario Mieli. E adesso*; LoIacono, “La gaia scienza: La critica omosessuale di Mario Mieli,” 96-103. For an interesting literary reading of Mieli’s “gaia critica” see also Frascà’s “The Importance of Being *Ernesto*,” 122-141.

¹⁰ Barilli, “Il corpo in rivoluzione,” in *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 303.

¹¹ Bernini, “Mario Mieli, una di noi (Lotta anale contro il capitale!).”

¹² Barilli, *Il movimento gay in Italia*, 66-68.

¹³ See, for instance, the aforementioned essays of Teresa de Lauretis, Tim Dean, and Christopher Lane, in the appendix to the Feltrinelli edition of *Elementi di critica omosessuale*.

¹⁴ Prearo, “Introduction,” in *Towards a Gay Communism*, xix.

¹⁵ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*.

gay liberation movement, but because we must always contend with the reality that Mieli's name gives energy to harmful contemporary homophobic and transphobic political views.

We can see just how easily Mieli's name can be appropriated in the service of homophobic politics by considering an incident from Lilli Gruber's political talk show *Otto e Mezzo* (Eight and a Half) last September. During an episode Mieli's name was dragged into an ongoing conversation about the current Italian political climate. The person dragging him was Silvana De Mari, a noted children's literary author and psychotherapist, who has come under fire for remarks that homosexuality is a curable sickness.¹⁶ At one point in the episode Gruber asked if De Mari was disturbed by the rising trend in violent language in politics, to which De Mari responded:

Certo [...] Ma attenzione: il punto più sacro è la libertà di parola. Posso fare un esempio pratico? A Roma abbiamo un circolo che è intitolato a Mario Mieli. Questo circolo riceve fiumi di denaro dallo stato per fare attività pedagogica, psicologica e sanitaria. Ricordo che Mario Mieli è un intellettuale morto suicida a 31 anni, mangiava gli escrementi suoi e del suo cane a spettacoli teatrali. Nel suo libro gli *Elementi di critica omosessuale* lui parla di come lui subisca e come sia affascinato dall'erotismo dei bambini.¹⁷

At first, De Mari's comment seems to be a non sequitur. What does the Circolo Mario Mieli have to do with the topic of conversation, violent language in politics, and her remark about the sacredness of "la libertà di parola" (free speech)? Moments earlier she set the frame for this comment by arguing that in today's political climate we must take a course to become "belve" (beasts) "per diventare dei leoni, delle leonesse; per imparare a batterci; per imparare a smontare tutti i discorsi manipolatori, grazie [ai quali] [...] qui siamo in mezzo di una dittatura delle minoranze" (in order to become lions and lionesses; so that we learn to fight for ourselves; in order to learn to dismantle every sort of manipulative discourse, thanks to which we are now in the midst of the tyranny of minorities).¹⁸ She clarifies her meaning by singling out two particularly "manipulative discourses": "in questo momento noi abbiamo i due psicoreati di un futuro totalitario che sono l'omofobia e l'islamofobia" (at the moment we have two forms of crimethink of a totalitarian future, which are homophobia and islamophobia).¹⁹ Thus, she paints the current discourse of inclusivity touted by the progressive political left (e.g. we must work for equality for all by fighting against homophobia, transphobia, islamophobia, etc.) as a censoring of free speech. From this perspective the progressives are the "Thought Police" with a pure ideology of equality and any resistance to that (e.g. homophobia, transphobia, islamophobia) for any reason is "psicoreato" (crimethink) and must be censored. For her, Mieli's perverse behavior (e.g. "mangiava gli escrementi," "sia affascinato dell'erotismo dei bambini") (he used to eat excrement, was fascinated by the eroticism of children) is dangerous not only because eating his own shit (i.e. coprophagia) is pathological and leads to suicide ("intellettuale morto suicida")

¹⁶ Nenzi, "Il chirurgo Silvana De Mari: 'Curo gli omosessuali da 40 anni. La loro condizione non è normale.'"

¹⁷ "Of course [...] However: the most sacred point is the freedom of speech. Can I offer a practical example? In Rome we have a cultural center named after Mario Mieli. This center receives waves of funding from the state, which goes towards pedagogic, psychological, and health-related activities. I remind you that Mario Mieli was an intellectual who committed suicide when he was 31 years old, and he used to eat both his and his dog's excrement during theatrical performances. In his book, *Elementi di critica omosessuale* he talks about how he is subjected to and fascinated by the eroticism of children." I copied down the text from a recording of the television program. The entirety of the episode can be found here: Lepore, "Un errore aver invitato Silvana De Mari a Otto e Mezzo."

¹⁸ She cites from an article she published a day earlier in the conservative newspaper *La Verità* entitled, "Macché buoni: diventate belve. E cominciate a costruire dei muri."

¹⁹ De Mari's use of "psicoreato" (crimethink) is a neologism from George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984* indicating a thought that is a crime, all activity of which is monitored by the "Thought Police."

(he is an intellectual who committed suicide), but because his ideas can be seen to promote pedophilia. Pedophilia, it seems, constitutes the greater threat for De Mari: she continues by inaccurately citing a passage of the *Elementi* in which Mieli makes one of his most outrageous claims of the book: “Noi checche rivoluzionarie sappiamo vedere nel bambino non tanto l’Edipo, o il futuro Edipo, bensì l’essere umano potenzialmente libero. Noi, sì, possiamo amare i bambini. Possiamo desiderarli eroticamente rispondendo alla loro voglia di Eros, possiamo cogliere a viso e braccia aperte la sensualità inebriante che profondono, possiamo fare l’amore con loro.” (We revolutionary queers see in the child not so much Oedipus, or the future Oedipus, as *the potentially free human being*. We do indeed love children. We are able to desire them erotically, in response to their own erotic wishes, and we can openly and with open arms grasp the rush of sensuality that they pour out and make love with them.)²⁰ De Mari reformulates this in a much more threatening register: “Noi checche rivoluzionarie, noi sicché possiamo accogliere l’eros dei vostri figli, noi li sedurremo, noi faremo l’amore con loro” (We revolutionary queers, given that we are able to accommodate the eroticism of your children, we will seduce them, we will make love to them). According to her, free speech means that we must also engage in violent language in order to fight against societal threats; in this case, against the support of the Circolo Mario Mieli, which gives voice to the dangerous musings of a sick, suicidal, pedophilic, pervert.

De Mari’s argument constitutes an insult; one that has become more prevalent in Italy through the “crociata anti-gender” (anti-gender crusade) with which De Mari can be associated.²¹ She does not come right out and call Mieli a name — a pervert, a pedophile, a fag — but she makes a direct connection to these nominal insults, thus consigning Mieli to the bizarre, the abnormal, the dangerous, as a way to discredit the institution to which his name is attached. Didier Eribon’s study on the emergence of gay subjectivity through the linguistic act of the insult is clarifying here: “Insult is more than a word that describes. It is not satisfied with simply telling me what I am. If someone calls me a ‘dirty faggot’ [...] that person is not trying to tell me something about myself. That person is letting me know that he or she has something on me, has power over me.”²² De Mari is not trying to represent Mieli or his political project honestly, but attempts to assert power over his name by taking control of how it is framed. To this end, she doesn’t dialogue or engage with Mieli’s writing or performances, she is not interested in hearing what he has to say about eating shit or the liberational value he places on making room for children’s erotic capabilities.²³ De Mari reductively equates Mieli’s name with the

²⁰ Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 62, emphasis his; Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism*, 54.

²¹ The “crociata anti-gender” refers to a recent upsurge in activism polemically aimed at the growing influence of “gender ideology” in the public sphere, begun by Pope Francis’s declaration that gender theory “is the great enemy of marriage today.” Pope Francis I, “Meeting with Priests, Religious, Seminarians and Pastoral Workers.” Judith Butler, a foundational figure in the development of what these activists term as “gender ideology” in the academy with her paradigm-shifting work in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, is a prime target of these growing movements. She responded in an article this year denouncing these groups: “Judith Butler: the backlash against ‘gender ideology’ must stop.” For more on the organization of these groups into social movements see: Sara Garbagnoli and Prearo, *La crociata “anti-gender.”*

²² Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, 16-17.

²³ Mieli’s coprophagia and comments about childhood eroticism are often the first themes of his work that people encounter. Admittedly, it’s quite difficult to approach a thinker who did, in fact, eat shit during his performances and call for the political necessity of cultivating the erotic tendencies of children. It is easy to miss Mieli’s political commitment and rigorous theoretical groundwork because of the perverse spectacle that these actions and comments create. It is not my intention to delve into the psychoanalytic theories that inform these actions nor to take a moral stance on them. Instead I want to focus our attention on what these acts of public indecency meant for Mieli’s project of gay liberation. For an overview of the theoretical underpinnings of coprophagia see Mieli, “Cenni sull’analisi e la pornolalia. Il denaro e la merda” in *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 146-155, and an interview between Mieli and Antonio Veneziani, “Alchimia, merda, droga e sogno,” 67-74. For more on Mieli’s claims about childhood eroticism see “Il desiderio omosessuale è universale” in *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 13-62, and Accolla, “Mieli pedofilo? La morale a corrente alternativa di Malan & co.”

danger of perversion in the same moment as she weaponizes it against anyone who has sought out the Circolo Mario Mieli for aid in navigating the everyday violence of living queerly in Italy.

Mieli understood very well how the authorities of the “Norm” work to take the voice, and thus power, away from those labeled as perverse. In the *Elementi* he writes about the “psiconazisti” (psychonazis), “terapeuti” (therapists), “protettori di sinistra” (the protectors of the left), who misconstrue what it means to be a homosexual and therefore contribute to the economy of insult and violence under which gay men lived during the 1970s.²⁴ Mieli’s theoretical project is thus grounded in the conviction that the gays must work from their own experience if they are to combat the presumptions levelled at them by “i pareri tradizionali degli etero” (the traditional opinions of the heteros). In fact, he begins the *Elementi* with this fundamental point of summary:

Ho messo a confronto col mio punto di vista, maturato e ringiovanito nell’ambito del movimento gay, molti dei luoghi comuni antiomosessuali diffusissimi e alcune delle più note teorie psicoanalitiche inerenti all’omosessualità. L’ho fatto perché ritengo ancora opportuno contrapporre, anche in “sede teorica,” i pareri di noi gay a quelli tradizionali degli etero, i quali di solito condividono – più o meno volentieri o più o meno consapevolmente – i (pre)giudizi di certa canaglia reazionaria, di tutti quei medici, psicologi, sociologi, magistrati, politici, preti ecc. che spacciano per verità sulla questione omosessuale le più grossolane – o, rarissimamente, sottili – menzogne. Noi, che non identifichiamo con la loro “Scienza,” facciamo riferimento a una *gaia scienza*.²⁵

Significantly, Mieli never outlines a definition of the process of this “gaia scienza” (gay science).²⁶ Instead he often positions “gaia scienza” in opposition to modern scientific methods which have oppressed homosexuals for more than a century (e.g. psychoanalysis and psychiatry). For example, when he talks about the value of psychoanalytic methods for the work of gay consciousness-raising groups he writes: “Abbiamo così scoperto nella psicoanalisi alcune nozioni importanti, come quella di *inconscio*, ad esempio, o di *rimozione*, che, almeno per il momento, possono venire integrate nella *gaia scienza*” (We have discovered in psychoanalysis some important ideas, such as that of the unconscious, for example, and repression – ideas which we can integrate at least temporarily into our own gay science).²⁷ Mieli’s “gaia scienza” is a mode of knowledge production that refuses the discourse of experts (like the “psiconazisti,” or in our contemporary setting, De Mari) in favor of the expertise of the autonomous subject (his own self-narrated experience as a gay person).²⁸ If we are to approach Mieli’s work in the academy I feel it necessary to recall that he grounded his militancy on the privileged perspective of an autonomous subject: a subject that seizes control over how they narrate their own experiences of oppression. Keeping this in mind, this article explores the following question: what does it look like when Mieli, labelled as perverse, and thus considered to be dangerous, speaks for

²⁴ For Mieli “psiconazisti” is one of Mieli’s many neologisms, referring to the psychiatrists and psychoanalysts who twist their understanding of homosexuality in such a way as to further oppress them.

²⁵ Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 7. “I have tackled from my own perspective, one that was matured and rejuvenated in the ambits of the gay movement, many of the most widespread anti-homosexual commonplaces and some of the best known psychoanalytic theories that bear on homosexuality. I did this because I think it opportune, even on a “theoretical basis,” to oppose the opinions of us gays to the traditional opinions of the heteros, which as a rule share – more or less deliberately, more or less consciously – the prejudices of a certain reactionary rabble, i.e. all those doctors, psychologists, magistrates, politicians, priests, etc. who peddle as the truth on the homosexual question the crudest lies – or, more rarely, the more subtle ones. We, who refuse to identify ourselves with their “science,” base ourselves rather on a *gay science*.” Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism*, xxxvii.

²⁶ Though this is, of course, a campy nod to Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science*.

²⁷ Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 16; Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism*, 3.

²⁸ LoIacono, “La gaia scienza: La critica omosessuale di Mario Mieli,” 97.

himself? How does he engage with the label of perversion and its perceived sense of danger to the “normal?”

Though Mieli is hardly mentioned in anglophone queer scholarship, Sedgwick includes him, albeit briefly, in one of the last essays she wrote, entitled, “Analogy: News from the Front.”²⁹ The piece itself is a meditation on the thorny psychoanalytic complexities of “analogy” as a sexual category which signals a certain danger for “masculine” subjects. In her introduction to the topic she evokes the post-68 historical moment for which grappling with analogy as a category of radical gay liberation proved foundational. She names Mieli, alongside the much more widely recognized and discussed Guy Hocquenghem, as prime examples of those cultural theorists who put psychoanalytic and Marxist concepts in conversation during the tendentious days of 1970s liberation movements:³⁰

At that international moment of (what seemed) revolutionary possibility there was a great premium placed on economy of theoretical means, the elegance of understanding how exactly the most defended aspects of a culture were also those that could most readily be turned against it. [...] The radical promise of both women’s and gay liberation at that time was that a very small body of concepts and questions could give unique access to a wildly disproportionate force field of social relations. And such access would be not only analytic but through-and-through performative.³¹

Sedgwick’s use of “through-and-through” indicates a certain saturation of the performative dimension in this international milieu of liberation theorists. I would like to suggest that this saturation, this primary embeddedness of performativity, textures the political strategies in which Mieli took part. In what follows I build on Sedgwick’s assessment in order to provide us with a fuller picture of how performativity pierces through Mieli’s work.

Instead of deliberating over what Mieli’s theory is or is not (how Foucauldian, Butlerian, or Lacanian, is his theoretical apparatus?), a critical move that more often than not plays into a paranoid “hermeneutics of suspicion,” I am interested in what Mieli attempts to *do* through his work.³² To this end, I engage in a reflection on the linkage between his embodiments of performance, in a more theatrical sense, and on his performativity, in the sense of the linguistic philosophical tradition begun with J.L. Austin.³³ My understanding of performativity is influenced most directly by Eve Sedgwick’s

²⁹ Sedgwick, “Analogy: News from the Front,” 166-182.

³⁰ See Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*; Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*; Jackson, *Living in Arcadia*.

³¹ Sedgwick, “Analogy,” 168-169.

³² For more on the methodological positionings of paranoid and reparative reading see, Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” 123-152.

³³ When scholars or artists invoke performativity as a conceptual term it tends to have very different meanings depending on who’s using it and to what discipline or theoretical tradition they ascribe. For some the category indicates a loosely connected archipelago of theatrical practices generally placed under the rubric of “performance.” If we follow Richard Schechner’s influential account of performativity as a crucial aspect of performance, then we can extend this understanding of theatrical performativity to seeing its expression in the everyday: “Performativity—or, commonly, ‘performance,’ is *everywhere* in life, from ordinary gestures to macrodramas.” Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 326. What he means by this is that pieces of theater (e.g. Shakespeare, Pirandello, Fo, etc) that take place in the traditional spaces of theater, with a stage, actors, and an audience is joined by ritual, everyday behaviors (what he calls ‘bits’), and even the micro-level of facial expression in the communication of feeling all under the rubric of performance or performativity. Antonella Grassi includes an excellent discussion of this sort of expression of performance within the context of the gay liberation movements practices in Parma. Her analysis dovetails nicely with a lot of the points I cover in this essay. Grassi, “La gaia piazza. Le orme del movimento gay nella Parma negli anni Settanta,” 145-156. Linguistic performativity gets its start with Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*. The most commonly cited elaboration on this theme in terms of gender is Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies that Matter* (1993), and *Undoing Gender*. Though I find that it would be valuable to put Butler’s theory of gender performativity in conversation with Mieli’s subversive work, I thought that Eve Sedgwick and Shoshana Felman’s emphasis on the theatrical in their writings on performativity would fit better for my purposes in this essay. For

writing on “queer performativity,” which she defines as “the name of a strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame and to the later and related fact of stigma.”³⁴ For Sedgwick, the analytic of queer performativity is valuable insofar as it accounts for both the material experience of queer people in a homophobic social structure, grounded in the speech acts of insult and shaming, like De Mari’s, and the “‘torsions’ or aberrances between reference and performativity.”³⁵ In other words, queer performativity does not congeal queerness into a replicable identity, it is not cleanly definable as tropes and types; rather, it emphasizes performativity’s (both linguistic and theatrical) perversion of intended meaning based on a queer subject’s emergence into the social world through insult and shame. My hope is to demonstrate performativity’s salience to Mieli’s work in a way that foregrounds his desire to transform the world by getting us to know, and thus transform, ourselves.

The Travestito and Her Double: Gendered Performance, Transessualità, Transformation

“*Le theatre!*” (The theatre!) proclaims Mieli from the pages of his autobiographical novel, “Luogo dove si può dire il vero, l’unico ove non sia proibito esprimersi con una certa libertà in pubblico, nella ‘società dello spettacolo.’” (A place where one can speak their truth, the only place in which we are not prohibited from expressing ourselves with a certain freedom in public, in the “society of the spectacle”).³⁶ From this declaration we can begin to get a sense of the importance that theatrical space held for Mieli’s vision of gay liberation: it is a space that allows us to express ourselves without inhibition, it offers us a freedom that is not easily imagined in everyday life. In providing access to this freedom Mieli describes theater and performance as revolutionary tools to transform the social, or, if we recall my first epitaph by José Muñoz, to birth a new world through performance.

In this section I reflect on some of the critical analyses of Mieli’s theater and performance, alongside a lesser known essay of Mieli’s, in order to clarify some of the imbrications between his theoretical claims, performance practice, and political militancy. Francesco Paolo Del Re offers one of the few rich articulations of the connection between Mieli’s performance practices and his militant political project, broadly arguing that “nel percorso personale e politico di Mieli il teatro assume una grande importanza” (Theater takes on great importance in Mieli’s personal and political itinerary).³⁷ Mieli’s involvement with the emerging gay theater scene is particularly important because it offered a means of testing the conclusions resulting from collective gay practices of *autocoscienza*. Most importantly, making theater meant creating new spaces of *autocoscienza* which could bring in those who did not necessarily see themselves as gay. In his essay Del Re brings to our attention some of the main works of gay theater that were created in the latter half of the 1970s: *La Traviata Norma ovvero: vaffanculo...ebbene sì!* (The Errant Norm, or: Go Fuck Yourself...Well If You Say So! [1976]), *Questo spettacolo non s’ha da fare: andate all’inferno* (This Show is Not to Be Performed: Go to Hell [1977]), and Mieli’s later monologue *Ciò detto, passo oltre* (That said, I’m Moving On [1981]).³⁸ These works were

an excellent introduction to the trajectory of linguistic performativity and its relation to performance practices see Parker and Sedgwick, “Introduction: Performativity and Performance.”

³⁴ Sedgwick, “Shame, Theatricality, Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*,” 61.

³⁵ Sedgwick, “Shame, Theatricality, Queer Performativity,” 62.

³⁶ Mieli, *Il risveglio dei Faraoni*, 190. The “society of the spectacle” he mentions is a reference to Guy Debord’s influential book, *Society of the Spectacle*.

³⁷ Del Re, “La performance totale di Maria M,” 67.

³⁸ The titles of these shows are quite difficult to translate, as one of the main stylistic features of this theater was an excess of campy puns. *La traviata norma, ovvero: vaffanculo...ebbene sì!* was written by the theater collective within the Collettivi

part of a small assemblage of shows that Stefano Casi has called “teatro frocio” (faggot theater) which emerged after the first performance of *La Traviata Norma* in the summer of 1976.³⁹ As Del Re notes, there were a number of formal elements that were common to all of these shows: the importance of *travestimento* (cross-dressing), the use of make-up, and an adamantly campy style, often described as *scheccata*.⁴⁰ *Travestimento* was a particularly important mode of expression in the politics of gay liberation, a trend Dennis Altman has referred to as “radical drag.”⁴¹ Del Re goes so far as to claim that “il Mieli teatrante è [...], sin dal principio, travestito e militante” (The Mieli who creates and participates in theater is [...], from the outset, both transvestite and militant).⁴²

We could also reformulate this to claim that Mieli’s militancy is based on the transformational function of radical drag. In fact, Mieli’s interest in the politics of *travestimento* can be traced back to his involvement with the London Gay Liberation Front, which actively incorporated the theatricality of radical drag in their politics.⁴³ From the early 1970s on the practice of radical drag permeated not only his theatrical work but also his writing, where dismantling the *homo normalis* (normal man) became one of the main polemical aims of his *Elementi* as well as his autobiographical novel *Il risveglio dei Faraoni* (The Awakening of the Pharaohs). Part and parcel of this attack on the neurotic “normal” man (often described as a *criptocecca* or cryptofag) was precisely the practice of *travestimento*, or as Marco Pustianaz argues, “The queer male subject can recapture his original polymorphous state through theatricalized acts and interruptions: by staging rituals of degradation, by taking on non-masculine gestures and habits, by wearing nonmasculine clothing, by adopting feminine gender in speech.”⁴⁴ Part of Pustianaz’s point is that Mieli’s politics rest on the injunction to “act in ways that will appear violent

Omosessuali Milanesi (COM / Milanese Homosexual Collectives) called Nostra Signora dei Fiori (Our Lady of the Flowers). The title of the play is essentially untranslatable—a close approximation being: *The Errant Norm, or: Go Fuck Yourself... Well If You Say So!* The Italian title is a pun on two operas: Giuseppe Verdi’s *La Traviata* (1853) and Vincenzo Bellini’s *Norma* (1831), the music from which is integrated in different places in the stage directions. Also, not insignificantly, the name of the Milanese gay collective “Nostra Signora dei Fiori” is a direct reference to the work of Jean Genet (1910-1986), more specifically his novel *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1943), a leading model of perverse sexuality during the years of gay liberation. This was the only show which the collective decided to publish a year later with the countercultural press, L’erba voglio: Collettivo “Nostra Signora dei Fiori,” *La traviata norma, ovvero: vaffanculo...ebbene sì! Questo spettacolo non s’ha da fare: andate all’inferno* could be translated as *This Show is Not to be Performed: Go to Hell*. My thanks goes to David Forgacs for reminding me that this title cites the famous opening pages of Alessandro Manzoni’s *I promessi sposi* when Don Abbondio is warned not to perform the wedding ceremony of Renzo and Lucia by Don Rodrigo’s two “bravi” (henchmen): “‘Ora bene,’ gli disse il bravo, all’orecchio, ma in tono solenne di comando, ‘questo matrimonio non s’ha da fare, né domani, né mai.’” (“Okay good,” said the henchmen in his ear but in a solemn commanding tone, “this marriage is not to be performed, not tomorrow, not ever.”) Manzoni, *I promessi sposi*, 13. I have not been able to find the text of this specific show, but extracts were published in a special issue of the *Scena* theater journal dedicated to “teatro frocio”: Attisani, ed., “Di che sesso è il teatro?” *Ciò detto, passo oltre* (That said, I’m Moving On) was a monologue Mieli performed at the Milanese Teatro Out-Off in 1981 and can be found in the program publication from that evening “Ciò detto, passo oltre,” 35-37.

³⁹ Casi, “Delirio diletto travestimenti e trasgressioni,” 8.

⁴⁰ *Scheccata* derives from the verb *scheccare*, which comes from *checca*, meaning a feminine faggot, or a queen. In essence *scheccata* is an adjective describing something in a particularly “gay” style, while *scheccare* is to behave in a “gay” manner. However, along with this tamer meaning it also retains a defiant charge—in a similar way that the English “queer” became a term of pride and disruption between the 1970s-90s. In English we could at times translate this as “camp” or “campy” or even “queerly,” however this brings on a whole new set of meanings in the English so it tends to be better to leave it untranslated.

⁴¹ Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, 140.

⁴² Del Re, “La performance totale,” 68.

⁴³ Mieli, “London Gay Liberation Front: Angry Brigade, Piume & Paillettes,” 5-6.

⁴⁴ Pustianaz, “Transitive Gender and Queer Performance in the Novels of Mario Mieli and Vittorio Pescatori,” 215.

to the naturalized norm.”⁴⁵ As Del Re notes, the purpose of the figure of the *travestito* in the series of *teatro frocio* shows was to reveal the way in which every day gender expressions are mere performances.⁴⁶

In 1976 Mieli published an article for the gay liberation magazine *FUORI!* called, “My First Lady,” in which he argues that the practice of *travestimento* “traduce nel comico la tragicità che è nella polarità tra i sessi” (translates the tragic nature of the polarity between the sexes into the comic).⁴⁷ The scene under investigation opens with Mieli observing a 17th century fireplace decorated with maiolica pottery in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.⁴⁸ On the fireplace he notices a hermaphroditic figure (“la fantasia ermafrodita”) (the hermaphroditic fantasy) which he juxtaposes with his own hermaphroditism. The big opening reveal of Mieli’s short essay, which itself reads like an opening sequence of a film, is that he faces this figure dressed as former first lady Jackie Kennedy: “Ma questa somiglianza con Jacqueline si reduce al mio aspetto esteriore: i visitatori del museo, ignari, non immaginano che, sotto le spoglie della first lady, la figlia di Urano, Afrodite, ispiatrice dell’amore fra uomini, discenderà tra poco fra loro a sollecitare il risveglio del desiderio omosessuale addormentato ormai da troppo tempo” (But this resemblance to Jacqueline is limited to my outward appearance: the visitors of the museum, unaware, couldn’t imagine that underneath the first lady’s clothes is the daughter of Uranus, Aphrodite, inspiration for the love between men, who shortly will descend amongst them to provoke the reawakening of their homosexual desire, which has been dormant for far too long)⁴⁹. From this dramatic and intriguing introduction Mieli opens onto the problem of laughter spurred by an encounter with a man dressed as a woman. Drawing from his personal experience as a “travestito part-time” (a part-time transvestite) he makes a connection between the common reaction of laughter when encountering a transvestite and the more negative ones: “essi reagiscono manifestando rabbia, disgusto, scandalo, oppure fingendo di non essersene accorti” (they react by showing rage, disgust, shock, or they pretend to not have noticed).⁵⁰

What interests me in Mieli’s short reflection on the theoretical value of his own practice of *travestimento* is his use of theatrical metaphors to explain processes of subjectivity and to question our understandings of subject formation. In my view these theatrical metaphors demonstrate Mieli’s deep conviction that life is a spectacle in which we all play a part. Enacting these metaphors, both theatrically and textually also has a performatively rhetorical impact on the audience member or reader, opening up the possibility of epistemological, and thus subjective, transformation.

⁴⁵ Pustianaz, “Transitive Gender,” 215. Pustianaz argues that Mieli’s politics of gender performance creates a “liberation from tyranny of gender that is at best incomplete. One might even go further and say that the very space of representation has been reconfigured even more strictly as exclusively male, given its implicit rules of inclusion and exclusion. While it is true that this performativity is intended to dissolve gender, in effect the type of performance promoted by Milei reinforces the notion that only one gender is present on stage—the male gender—the only gender that really needs to be dislodged.” (215) It seems to me that Mieli’s deep engagement with *transessualità* raises questions about shifting notions of gender in 1970s that trans studies might help us unpack and rethink in this case. Dalla Torre has written an excellent piece that begins to do this sort of work: “*Transessualità* Italian-Style or Mario Mieli’s Practice of Love,” 556-576.

⁴⁶ Del Re, “La performance totale,” 71.

⁴⁷ Mieli, “My First Lady,” 31. In this article I use the original *FUORI!* pagination. Fortunately, Massimo Prearo and Paola Mieli have included a more accessible and expanded version of this essay in their edited collection of Mieli’s writing. For this see, Mieli, “My First Lady,” in *La gaia critica*, 116-143.

⁴⁸ Mieli first went to London just after high school in 1971 to improve his English skills. This became an important time in his political life for it was there that Mieli first encountered the London Gay Liberation Front on which he and Angelo Pezzana eventually modelled *FUORI*. He returned to London in 1974, which is when he began practicing coprophagia inspired by his new immersion in reading psychoanalysis during university. This eventually led to his being arrested and sent to a psychiatric hospital before returning to Milan. De Laude, *Mario Mieli. E adesso*, 11-16.

⁴⁹ Mieli, “My First Lady,” 31.

⁵⁰ Mieli, “My First Lady,” 31.

Mieli brings in the classic theatrical genres of comedy and tragedy as heuristics for the parts we play in the realm of the social. For him, the binary opposition between genders is the tragic underpinning of our gendered lives, what he calls the “tragicità della polarità tra i sessi” (the tragic polarity between the sexes). The reactions of passersby, ranging from the “riso” (laughter) to the more negative affective manifestations of rage and disgust, that are geared toward Mieli (or any *travestito*), point to a deeper truth for him: the repressed *transessualità* (transsexuality) of the subjects who express them. Here we must remember that for Mieli *transessualità* to signify a profound and undifferentiated set of desires and expressions of gender that we were born with and which have since been taken away from most of us through societal repression. This is a reformulation of Freud’s claim in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* that a disposition to the perversions is polymorphous and universal in every human being.⁵¹ Thus, the *travestito* creates the possibility of a scene of recognition of this repressed *transessualità*, both for themselves and for those who recognize the gender transgression.⁵² Mieli focuses on the splitting of the subject within this scene:

tutte le reazioni degli altri passeggeri, siano esse di riso e/o altre, non fanno che esprimere [...] paura; o, più esattamente, l’angoscia. Infatt[i] l’oggetto del loro timore non consiste in me in realtà: io mi limito a rappresentare l’immagine che fa da medium tra l’ambito della loro osservazione cosciente ed un oscuro oggetto di timore misteriosamente radicato nel loro inconscio. Senza dubbio la mia presenza centralizza la loro attenzione: ma, in tal modo, essa non fa che provocare in parecchie persone, e contemporaneamente, reazioni analoghe, che mettono a fuoco l’analogia dei loro sentimenti e la trama comune di angoscia che li sottende.⁵³

According to Mieli, these people who encounter him *en travesti*, in the museum or on a train, are faced with a refracted image of their own repressed “polymorphous perversity;” they are encouraged to look into the excised part of themselves that they could embody, but have been socially conditioned to view as monstrous.⁵⁴ Mieli calls this process of excision “educastrazione” (educastration), by which he means society’s repressive apparatus which removes “le tendenze sessuali congenite che essa [società] giudica ‘perverse’ [...] L’educastrazione ha come obiettivo la trasformazione del bimbo, tendenzialmente polimorfo e ‘perverso,’ in adulto eterosessuale, eroticamente mutilato ma conforme alla Norma” (those congenital sexual tendencies deemed “perverse” [...] The objective of educastration is the transformation of the infant, in tendency polymorphous and “perverse,” into a heterosexual adult, erotically mutilated but conforming to the Norm).⁵⁵ In the encounter with a *travestito* the *educasttrato* apprehends their own terrifying freedom as a subject, the potential to regain the

⁵¹ Freud, *The Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 50. To follow Mieli’s theoretical line on this see the chapter “Il desiderio omosessuale è universale,” in *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 13-62.

⁵² For an incisive analysis of the intersubjective scenes of recognition between psychoanalysis and phenomenology see: Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 131-151.

⁵³ Mieli, “My First Lady,” 31. “all of the reactions of the other passengers, laughter and/or other responses, do nothing but express fear [...] or, more precisely, anguish. In fact, the object of their fear isn’t really me: I only represent the image which acts as a medium between the field of their conscious observation and an obscure object of fear that is mysteriously rooted in their unconscious. Without a doubt my presence focuses their attention: but, in this way, my presence does nothing more than simultaneously provoke similar reactions in many people, which highlight the analogous connection between their feelings and the shared narrative of anguish which underpins them.”

⁵⁴ Cristallo, *Uscir Fuori. Dieci anni di lotte omosessuali in Italia: 1971/1981*, 13-22.

⁵⁵ Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 17; Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism*, 4.

polymorphous perversity that the social cut out of them, and thus they encounter themselves as a split subject.⁵⁶

Mieli's writing on the splitting of the subject draws on Norman O. Brown's theorization of schizophrenia, which inverts our perspectives of normality and abnormality with regard to the schizophrenic.⁵⁷ The "schizofrenici" (schizophrenics), Mieli argues, experience the fullness of the truth of our existence and it is gaining access to this schizophrenic experience, to a psychological state of being split, that Mieli privileges as a political strategy. Mieli's politics therefore hinge on giving us the ability to access a state of schizophrenia, because only when we achieve this state can we see the truth of our excised subjectivities, our repressed *transessualità*. Moreover, this process of inhabiting a state of schizophrenia is necessarily transformative. "Il sentirmi transessuale" (My feeling transsexual) Mieli writes, "fu una delle cause e insieme dei risultati del progressivo alterarsi della percezione del mio corpo e della mente, del mondo 'esterno' e degli altri" (was both a cause and a result of the progressive mutation of the way I perceived my body and my mind, the "external" world and the others).⁵⁸ Mieli refers to this process as a "trip schizofrenico" (schizophrenic trip), a designation which conjures the delirious effects of the drug LSD which was popular in the 70s, and emphasizes the transformative effects of such a process:

Nel trip "schizofrenico," tuttavia—in particolare se intrapreso da omosessuali coscienti—la fantasia transessuale si trasforma in travolgente esperienza *effettiva* della transessualità. Allora, si direbbero avverarsi le parole di Gesù secondo san Clemente, e cioè che un giorno "due faranno uno, e l'esterno somiglierà all'interno, e più non ci sarà né maschio né femmina." Da latente, la transessualità si fa manifesta.⁵⁹

This process of conversion, of metamorphosis or transformation, that comes with the "schizophrenic trip" evokes Mieli's strong engagement with alchemical thinking, which position the hermaphroditic "rebis" as the telos of alchemical processes.⁶⁰ Stefano Casi interprets Mieli's politics of schizophrenia

⁵⁶ On the splitting of the subject I would direct readers' attention once again to Butler's essay on the "subjection" of the subject, *Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Closer to the Italian context this notion of split subjects is a main feature of Pier Paolo Pasolini's final unfinished novel *Petrolio*. For excellent dual analyses of Pasolini's late work in conversation with Mieli see Maggi, "A Schizofrenic Child is a Tiny Dot, I Dreamed Once: Metamorphosis in Mario Mieli and Pasolini," in *The Resurrection of the Body: Pier Paolo Pasolini from Saint Paul to Sade*, 339-353; and De Laude, "Fly Translove Airways: *Petrolio* e *Il risveglio dei Faraoni* di Mario Mieli," 9-64. I should also note here that Mieli was reading R.D. Laing's groundbreaking intervention into psychiatric and philosophical discourses on madness, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*, which was one of the most prominent texts circulating internationally in countercultural circles throughout the 1960s and 70s.

⁵⁷ Brown, *Love's Body*, 159. We can also detect here traces of Deleuze's "schizoanalysis" which he and Guattari develop at length in their seminal text originally published the same year as the *Elementi* (1977): *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Interestingly, Mieli never cites from *Anti-Oedipus* itself, but he did draw on interviews and conference talks by Deleuze and Guattari in which they discuss their method of "schizoanalysis". For more on this see Bernini, *Le teorie queer. Un'introduzione*.

⁵⁸ Mieli, *Elementi*, 192. This is Armando Maggi's translation, which I prefer because of his emphasis on Mieli's own feeling, which is present in the original Italian. Maggi, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 339.

⁵⁹ Mieli, *Elementi*, 190. "But in the 'schizophrenic' trip, all the same—in particular when undertaken by conscious homosexuals—the transsexual fantasy is transformed into the overwhelming effective experience of transsexuality. If we can take up the words of Jesus according to the Gnostic Saint Thomas, then one day 'the two shall be one, and the outside shall resemble the inside, and there shall no longer be either male or female.' From being latent, transsexuality now becomes manifest." Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism*, 197.

⁶⁰ In early modern alchemical thought "rebis" was a hermaphroditic figure, which represented the divine but unstable fusion of matter and spirit, woman and man. For an incisive analysis of this figure in early modern Europe see Long, *Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe*.

according to Antonin Artaud's "intuizione del doppio" (intuition of the double), which is made possible by Mieli's "frequentazione alchemistica e teatrale" (alchemical and theatrical experiences).⁶¹ The "double" in Artaud's conception of alchemical theater deals with the relation between the symbolic and the real. However, he makes a distinction between how this works for alchemy and theater respectively. Whereas alchemy deals with the transformative operation of real materials into a symbolic system, what Artaud refers to as a "spiritual Double," theater is the "Double" of an "inhuman" reality, one which is "archetypal and dangerous," a reality whose principles, "like dolphins, once they have shown their heads, hurry to dive back into the obscurity of the deep."⁶²

Therefore, according to Mieli, upon encountering the *travestito*, a "normal" person meets the phantasmagoric double of themselves. In knowing that deep part of themselves they are able to recapture their lost *transessualità* and transform it into their true form, the hermaphrodite. In the following section I consider the linguistic categories on which Mieli relies in order to provoke such a transformation.

Daring Perversion to Speak

Though the term "queer" had been operating in 1970s anglophone contexts with injurious purpose, followed by its radical re-appropriation towards the end of the 1980s, we must remember that Mieli does not take up "queer" as a celebratory label.⁶³ Instead, at various points in his writing, Mieli deals with what we could argue are two prominent Italian approximations: *perverso* (perverse) and *diverso* (different/queer). While *diverso* could, in my view, more readily be translated as "queer," *perverso* carries with it the baggage of its psychoanalytic and sexological charge. The way in which Mieli engages with the concept of perversion stems from his radical reading of the *Three Essays* in which Freud argues against the predominant views of his time that perversion was pathological. Instead, Freud writes:

It is by no means only at the cost of the so-called *normal* sexual instinct that [psychoneurotic] symptoms originate [...] they also give expression (by conversion) to instincts which would be described as *perverse* in the widest sense of the word if they could be expressed directly in phantasy and action without being diverted from consciousness. Thus symptoms are formed in part at the cost of *abnormal* sexuality; *neuroses* are, so to speak, *the negative of perversions*.⁶⁴

This radical claim of Freud's, along with his other influential claim about the universality of "polymorphous perversity," becomes the basis for Mieli's theoretical propositions regarding perversion. "La nevrosi di noi froci o delle lesbiche" (The neurosis of us gay men and women) he writes, "non dipende dalla nostra omosessualità, bensì potrebbe essere causata dalla traduzione in termini patologici della componente eterosessuale e delle tendenze cosiddette 'perverse' che, a differenza dell'omosessualità, abbiamo "generalmente rimosso o 'quasi rimosso' in misura variabile di caso in caso" (is not a function of our homosexuality, but is rather due to the translation into pathological terms of the heterosexual component and the so-called "perverse" tendencies—which, as against homosexuality, we have in general repressed or at least "quasi-repressed," to a greater or

⁶¹ Casi, "L'omosessualità e il suo doppio: il teatro di Mario Mieli," 159.

⁶² Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 48.

⁶³ The significance of this has been noted by Teresa de Lauretis, Christopher Lane, and Tim Dean in their essays in the appendix to Mieli's *Elementi*.

⁶⁴ Freud, *Three Essays*, 26.

lesser extent).⁶⁵ Mieli uses this formulation to reassign the origins of the persecution of homosexuals to the injurious actions of a neurotic general public: “è la psiconevrosi che si regge sulla repressione e sulla rimozione del desiderio omosessuale a causare, principalmente, la psiconevrosi di noi omosessuali manifesti. *Non l'omeroismo, dunque, ma la persecuzione dell'omoerotismo è patologica e patogena*” (The psychoneurosis based on the oppression and repression of homosexual desire is the chief cause of the psychoneurosis of us manifest homosexuals. What is pathological and pathogenic is not homoeroticism, but rather its persecution).⁶⁶ Mieli's displacement of the pathological from the *perversi* to society at large is a rhetorical strategy for disrupting the repressive power of pathologized categorization. Jonathan Dollimore points out that this rhetorical move constitutes a “classic statement[s] of liberational radicalism, at the heart of which is a provocative inversion epitomized in the very concept of homophobia: “it is not we who are sick but you.”⁶⁷

However, Mieli's engagement with the concept of perversion goes beyond this fundamental pathological displacement. Even before the pathologizing force of psychoanalysis came into the picture, perversion itself was long figured as that which disrupts social cohesion, acting as an impediment to the development of civilization.⁶⁸ On this point Mieli writes: “*Secondo la teoria metapsicologica che coglie nel processo di civilizzazione la conversione di potenti forze libidiche, la loro deviazione dalla meta sessuale nella prospettiva del lavoro e della civilizzazione, l'Eros represso può essere considerato l'energia della storia e il lavoro può essere visto come sublimazione dell'Eros*” (According to a metaphysical [metapsychological] theory that sees the process of civilization as the conversion of powerful libidinal forces, their deviation from the sexual aim into labour and culture, repressed Eros may be viewed as the motive force of history, and labour as the sublimation of Eros).⁶⁹ Here Mieli sets out the transformative connection between Eros and labor that is the basis for thinking a “gaio comunismo” (gay communism), where a repressed Eros provides the energy for labor through a process of sublimation.⁷⁰ To achieve gay communism we must desublimize this original erotic energy, which is possible through the performance of perversions. However, Mieli is adamant in pointing out that while it is disruptive to the proper functioning of the social, perversion is easily co-opted by the logic of late capitalism:

Oggi è evidente che la società si serve benissimo delle “perversioni” a scopo utilitario (basta andare in edicola o al cinema per rendersene subito conto). La “perversione” è venduta al dettaglio e all'ingrosso, è studiata, sezionata, valutata, mercificata, accettata, discussa; diventa in moda, *in e out*: diventa cultura,

⁶⁵ Mieli, *Elementi*, 33-34; Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism*, 22.

⁶⁶ Mieli, *Elementi*, 34; Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism*, 22. Readers will note the translations of terms such as “repression” and “rimozione” as “oppression” and “repression” respectively. This will appear at odds with the following paragraph in which “represso” is translated as “repressed.” This basic distinction in the translation has to do with the difference between state repression, rendered by David Fernbach and Evan Calder Williams as oppression, and the Freudian notion of psychical repression. Notably, Mieli does not distinguish between these two very different ideas, slipping as he does between using “repression” and “rimozione” throughout the *Elementi*. For more on this see de Lauretis, “La gaia scienza, ovvero la traviata Norma,” in *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 265.

⁶⁷ Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*, 211.

⁶⁸ For more on this history see Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*.

⁶⁹ Mieli, *Elementi*, 214-215, his emphasis; Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism*, 223.

⁷⁰ Built into this claim is a thorough reading of Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* and *One-Dimensional Man*, two texts that were fundamental in the rising culture of the New Left. It is important to note here that the conversations regarding societal liberation and revolution since the early 1960s (and even earlier throughout the period of reconstruction after WWII) through the 1970s in Italy were in an overwhelmingly Marxist register.

scienza, carta stampata, denaro (altrimenti, chi pubblicherebbe questo libro?). L'inconscio è venduto a fette sul banco del *macellaio*.⁷¹

Therefore, any project of liberation must recognize this liberalizing function of late capitalism if we are to live out our repressed perversions:

È ovvio che le tendenze erotiche definite “perverse” non possono che restare represses, se la gente continua ad accettare i prodotti veramente osceni e *perversi* che il capitale impone sul mercato sotto l'etichetta di sessualità “perversa,” se vi è ancora chi si accontenta di “sfogare” i propri impulsi “particolari” limitandosi a provare mediocre eccitamento di fronte agli squalidi feticci del sesso smerciati dal sistema.⁷²

This presents us with a pretty bleak picture of the political possibilities left to the 1970s gay liberational project. Yet, and this is crucial to understanding the texture of Mieli's politics, he insists that we push ourselves to our perverse limits, to become reacquainted with our deepest, most perverse desires.⁷³ How can we better understand this tension between his critique of the commodification of perversions and his consistent point that perverse desire holds within it a “forza rivoluzionaria” (revolutionary force)?

It seems to me that the answer to this question lies with performativity, not only in an unabashed everyday performance of perversion, which we've seen with Mieli's *travestito*, but in its forceful proclamation. In explaining Mieli's critique of the commodification of perversions, Armando Maggi writes: “What Mieli means is that society (and most likely he refers to Italian society in particular) offers a *silenced* form of perversion, which can be marketable and thus intrinsically repressive and heterosexual.”⁷⁴ The silence induced by the “politics of the closet” was of central concern to Mieli's generation of gay liberation activists.⁷⁵ Italy's Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano took this principle into their own publication, *FUORI!*, the first issue of which proclaims the importance of homosexuals speaking for themselves in order to transform the world. “Chi parla per gli omosessuali?” (Who Speaks for Homosexuals?) Angelo Pezzana asks and then answers:

molti, tantissimi, troppi, hanno avuto da dire e da raccontare, da scrivere e da analizzare, da riassumere e da concludere, sugli omosessuali e quando la cosa gli risultava opportuna per gli omosessuali [...] è chiaro che non stiamo facendo semplicemente un “altro” giornale, ma iniziamo al contrario un discorso

⁷¹ Mieli, *Elementi*, 215, his emphasis. “Today it is clear that our society makes very good use of the ‘perversions;’ you need only to go into a newsagent or to the cinema to be made well aware of this. ‘Perversion’ is sold both wholesale and retail; it is studied, classified, valued, marketed, accepted, discussed. It becomes a fashion, going in and out of style. It becomes culture, science, printed paper, money—if not, then who would publish this book? The unconscious is sold in slices over the butcher's counter.” Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism*, 224.

⁷² Mieli, *Elementi*, 216, his emphasis. “It is obvious that those erotic tendencies defined as ‘perverse’ cannot but remain repressed, as long as people continue to accept the truly obscene and perverted products that capital puts onto the market under the label of ‘perverse’ sexuality, and as long as there are still those who are content for their ‘particular’ impulses to be vented in a way that gives them a mediocre titillation from the squalid fetishes of sex marketed by the system.” Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism*, 224-225.

⁷³ Many thanks to Lorenzo Bernini for reminding me of this fundamental point.

⁷⁴ Maggi, *Resurrection of the Body*, 345, my emphasis.

⁷⁵ D'Emilio makes this point explicitly in *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 235-236. For a queer theoretical consideration of the linguistic performativity of silence see: Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 67-91.

completamente nuovo, che vuole aprire con un'esplosione di gioia e di rabbia un processo di liberazione.⁷⁶

Perversion is implicit in Pezzana's rhetorical question: for too long homosexuals have been, as the empirical evidence of the perversions, silent subjects. However, silence in this instance does not mean that that homosexuals weren't allowed to speak, but the conditions of their speech were regulated and appropriated within discourses to which they were subject. In this sense, silence does not only indicate an absence of speech, but involves complex processes of authorization and distribution of certain kinds of speech within a larger discursive frame.⁷⁷ What Maggi calls "silenced forms of perversions" are, for Mieli, the forms of the perversions that have been "desublimated" in instances that only allow for their use in production and consumption: "rather than letting perversion speak, capitalist society deprives it of its idiom."⁷⁸

Mieli is attempting to get perversion to speak. This is part of what gives his *Elementi* its quirky and campy stylistic excess. As Teresa de Lauretis notes, "Il ritmo stesso della scrittura, a volte incontenibile, a volte rallentato dalle reiterazioni e dal disordine dei paragrafi, mima il perverso polimorfismo di quella forza erompente e dilagante che Mario chiama transessualità" (The rhythm of writing itself, at times irrepressible, at other times slowed down by reiterations and the disorder of paragraphs, mimes the polymorphous perversity of that gushing and unrestrained force that Mieli calls *transessualità*).⁷⁹ However, it is not just his own *transessualità* that he is trying to invoke in his writing and performance. As we have seen with the atmosphere created by *teatro frocio* and Mieli's insistence on the practice of *travestimento*, an important part of his political project is to put others in touch with their profound *transessualità*. It is my contention that Mieli is acting through his speech in order to open other people up to experiencing their repressed *transessualità*.

⁷⁶ Pezzana, "Chi parla per gli omosessuali?" 2. "Who speaks for homosexuals? Many, so many, too many, have had something to say and to tell; to write and to analyze; to summarize and to conclude about homosexuals and when things were appropriate for homosexuals [...] it's clear that we are not creating just 'another' journal, on the contrary: we are beginning a completely new discourse, which seeks to open up a process of liberation with an explosion of joy and rage."

⁷⁷ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, 27.

⁷⁸ Maggi, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 344. Mieli even sees this in the work of Pasolini, who, created a marketable form of perversity despite being consistently shrouded in controversy for obscene depictions of sexuality. Mieli reads the homosexuality in Pasolini's work, and that of other prominent homosexual writers and artists, as falling into the same old tropes of homosexuality that perpetuate feelings of guilt and shame: "E in memoria di Pasolini, regista omosessuale, noi diciamo: basta con l'omosessualità ammessa ma colpevolizzata tra 'ragazzi di vita' e roghi di Canterbury, tra un Edipo un porcile un teorema e Salò; tra una *Morte a Venezia* e la morte in fondo al lago di Ludvig [di] Visconti. Noi gridiamo: 'W IL CULO RIVOLUZIONARIO IN CINERAMA'" Mieli, *Elementi*, 163. "So in memory of Pasolini, homosexual director: enough with the permissible but guilt-tripped homosexuality between street kids and the fires of Canterbury; between an Oedipus, a pig, a theorem, and Salò; between *Death in Venice* and the death of Visconti's Ludwig at the bottom of a lake. Instead, we shout: 'LONG LIVE THE REVOLUTIONARY ASS IN CINERAMA!'" Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism*, 166. Evan Calder Williams adds a note to his translation that I find worth including here: "Cinerama is a widescreen colour film format that uses three separate 35mm projectors to produce an enormous image: to call for the revolutionary ass in Cinerama is hence to call for the most lavish, spectacular depiction possible." It is important to remember here that Mieli is writing at a time when perversion is prominently used for commercial purposes especially within film culture. By way of example we might conjure the public fascination with films such as Luchino Visconti's *La caduta degli dei* (1969), Liliana Cavani's *Portiere di notte* (1974), and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò o le 120 giorni di Sodoma* (1975). Indeed, the conflation of Fascist governments with the category of perversion in this period, and earlier, signals to the type of perversion that was consumable—namely the relegation of perversion as a degraded metaphor for the abuse of power and authority. For more on this theme see: Forgacs, "Days of Sodom: The Fascism-Perversion Equation in Films of the 1960s and 1970s"; and Frost, *Sex Drives: Fantasies of Fascism in Literary Modernism*.

⁷⁹ de Lauretis, "La gaia scienza," 268.

In her groundbreaking work on the performative speech act, Shoshana Felman poses a fundamental question: “To speak an act: can this be done? Is it possible to speak seduction—the always scandalous intervention of love in theory, of pleasure in knowledge?”⁸⁰ Felman is working at the crossroads of several disciplines (psychoanalysis, linguistics, philosophy, and literature) whose meeting point is J.L. Austin’s coining of the grammatical category of the performative speech act. In her approach to the performative Felman engages in a prolonged meditation on a single performative that had become the “exemplary model of speech acts in general”: the act of promising.⁸¹ By putting J.L. Austin’s own philosophical style in conversation with the literary figure of Don Juan, who constantly engages in a series of promises that never come to fruition, Felman brings the body to bear on questions of speech. Most importantly for my purposes, Felman reads this linkage of body and speech through the language of seduction. “Speech is the true realm of eroticism,” writes Felman, “and not simply a means of access to this realm. To seduce is to produce language that enjoys, language that takes pleasure in having ‘no more to say.’ To seduce is thus to prolong, within desiring speech, the pleasure-taking performance of the very production of that speech”⁸². For Don Juan this seduction takes the form of his constant broken promises, promises that are explicit performatives, and thus set a seductive trap in language. For Felman the trap of seduction has to do with the self-referentiality of the explicit performative utterance. So if an explicit performative is the classic performative utterance wherein the first-person subject is reflected in the first-person conjugation of the verb, then “I promise” creates a scene of commitment that is necessarily a seductive trap to the person receiving the promise because, grammatically, there is no interlocutor, thus creating the illusion of commitment. Don Juan manifests the illusion of commitment in his consistent breaking of promises, revealing the self-referential nature of the promise. Felman extends this point to the person receiving the promise in a way that I find compatible with Mieli’s figuring of the *travestito* as the specular image of the repressed *transessualità* of the *homo normalis*. She writes:

Just as seductive discourse exploits the capacity of language to reflect itself, by means of the self-referentiality of performative verbs, it also exploits in parallel fashion the self-referentiality of the interlocutor’s narcissistic desire, and his (or her) capacity to produce in turn a reflexive, specular illusion: the seducer holds out to women the narcissistic mirror of their own desire of themselves.⁸³

As we’ve seen, Mieli holds out a mirror to the *homo normalis* while dressed as Jackie Kennedy. “Lo specchio,” (The mirror) he writes, “simboleggia la costante testimonianza negli altri della tragedia dell’io” (symbolizes a constant testimony to the tragedy of the self within others).⁸⁴ In contrast to Don Juan, Mieli does not promise anything to these people. In fact, he remains silent, observing them observing him. Yet, in this case, his language of seduction is his own silent body, which denounces the patriarchal negation of the feminine, “commettendo sacrilegio nel confondere la sacra opposizione dei sessi, dal momento che combina in sé entrambi i sessi perché *osa* applicare la femminilità ridotta ad apparenza alla realtà di sé maschio” (committing sacrilege by confusing the sacred opposition between the sexes, since he combines both sexes within himself because he *dares* to apply a femininity reduced to appearances to the reality of his lived male self).⁸⁵ I think it’s plausible to argue that Mieli echoes the performative practice of Don Juan. However, rather than enacting a series of broken

⁸⁰ Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, 5.

⁸¹ Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, 3.

⁸² Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, 15.

⁸³ Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, 17.

⁸⁴ Mieli, “My First Lady,” 31.

⁸⁵ Mieli, “My First Lady,” 32. My emphasis.

promises (though there are certainly a number of broken promises to which we might attend), I suggest that his language of seduction is made up of a series of dares. I will conclude by meditating on the role of masochism in Mieli's work, which, in my view, engages in precisely the type of seductive language Felman describes. However, Mieli's body speaks for itself.

Accessing *transessualità* through the Performative Suffering of Masochism

A year after Mieli published the *Elementi* he gave an interview to Antonio Attisani for the theater journal *Scena* entitled "L'attore è un masochista" (The Actor is a Masochist).⁸⁶ His main point in the interview is this: the actor must go through a process of suffering that consists in exposing themselves to their audience thus risking and leaning into the dissolution of themselves—both into their character and their audience. In the interview he recounts different instances of theatrical performances he gave in public in Florence, and on various train trips. He describes how his goal in his exchanges with his audience, the public, is not to scandalize—even if he manages to shock. One performance began spontaneously on a train headed to Bologna when Mieli meant to go to Piacenza from Milan. While riding dressed as an "uomo molto serio" (a very professional man) another man on the train struck up a conversation with him asking, among other things, Mieli's profession. "Faccio lo scrittore e l'attrice" (I'm a writer and an actress) Mieli responded. When the man asked why "attrice" (actress) and not "attore" (actor) he came back with, "Perché recito quasi sempre vestito da donna" (Because I almost always perform dressed as a woman).⁸⁷ The man then asked for Mieli to perform something for him on the train and so Mieli immediately went to the bathroom to change into a green dress with green shoes and emerged in full make-up. This caught the attention of the entire train car and once he felt the spotlight he began to sing "La Vie en rose," [a song written and popularised by Édith Piaf] and upon learning that there were Germans in the car who only knew English instead of Italian began to improvise a song in English: "If I want I can sing for you, if want I can do something for you and I was inventive all the time guessing what you want me to do."⁸⁸ The public responded positively: "Allora si creava attorno una situazione estremamente divertente perché tutti rispondevano, ognuno a loro modo, a questa persona che, stranamente disinibita, come un fuoco, era uscita dai suoi abiti maschili e appariva così vestita da donna" (And so an extremely entertaining situation was created because everyone responded, in their own way, to this strangely disinhibited person who, like a flame, left his masculine clothes and appeared dressed as a woman).⁸⁹ No one reacted in a way that was expected by gay people at the time. No one reacted with the laughter, or the aggression, with which Mieli was met at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London years before. Another person on the train even partook in the performance—asking Mieli why he did not just strip for them all, a request to which he humbly obliged and for which they created a protective barrier so as not to arouse the suspicions of the police. Finally, as they arrived in Bologna Mieli quickly changed back into his street clothes and exited the train, but not before one of the spectators who hadn't yet said a word approached him and said, "Ci rivedremo all'inferno" (We'll see each other again in hell).⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Mieli, "L'attore è un masochista," 101-105.

⁸⁷ Mieli, "L'attore è un masochista," 105.

⁸⁸ Mieli, "L'attore è un masochista," 105. This is just as the text presents the English.

⁸⁹ Mieli, "L'attore è un masochista," 105.

⁹⁰ Mieli, "L'attore è un masochista," 105.

For Mieli, masochism is precisely that process of suffering to which the actor exposes themselves when performing.⁹¹ Therefore, in Mieli's sense, masochism is a necessary process by which the actor activates a connection between them, their audience, and their character. The primary function of this masochism is the dissolution of the neurotic-self through experimentation, which, in its theatricality, invites the audience to do the same. "Ognuno deve sperimentare se stesso: questo teatro dovrebbe essere un invito alla gente a fare esperienza di sé, perché nella società dello spettacolo, che è la società nevrotica, ognuno di noi in genere tende a non conoscere se stesso e il limite delle proprie potenzialità, non solo al livello mentale, ma anche a livello fisico" (Each one of us must experiment with themselves: this theater should be an invitation to people to experience themselves, because in the society of spectacle, which is the neurotic society, each one of us tends in general to not know ourselves, and the limits of our potential, not only on a mental level, but physically as well).⁹² So what we have here is Mieli's call for people, but especially men, to "sperimentare se stesso," (experiment themselves) and he calls this experience theater. Mieli's understanding of society at large is as a spectacle, an ongoing show—one in which neurosis has been forced on its actor/spectators. Thus, by engaging in an experience of our selves through the theatricality of acting (e.g. engaging in a public act of masochism) we can glimpse, if only for a moment, the potential of our deepest selves, our *transessualità*, both mentally and physically. "Un'altra cosa molto importante" (Something else that's very important), he writes, "è che l'attore faccia vedere alla gente come tutte le cose si possono fare anche in pubblico, che riesce, attraverso l'esperienza teatrale, a vincere i propri pudori e a tentare di convincere gli altri a vincere i loro pudori" (is that the actor should show people how everything can also be done in public. Through the theatrical experience the actor must prevail over their prudishness and try to convince others to overcome theirs as well).⁹³ Therefore, the actor does not only activate a connection with their own *transessualità* but the public performance of this masochistic gesture invites others into the theatrical experience prompting them to activate the connection to their *transessualità*.

Mieli finishes the interview by summarizing the performative gesture of masochism as akin to the English performative, "to dare":

Tutta la vita per me è un fatto di prendere per ridare [...] però per dare nel migliore dei modi bisogna osare, aver coraggio. Osare in inglese si dice *to dare* e si scrive dare: allora osare è dare; se l'attore osa regala agli altri, offre [a]gli altri l'esempio del fatto che se anche loro osassero, se facessero un minimo sforzo, forse cambierebbero la loro vita. Questo è il discorso.⁹⁴

The event of daring becomes, for Mieli, the scene in which performance as theater and performativity as linguistic speech act form a productive imbrication. As Sedgwick and Parker note, "I dare you" "requires a disimpaction of the scene, as well as the act, of utterance."⁹⁵ That is, the act of daring someone requires a third-party witness to the daring, whether the witness is physically present or not. The notion of a third party to the act of daring establishes that there is a social context in which this

⁹¹ We might also put Mieli's conception of masochism within acting in productive conversation with the "self-shattering" masochism that Bersani develops in relation to queerness in *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* and elsewhere. Bernini's *Apocalissi queer. Elementi di teoria antisociale* would be a great starting point to think this through.

⁹² Mieli, "L'attore è un masochista," 102.

⁹³ Mieli, "L'attore è un masochista," 105.

⁹⁴ "For me, life is entirely an act of taking in order to give back [...] however, to give in the best possible way one must dare, to have courage. In English, the verb *osare* means "to dare," and is written "dare" [to give, in Italian]: therefore, to dare is to give; if the actor dares then they give a gift to others, they offer others an example of the fact that if they were to dare, if they were to make even the slightest effort, maybe they would change their lives. This is what I'm trying to say." Mieli, "L'attore è un masochista," 105.

⁹⁵ Parker and Sedgwick, *Performativity and Performance*, 8.

act is being performed. In Mieli's case it is the taboo of exposing the perversity of his body on the train, a space that would not normally consent to the free display of perversions: in this instance radical drag, but in other instances, coprophagia. The one spectator's reaction to Mieli's performance demonstrates the possibility of interpellation onset by performative utterance. Beyond the joyous participation Mieli was able to provoke by daring to perform an on-the-spot drag show on the train, he successfully reached another gay person, magically persuading him to speak his own perversion, though it was still couched in their joint damnation.

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