

EMILIA-AMALIA Session II:

Affidamento/ Entrustment

**EMILIA-AMALIA Session II: Affidamento/Entrustment
Chapbook 1**

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Emilia and Amalia are cited as women who are entrusted to one another. They meet in the 1970s in a writing class at the 150 School, a free educational program in Milan, initiated by Italian labour unions and implemented by the government. The student body is made up of workers, unemployed people, the elderly and women who have little to no formal education.

Emilia and Amalia grow close and share their personal lives and stories. Emilia's telling and retelling of her life, and the events that shape it, is fragmented, chaotic and disordered.

One day, out of exasperation and in a gesture of friendship, Amalia hands Emilia a piece of paper with her life's story recorded in beautiful prose. For the first time, Emilia feels seen and whole. She weeps, perhaps with joy, and carries the document in her purse for the rest of her life.

Emilia wanted and needed; Amalia knew and offered.

Cecilia Berkovic

EMILIA-AMALIA is a Toronto-based feminist exploratory working group. Initiated in 2016, the group meets regularly to examine and employ practices of citation, annotation, questioning, interviewing and autobiography as essential feminist strategies that activate feminist art, writing and research practices. Each session is organized around a 'text,' a conversation, and a writing activity, but beyond that the meetings have taken many different forms. All meetings are open to the public and participants have varied widely.

One particular interest has been to elucidate the histories and strategies of feminism that have been obscured and overlooked. EMILIA-AMALIA asks how we might update and rewrite past practices so they can better respond to contemporary questions. Our aim has been to think through these questions from the differences and disparities between members and in a spirit of collaboration. For this reason, EMILIA-AMALIA is an open group that invites all levels of engagement.

We are all experts.
No one is an expert.
Expertise is not expected.

This series of five chapbooks is a partial record of the conversations, texts, images and output the meetings have generated and engaged with.

ism and a pronounced disregard for feminism continued to pervade, as they will do, all social intercourse. Yet, I would suggest, that experience of a harsh and protracted separateness, of social-symbolic defeat—in the impossibility for women to achieve what Lonzi called “philosophical equality” and to gain self-representation in the established symbolic order—may be just what enabled the subjects of that experience to reach the present-day critical understanding of their own different subjecthood (the theory of sexual difference) and to attempt to define the modes of its possible existence, the ways of living it out in the practice of everyday life (the practice of sexual difference).

Eventually, then, under the pressure of its own contradictions, the practice *autocoscienza* evolved into other, more open and conflictual practices that expanded or created new spaces of female sociality: cultural activities, parties, dances, conferences, journals, group holidays and travel, teaching, and direct contacts with feminists in other countries, notably the “Politique et psychanalyse” group in France (also known as “Psych et po” from its former name, “Psychanalyse et politique”). This more dynamic and interactive, though no less separatist, mode of sociality and communication among women is regarded by the Milan authors as a breakthrough in the development of their theory of feminist practice. For among the results of the new practice of female relationships [*pratica dei rapporti tra donne*] was the necessity of coming to terms with the power and the disparity—the social and personal inequality—inherent in them, as well as with the erotic dimension of all relationships between women and its relation to power. This proved to be especially conflictual, indeed “scandalous,” in view of the ethos of parity (equality among women), nonaggressivity, and sisterhood in oppression that had characterized the past practice and self-image of the movement. Not surprisingly, these issues are still live as goals, and the views of the Milan authors very much contested.

A first formulation of the issues and perspective that inform *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice* appeared in 1983 as a pamphlet of the Milan Bookstore publication *Sottosopra* [Upside Down] entitled “Più donne che uomini” [More Women Than Men] but better known as “the green *sottosopra*” from the color of its print. It was this text, by national consensus, that marked a definitive turning point for all Italian feminists, whatever their positions, pro or against or ambivalent about its authors’ position.⁶ Several years of intense debate ensued, in many Italian cities and with many groups representing various tendencies within the movement. The debate has been rekindled since the publication of the book.

One of the major points at issue is the notion of entrustment [affidamento], a term proposed to designate a relationship between two women which, though recorded and variously accounted for in feminist and women’s writing, had not yet been named or formally addressed in feminist theory. Briefly, the relationship of entrustment is one in which one woman gives her trust or entrusts herself symbolically to another woman, who thus becomes her guide, mentor,

“entrustment [affidamento], a term proposed to designate a relationship between two women which, though recorded and variously accounted for in feminist and women’s writing, had not yet been named or formally addressed in feminist theory. ...The relationship of entrustment is one in which one woman gives her trust or entrusts herself symbolically to another woman, who thus becomes her guide, mentor, or point of reference—in short, the figure of symbolic mediation between her and the world. Both women engage in the relationship...not in spite but rather because and in full recognition of the disparity that may exist between them in class or social position, age, level of education, professional status, income, etc.”

— Teresa de Lauretis, “Sexual Difference and Feminist Thought in Italy” in *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, trans. Patricia Cicogna and Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 1-21, 8-9.

in spite but rather because and in full recognition of the disparity that may exist between them in class or social position, age, level of education, professional status, income, etc. That is to say, the function of female symbolic mediation that one woman performs for the other is achieved, not in spite but rather because of the power differential between them, contrary to the egalitarian feminist belief that women's mutual trust is incompatible with unequal power.

Sexual Difference questions this belief on the basis of the experience of social defeat and personal disempowerment that women in the movement have admitted to, and that led to a weakening of energy, a leveling of women's fantasies, and a stifling of female desire ("within feminism, the politics of equal rights had no theoretical grounding but was nourished by the weakness of male desire, in its reluctance to expose itself, in its lack of symbolic authorization"); and it forcefully argues that the disparity, which does exist in the world as constructed and governed by the male social intercourse, is invested in women by dint of their subjection to the institutions of the male social contract, i.e., by their being objects of the male symbolic exchange. To confront that disparity and to practice it in the relationship of entrustment establishes the ground of a symbolic exchange between women, a female social contract whose terms can be defined autonomously from the male social contract.

Naming the fact of disparity among women was certainly the decisive step. It meant breaking with the equalization of all women and their consequent submission to the distinctions set by male thought according to its criteria and the needs of men's social intercourse [*dei commerci tra uomini*]. It meant that among women there can and must be established a regime of exchange [so that] from being objects of exchange, as they were in the male world, women can and must become subjects of exchange.

Not only a generalized social practice of entrustment through disparity, the book implies, can change the affective contents, symbolic meaning, and social value of women's relations to one another and to themselves, and produce another structure of symbolic exchange and other practices of signification. But how can trust be given to the powerful (woman) when power has been the means of women's oppression, by other women as well as men?

The examples of the relationship of entrustment given in the book range from the biblical story of Naomi and Ruth to the relationships between H. D. and Bryher in Greece described in H. D.'s *Tribute to Freud*, between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, Emily Dickinson and (the writings of) Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Mme du Deffand and Mlle de l'Espinasse, and from the "Boston marriages" back to the myth of Demeter and Persephone. What these have in common, besides the intimately complex and often erotic nature of the bond between the women, is the symbolic recognition, the value or valuation of human, gendered worth that each one is capable of conferring upon the other,

"As a guiding concept of feminist practice, in the relationship of entrustment, the notion of the symbolic mother permits the exchange between women across generations and the sharing of knowledge and desire across differences. It enables, as the book's authors put it, the alliance 'between the woman who wants and the woman who knows,' that is to say, a mutual valorization of the younger woman's desire for recognition and self-affirmation in the world, and the older woman's knowledge of female symbolic defeat in the social-symbolic world designed by men."

— Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Difference and Feminist Thought in Italy" in *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, trans. Patricia Cicogna and Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 1-21, 11.

“Affidamento is a term to describe a relationship between two women, where each entrusts herself to the other, so that each can use her talents, competences and desires to open new political spaces for the other. It is not that the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective invented this kind of relationship, but rather they put a name to it. They named a kind of relationship, which now and historically has been indispensable for women to achieve political aims. Indeed in naming it, and practicing it intentionally, they created a radical ethics of difference, where this entrustment to the other is actually an entrustment to her difference—in other words, a radical openness and commitment to another’s irreducible difference, her uniqueness. This relationship is not one of identification—it is not that these two women see themselves in one another—on the contrary, it is through their differences that they desire to not only work together, but also to re-form the self as a uniqueness that comes about through its recognition by another.”

— Alex Martinis Roe, “An exercise in the practice of affidamento”

EMILIA-AMALIA Session II: Affidamento/Entrustment

4 July 2016, 6–9 PM

Gallery 44, Toronto

and

16 July 2019, 6–9 PM

Dufferin Grove Park, Toronto

Affidamento, or entrustment, is one of the most important and difficult practices enacted by the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, founded in 1975. Rejecting a narrative of equality and sisterhood, the Milan group sees difference, or disparity, as one of the most generative qualities of the personal and political relationships between women. Looking to historical examples of relationships of *affidamento*, and discussing how entrustment operates in our own lives, this session explores how practices of writing and narration give form to these exchanges and open up new spaces for feminist politics in the everyday.

Text

Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, “Chapter Four” in *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, trans. Patricia Cicogna and Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 108-131.

Writing Activity

“An exercise in the practice of *affidamento*”

Devised by Alex Martinis Roe, this activity invites participants to consider entrustment as “a practice doing” that combines narration and an individual writing activity.

This group exercise takes about an hour; each part requiring around twenty minutes:

Part One

Meet in a circle. The facilitator begins from her left and gives everyone in the circle a consecutive number, stopping when she is halfway around the circle. Then she begins counting from one again, so that everyone can find the person who has been given the same number. That way pairs are formed and the pairing is more likely to join people in the group who are not (yet) closely connected.

These pairs then find a space in the room where they can listen to each other, uninterrupted for 10 mins in the psychoanalytic dispositive, i.e. one lying down, the other sitting next to her head so that they don't look at each other, and listening to each other with a special kind of attention: keeping an open mind and not categorizing what the other person is saying. Other physical arrangements are fine, as long as there is a disparity in orientation between the positions, and there is no eye contact.

Each tells a story about a relationship she has had with a woman (and if you are not a woman, a story of a relationship between two women that you know of) which could possibly be a story of *affidamento*. It is important that the one listening does not interrupt the one speaking, although she may take notes.

When the first block of 10-minutes is up, the facilitator tells those speaking to stop and change positions with their partners. After the next 10-minute block, the facilitator explains the next stage of the exercise.

Part Two

In 20 minutes, write the other person's story. The facilitator poses some challenges and questions to the group: Think about the way you tell the story—its form and the kind of language you use. From what perspective, in which voice do you write, and why? Do you need to ask your partner questions as you write? Try to think of this story as a gift to the other: what can you write that will help her and the others to understand the relationship in a particular way?

Part Three

Gather again as a group in a circle to read a few of these stories. Those in the circle who would like to share the story they have written read them aloud. The facilitator asks for a few minutes of silence, so that everyone in the circle can consider the following: This reading should be done in such a way as to be a kind of gift to your partner (or the women in the story in the case that your partner is not a woman), giving her a coherent sense of her uniqueness-in-relation, and giving her the authority to speak about the relation for herself. In this task we entrusted one another with intimate stories of relations between women that work through and on disparity rather sameness. We worked on the important task of storytelling as a way of creating affirmative relations over time and giving others a political space of co-appearance as an act of co-becoming. How can we perform this in the act of reading?



K worked as a waitress at a diner at Queen and Crawford. An artist, she was getting set to open her gallery at Queen and Dufferin when A met her. The landscape of Queen Street West has changed. In the 1990s there was very little to be found there. A, still an undergraduate student, was impressed with K. Firstly, she was at OCAD, where the “real artists” worked. K was about 10 years older than A and though they both waitressed and worked hard, K provided a model of being—woman, artist, mother—that expanded the model of “female artist.”

K lived with her small son behind the storefront gallery she opened in the “no man’s land” at Queen and Dufferin. They lived with very little—just the two of them, mother/son, artist/child. When the art world seemed to be full of pretension, K was funny, fun to be around and intimidating in a way, whereas other women’s glamour wasn’t appealing. Seemingly fearless, fierce and brave, K represented another way of being in the art world, flouting the rules like that—living on the outskirts, having a child, making her way on her own.

A asked K to her final student show—a thrilling request to ask someone you know to see your work for the first time, to see you: especially someone you respect.

After the show, K invited A to show at a new space she was opening—this time moving closer to centre, ever so slightly—at Queen and Dovercourt. K became A’s gallerist, exhibiting her work in Toronto and New York—showing A how negotiating the complicated social dynamics of the art world looked when done by a woman with power. When her last New York gallery opened, A was one of the first artist to show there. A pleasurable easing of the power dynamic between the two had begun.

Flash forward to lives lived separately but together—observed. Spaces and circumstances changed; their relationship and support for one another endured. But this powerful woman had a dark sense of humour at times and when A told her she was pregnant, K made a poor joke, and cautioned her not to make the mistake of making work about her children now.

Eventually A saw that part of what brought the two together was shared interests and talents, but that the working relationship had run its course. Making the decision to leave the gallery culminated in a long, beautiful lunch—an opportunity for A to tell K how much she had taught her and how much she loved her.

The first piece K had shown of A's, from that first student show, was a reel of a woman summersaulting underwater, on a loop. Repeated on infinite, the woman spins forever, just below the surface.

Sarah for A



This woman was a student. She is a lot of other things of course, but for now I'll call her the student. She is telling me about three different female mentors during her time in a local university, all three of which are relationships forged through their situatedness within the institution: how the student navigated it, how the student understood her time after she'd leave its walls.

Two were professors who taught the student directly, one in Slavic studies and the other in Asian Art. The third was a fellow student, a peer, a colleague.

Previously, this student, the subject of this story, had felt ambivalent about the desire for these types of relationships: forms of mentorship and affinity between women. The student felt she didn't require these types of dynamics in her life. Yet being in a university typically prompts a great deal of anxiety as to what might happen when you leave it, for better or for worse. It has that power, and the student was trying to find her place within it, moving alongside the prospect of leaving its walls, trying to rearticulate herself against this inevitable but uneasy reality.

These women offered her different things.

The first was a professor, they worked together directly through a research fellowship. From the way she describes this professor, I imagine her as level-headed and calm, curious and willing to listen. They spoke at length about the student's fears about leaving the university, and the relationship became something akin to a familial one as the student worked to assist the professor in her practice, as their forms of research were parallel, mutual, in tandem.

The second was also a professor, one a little bit less organized, a bit more flighty and unsteady, one accessed across a larger (disciplinary) boundary. She wasn't

there to offer the student practical advice but perhaps gave her something on a more emotional level. The student sees this as a failed relationship, if my notes are correct, and she feels like she bothered her unduly, and I wonder how these institutions, these universities, prompt these feelings in us, as students of all kinds.

The third, as I have said, was with a peer, another student. The student of our story sees this other student as an eternal optimist, a person with boundless confidence. This fellow student spoke about networks of support in the face of the unknown, about being caught when you fall, about the precipice of leaving this place for good and not knowing what's next. The student admires these articulations in her colleague, as I understand it, characterizing herself as a pessimist, the opposite, at the end of a different pole, a different worldview. Yet as she speaks about these three women perhaps something similar is forming.

The student speaks about disentangling herself from this institution, for better or for worse. Perhaps these three relationships are both part of the entanglement and the possibility of something else: a density, a net, a scaffold, arms that can catch, arms that can bolster and push forward.

Daniella for M



It strikes me as a wonderful circularity that I have been entrusted to tell V's story of *affidamento* (entrustment) for her grandmother Jeannine, whom she dearly loves. I am encircled by other women sharing their stories with one another. Together we perform intimate acts. For what is more vulnerable than to share your love for another with a stranger?

But I digress. My duty is to share V's story. Like V I will try to tell what I remember from her telling, not my notes. After all, as V so beautifully pointed out, isn't *affidamento* first about listening and bearing witness, and then writing?

In the short time we had, V told me a little about her French Canadian grandmother who helped to raise her and her sister, "like a second mother," she said. Over the years, the stories her grandmother shared about her life came out in fragments, repeated themselves and expanded. As V grew older she learned to ask more leading questions, so the old stories grew richer in detail. Jeannine began having children at age 19, six in all, with two sets of twins to boot: five boys and one girl. By her mid 40s she was widowed, so had to work two jobs (in a bakery and grocery store) to support her family. Her home, where V often stayed as a child, was also a rooming house.

As V recalled, one morning while sitting in the bathroom watching her put on make up and dress, she glanced into her grandmother's bedroom next door and noticed the double bed with two pillows. Musing on the young lodger in the house, and thinking of her own single bed, V said, "Grandma, does Clifford sleep with you?"

It remains one of her grandmother's favourite stories: one she loves to tell. It is a story that V clearly enjoys telling me—smiling warmly and laughing as she remembers her grandmother's telling.

Sara for V



You saw a shaggy little head at the front of the cinema, during the early days of school when you felt uncertain about how you fit in and where you belonged, and said to yourself, “that’s mine, whatever that is: that’s mine.” It was the beginning of your first adult relationship like this: the next chapter in a book organized around these friendships of intense desire, companionship, but also frustration. There was Christina across the street when you were little, then you “fell in” with a woman named Jaclyn before you were even a teen.

And now there is the shaggy little head, attached to someone fiercely smart, fiercely instinctive: smoking, drinking, jumping over turnstiles to catch a subway train. She makes you bolder, and talks like no one else you know. Like the others before her, you begin the relationship feeling like she is in the position of power, but not in a bad way. You walk and talk in a frenzy of exchange. There is something intuitive about your attraction to her, as though drawn to her inscrutability. The fact that she cannot be easily translated. Her speech and gestures seem borrowed from elsewhere. There is a blankness to her that appeals to you.

It’s 14 years later and you still talk in a frenzy but something feels it has shifted. Perhaps you can translate her too easily now, and each new problem seems like the same turnstile, but this time she can’t clear it. While you have paid your fare and stepped into the car, she is still doubting the distance between her arms, her feet, and the ground.

Gabby for A



Can you love and resent someone at the same time?
Can you change your person, can you change your mind
and is there humiliation in doing this publicly?

The younger woman is bold and bright-eyed. She is excited, attracted, in love/awe with the older woman, who is wiser, more experienced and better placed. The younger woman watches her keenly, assesses her, noting how she does it, what she takes and what she leaves, how she navigates.

The older woman assesses too. She sees the younger woman, and though she doesn't let on, she knows what it is she will become. She recognizes the younger woman for what she is. Perhaps she sees in her versions of herself or, just as movingly, versions of other people she has loved or loathed, admired or struggled against. She knows what the younger woman will become, in five years, in 10 years, in 20. But she is also old enough to know that the imbalance created by seeing someone's future before they do would put the friendship permanently out of whack. So she keeps quiet.

The young woman watches the older woman and she wants her. She wants her and she wants to be here. She can't parse her desire for, from her desire to be. In fact she doesn't even try. The complexity of the attraction to the other, the attraction to what one sees of oneself in the other is beyond the limits of her experience, so she goes ahead and declares her love with all the force of youth. The older woman knows better, or at least she knows otherwise.

That first small humiliation is a seed that grows not into other bigger humiliations, but into a hollow space between the two of them, a place where risks can be taken. This hollowed out space is the real gift the older woman

gives to the younger—a space where she can try and fail and risk and succeed as she can not do anywhere else in the world.

Annie for G

Hemlock Forest

Moyra Davey

Moyra Davey is an artist based in New York, and whose work comprises the fields of photography, film, and writing. She has produced several works of film, most recently *i confess* (2019), which will premiere in North America at the Museum of Modern Art this spring. She is the author of numerous publications including *Burn the Diaries* and *The Problem of Reading*, and is the editor of *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood*. Davey has been the subject of major solo exhibitions at institutions including Portikus, Frankfurt/Main (2017); Bergen Kunsthall, Norway (2016); Camden Arts Centre, London (2014); Kunsthalle Basel (2010); and Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (2008). Her work is found in major public collections, including the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and Tate Modern in London. She is the 2018 recipient of the Scotiabank Photography Award, and in 2004 was granted the Anonymous was a Woman Award.

“*News From Home* by Chantal Akerman comprises breathtaking views of Manhattan accompanied by the filmmaker’s voice reading her mother’s letters from Brussels. These are frequently melancholic, pleading, a mother desperate for news of an apparently unresponsive daughter living on her own in what was then a dangerous city. Shot on film, *News* is saturated with gorgeous color, and Babette Mangolte’s camera work is a thing of beauty.

A third of the way into the film, there’s a subway shot aimed straight down the 1 train. The camera is uncannily still, taking in the movements of passengers, some curious, most indifferent, and one man dressed in lime green, apparently annoyed. Taken aback, he lurches, scowls at the camera, then turns on his heel and walks quickly away through the open doors into the next car.

I have an urge to re-create the scene by asking cinematographers to film a contemporary version of the shot. But I immediately begin to feel anxious and depressed about the idea: this is not how I’ve worked, I’ve always done my own scenes, even if this type of unpredictable situation in public is where I am most challenged technically. The idea of filming this quasi-illegal scene both makes me sick with nerves and—if I can pull it off—is a huge rush. This scene is the opposite of “low-hanging fruit.”

— Moyra Davey, *Hemlock Forest*

Stills from *Hemlock Forest*, HD video with sound, Moyra Davey, USA, 2016, 41 min, 15 sec.
Courtesy the artist; greengrassi, London; and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.





Colophon

EMILIA-AMALIA meets on the ancestral and traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the New Credit, the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabe and the Huron-Wendat, who are the original owners and custodians of the land.

EMILIA-AMALIA is initiated by Cecilia Berkovic, Yaniya Lee, Annie MacDonell, Gabrielle Moser, Zinnia Naqvi, Leila Timmins, cheyanne turions and Shellie Zhang.

EMILIA-AMALIA would like to thank Gallery 44 for hosting sessions and Trinity Square Video for lending space. Special thanks to Sean O'Neill for inviting us to be residents at the AGO; Alex Martinis Roe for giving us permission to work with her *affidamendo* writing activity; Helena Reckitt and the Feminist Duration Reading Group in London for their mentorship and friendship; Moyra Davey for her endlessly inspiring work; session participants who attended and shared their time and writing: Jill Glessing, Sarah Phillips, Margaryta Golovchenko, Daniella Sanader, Sara Angelucci, Su-Ying Lee, Marsya Maharani, Priya Zoe Jain, Suzanne Carte and Valérie Frappier; and lastly, to all of the folks who have come out to our sessions, screenings and talks over the past three years.

A portion of the proceeds from the sales of the chapbooks will be donated to Black Lives Matter Toronto's Freedom School. freedomsschool.ca

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- Chapbook 2 **EMILIA-AMALIA Session I: Translation/Annotation**
- Chapbook 3 **EMILIA-AMALIA Session VII: How to Ask a Question**
- Chapbook 4 **EMILIA-AMALIA Session VIII: Questioning Through Writing**
- Chapbook 5 **EMILIA-AMALIA: Syllabus/Workbook**

This series of five chapbooks is a partial record of the texts, conversations, images and output the EMILIA-AMALIA working group sessions have generated and engaged with since 2016.