

MARIUCCIA
SECOL
Unraveling

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MARIUCCIA SECOL

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Monika Branicka
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Mariuccia Secol's artistic practice was born from refusal: refusal of silence, of prescribed roles, and of the separation between art and life. Her work unfolds at the intersection of artistic experimentation, feminism, and care, forming an oeuvre that consistently resists categorization while remaining deeply grounded in lived experience. This monograph presents an artist for whom creation is inseparable from ethical responsibility and social engagement.

Born in Castellanza, near Varese, in 1929, Secol developed her artistic practice from the early 1960s, initially working in painting and encaustic techniques shaped by memories of war and its violence. From the late 1960s onward she turned to textiles, clothing, and everyday materials, using processes of cutting, unraveling, and reassembling to articulate feminist questions of identity, voice, and the female body. As she herself recalled, "My quiet paintbrushes disappear, new elements emerge in cryptic work." These gestures transformed materials historically associated with domestic labor into instruments of critique and self-determination. Wounds and repairs became central motifs through which destruction gave way to knowledge and renewal. As a founding member of Gruppo Femminista "Immagine," she became an original figure in Italian feminist art, most notably participating in the 1978 Venice Biennale, and continued to address social and political issues in her later work.

This monograph offers a renewed engagement with Mariuccia Secol's work, positioning her practice within broader debates on feminism, artistic labor, and social responsibility. Her art reminds us that creativity can function as a form of healing—and that, through acts of unraveling and reweaving, art can become a space where individual experience is transformed into collective possibility. The title of the exhibition and book—*Unraveling*—refers both to Secol's material practice of pulling apart fabric and threads, and to her lifelong effort to undo inherited social and artistic structures in order to remake forms of subjectivity and care.

I would like to thank the exhibition curators and editors of this monograph, Monika Branicka and Eva Brioschi, for their dedication and curatorial investigation into the body of work of this hitherto underrecognized artist.

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Grażyna Kulczyk

*Founder of Muzeum Susch and Chairwoman
of the Board of Art Stations Foundation CH*

Eva Brioschi

MARIUCCIA SECOL: A LIFE IN IMAGES

● Mariuccia Secol was born in Castellanza, near Varese on March 3, 1929 to Vittoria Bonfanti and Alessandro Secol. Her mother worked in a textile mill while her father had a small manufacturing business. Her first art teachers were Galliano Mazzon (1896–1978) and Pasquale Bossi (1892–1967). She studied accounting at the Istituto Dell'Acqua high school in Legnano, where Mazzon taught drawing. Her father had sent her to this school with the idea of employing her in his business—he wished her to help with the firm's accounts and management, and in any case the nearest art high school was in Milan, almost impossible to attend on a daily basis. Luckily, Mazzon was an exceptional teacher.

He was poetic, he used poetry to paint, he gave us the tools that became the basis for our work, for a new way of seeing things. The same method I used [in the painting atelier] with the patients in hospital, the same sense of freedom of expression.¹

1. Mariuccia Secol in conversation, July 2025.



Mariuccia Secol at the age of sixteen, courtesy of the artist's private archive

● At the age of fifteen, during World War II, Secol met Angelo Tognola, a partisan along with her brother Piero in the Italian Resistance Movement, who was hiding from the Nazi-Fascist military forces in Castellanza. In 1947, at the age of eighteen, she graduated high school and in 1948 she married Tognola. The following year, her son Alberto was born (1949), followed by Mirella (1951), Sandro (1952), and Ester (1955).

In 1954, Angelo Tognola was chosen as the town of Daverio's medical doctor and the family moved there. He purchased part of the historic garden of an eighteenth-century villa and built a family home where Secol still lives today with her two sons, Alberto and Sandro, and where more than sixty years of family history and art are kept.

Secol's husband, Angelo, was passionate about art and painted in his free time, for which reason the house plan included a studio for both of them in the attic. The couple made friends with Francesco Fedeli, an artist from Milan who had a second home in Sesto Calende, near Varese. It was Fedeli who taught them the "French" encaustic technique, which uses a particular paste made of different materials, including heated wax.

In the mid-fifties, Secol started painting canvases of middling dimensions that combined the abstract with more rigorous concrete art composition. Her first series of works based on a coherent theme is *Etruscan Tombs* (*Tombe etrusche*) (figs. see pp. 10, 89), which were completed after a trip, probably with her family, to Cerveteri and Tuscania, two Etruscan settlements in northern Lazio. At the same time, she painted the series *Burnt Cities* (*Città bruciate*), a response to the horrors and destruction of the war. The reference to fire was not just to the physical consequence of the bombardments, but also a metaphor for the violent barbarity that burns collective consciousness.



Mariuccia Secol, *Etruscan Tombs (Tombe etrusche)*, 1959–62, encaustic on canvas, 130 × 90 cm,
© Mariuccia Secol, photo: Magdalena Typiak

● The house in Daverio became an artistic and literary center, frequented by personalities from the Italian cultural world such as Renato Guttuso, Bruno Munari, Enrico Baj, Giuliano Vangi, and Leonardo Sciascia. The latter had arrived in Varese thanks to Bruno Arcurio (the teacher of Secol's son Alberto), a Sicilian like Sciascia who had involved him in a series of lectures. Guttuso too had a summer painting studio nearby—his wife Maria (Mimise) Dotti had in fact inherited Villa Dotti in Velate, a historic part of Varese. The Sicilian writer would visit the house in Daverio, accompanied by Father Umberto Cicogna, parish priest of nearby Galliate Lombardo, descendent of the noble family of the same name, and passionate follower of music and art. A few kilometers away were Lucio Fontana, who had a summer home in the Comabbio countryside from the early sixties (where he would go to relax until the year of his death) and Enrico Baj, who had a studio in Vergiate.



The Tognola-Secol family house in Daverio, photo: Magdalena Typiak

● During the early sixties, Secol was producing works like *Holocaust* (*Genocide*) (*Olocausto* [*Genocidio*]), (fig. see p. 90), clear references to wartime antisemitic persecution, and the series *Dismemberment* (*Smembramento*) (1965–66) (figs. see pp. 12, 42, 66). During this period, she read the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig (1881–1942), who in his book *The World of Yesterday*—written shortly before his suicide—narrates his experience as an exile in a wider context of recent European history. In 1965, struck by the writer's personal and artistic story, Secol painted *Suicide* (*Suicidio*) (fig. see p. 91): “I had read Zweig, who had given me the idea of having suicide ‘inside’, as change.”² In both cases, historic events are a background to a more personal crisis, during which Secol's paintings took the form of a dismembered human body, literally hacked to pieces, and then reassembled in the series *II Genesis* (*II Genesi*) (1968), which marked the birth of a new identity (figs. see pp. 46, 92, 93).

2. Mariuccia Secol in conversation, July 2025.



Mariuccia Secol, *Dismemberment* (*Smembramento*), 1966, encaustic on canvas on plywood, wooden strips, 143 × 123 cm, © Mariuccia Secol, photo: Magdalena Typiak

● Between 1965 and 1988, Mariuccia Secol ran a painting atelier in the psychiatric hospital in Bizzozero-Varese. The project was supported by Professor Edoardo Balduzzi, director of the Provincial Psychiatric Hospital and a pioneer along with Franco Basaglia³ of the new Italian psychiatry. Secol was subsequently assisted in her work there by Donatella Ghizzi. The painting atelier was attended by male patients not only due to logistical problems, but also because of a general refusal by female patients, who kept themselves occupied with knitting and considered painting entirely alien to them and outside their abilities. Later, the women were involved in a poetry workshop.

3. Franco Basaglia was an Italian psychiatrist known in the last century for his revolution in mental health care which brought about the closure of asylums in Italy through Law 180 (or the Basaglia Law) in 1978. His reform transformed the treatment of psychiatric patients, shifting attention away from the person's illness and promoting social reintegration through local services.



Atelier at the Bizzozero psychiatric hospital in the eighties, courtesy of the artist's private archive, photo: Carlo Meazza, Varese



Mariuccia Secol in 1968 in front of a painting from the series *II Genesis (II Genesi)*, courtesy of the artist's private archive

● The 1968 student protests changed everything. Secol's children joined the Gramsci Group, formed in Varese and Milan, which brought together workers, students, and left-wing intellectuals. The second wave of feminism gained ground in Italy too, encouraged by the desire for freedom and emancipation emerging from the young. In this socio-political context, painting no longer seemed to be the right means of self-expression. New materials were needed which could give voice to new needs. Secol dived into her everyday life for materials and tools she could use to express this spilling of life into art and of art into life: aprons, purses, towels, and textiles to dismember and reassemble.



Mariuccia Secol, *Steel Wool for Scouring Pots (Paglietta di ferro)* from the series *Instruments of the Female Role (Strumenti di ruolo femminile)*, 1975, steel wool for scouring pots on canvas, 121 × 71 cm, © Mariuccia Secol, photo: Magdalena Typiak

● In 1970, she used plastic construction materials to create the *Aphonous Musical Instruments (Strumenti musicali afofi)* (fig. see p. 68). A new woman was emerging, seeking a way to make her voice heard, a voice silenced for centuries. Another important work from this period is *The Scream (Il Grido)* (1971) (fig. see p. 144), an assembled mass of soft materials from which arms and hands seek a way out of a situation of suffocating oppression.



Mariuccia Secol, *Instrument for Multiple Mouths (Strumento a bocche plurime)* from the series *Aphonous Musical Instruments (Strumenti musicali afofi)*, plastic constructions, 57 × 57 × 54 cm, © Mariuccia Secol, photo: Magdalena Typiak

● During the same period, Secol created another important work: she used her own clothes—including her wedding dress—to create theatrical costume-like garments. A series of characters emerge from this cutting up and sewing back together of the remains of her past identity, through the dismantling of her roles as wife, mother, and stuffed doll against the backdrop of her home. The resulting series is *The Doll's House* (*Casa di bambola*) (1970–73), named after Henrik Ibsen's play (figs. see pp. 17, 94, 122).



Mariuccia Secol, *The Doll's House* No. 6: *Wedding Dress* (*Casa di bambola* No. 6: *Abito da sposa*), 1973, fabric on canvas, 173 × 97 cm, © Mariuccia Secol, courtesy of Galerie Gisela Clement, photo: Mareike Tocha

● Among the frequent visitors to the house in Daverio were Milli Gandini and he designer husband Tino. Gandini and Secol became better acquainted in the mid-sixties when they would meet after work (Secol in the psychiatric hospital, Gandini in her husband's design studio), to talk and discuss ideas. In 1973, they started taking part in feminist consciousness-raising groups (*autocoscienza*) on the invitation of the young women of the Varese Gramsci Group:

With consciousness elevating our minds we slowly started ridding them of all the constructs they were built from. We understood the limits of our lives up until that moment and we started to acquire the critical tools that would allow us to affirm our needs, to free us of prejudice, moralism, and preconceived ideas. It was clear to us that we had to refuse male presences at our discussions because we realized how much they worked against us and how damaging they were, and how they had the power to weaken our credo, dragging us back under their control.⁴

The two artists took part, together with numerous other well-known Italian artists, in a group exhibition on the theme of art's impact on society, organized by the architect Gian Paolo Manfredini in late 1973.⁵

4. Milli Gandini and Mariuccia Secol, *La mamma è uscita. Una storia di arte e femminismo* (Rome, 2021), p. 21.

5. See Maria Bremer's text in the present volume.



Milli Gandini and Mariuccia Secol at the exhibition *Mom Has Gone Out (La mamma è uscita)* at the Galleria Cavedra, Varese, March 1-23, 1980. In the background is Secol's work *La mamma è uscita*, courtesy of the artist's private archive

● Gandini, Secol, and her daughter Mirella Tognola decided to create their own group, Gruppo Femminista “Immagine” Varese, in 1974. Despite being dedicated to political struggle, the group’s artistic identity is evident in the word “image.” Later they were joined by Silvia Cibaldi, Clemen Parrocchetti, and Mariagrazia Sironi:

We don’t remember if the day was sunny or rainy, but we do remember that it was in a moment of joy that we created Gruppo “Immagine,” a visual arts group which several women artists were initially part of. We believed that the group was an instrument that gave us strength and at the same time was reassuring for its members. ... Freedom of choice and movement were fundamental to all of us. The relationship between Milli and Mariuccia always held a special place in the group. There was a friendship between us, a connection that went back further and a relationship between our two families that brought us closer.⁶

6. Gandini, Secol, *La mamma è uscita*, p. 19.



Gruppo Femminista “Immagine” Varese, 1978. Mariagrazia Sironi, Milli Gandini, Mariuccia Secol, Silvia Cibaldi, and Clemen Parrocchetti, courtesy of the artist’s private archive, photo: Studio Fotografico Soldano, Varese

● In 1975, Milli Gandini, Mariuccia Secol, and Mirella Tognola contacted the Committee for a Salary for Housework in Padua, a feminist group part of an international network that supported the idea of a wage for housework. The group also published the magazine *Women House Workers: Journal of Feminist Autonomia* (*Le operaie della casa: Rivista dell'autonomia femminista*), which promoted all feminist events and initiatives in Europe and the USA (fig. see p. 198). Here, Secol published *Maria*,⁷ a surreal, tragicomic tale and metaphor for the feeling of oppression that women could no longer contain. For her part, Gandini published a series of photographs entitled *Salary for Housework* (*Salario al lavoro domestico*) (figs. see pp. 207, 208), which show Mirella Tognola writing the slogan in the dust on Gandini's furniture.

The group's protective, reassuring identity is shown by the performance *Undressing* (*Spogliazione*) (fig. see p. 140), which took place in the village of Arcumeggia in 1976 with the tapestry *Cloak "Me"* (*Mantello "Io"*) 1973, made by Secol from her clothes: "The cloak is a wrapping up of the group in a sort of protection made of my clothes. The pressure you feel makes you pass from a non-voice to a shout. The need to express yourself."⁸

7. See pp. 184–86 and texts by Maria Bremer and Sonia D'Alto in the present volume.

8. Mariuccia Secol in conversation, July 2025.



Gruppo "Immagine" performing *Undressing* (*Spogliazione*) with Mariuccia Secol's *Cloak "Me"* (*Mantello "Io"*), Arcumeggia, 1976, courtesy of the artist's private archive

● 1978 was an incredibly fertile year for Gruppo “Immagine.” On January 14 and 15, the members organized the first national conference of women visual artists at the International Center of Brera, Milan, which they named *Woman-Art-Society (Donna-Arte-Società)*. Over 700 participants from all over Italy discussed the controversial question of feminist rather than feminine creativity and aesthetics, of the difficulty of emerging professionally in a patriarchal system which had closed the artists into a ghetto of dependent, minority, and subordinate positions. The group read the manifesto *We Want, We Fly (Vogliamo-vo(g)liamo)*,⁹ which distanced itself from “red asceticism,” Lea Melandri’s name for devotion to the workers’ cause at the expense of a freer and more self-determined creativity. This tension between the two distinct branches of feminism provoked serious ruptures, such as that in 1973 between Carla Lonzi and Carla Accardi inside the feminist group Rivolta Femminile.

9. *Vogliamo-vo(g)liamo*: literally “We want-we fly,” the two verbs differ for the single letter g in “we want.” Removing the letter, the word becomes “we fly.”



Gruppo “Immagine,” poster for the national conference *Money for All Women*, Rome April 29–May 1, 1975, courtesy of the artist’s private archive, photo: Magdalena Typiak