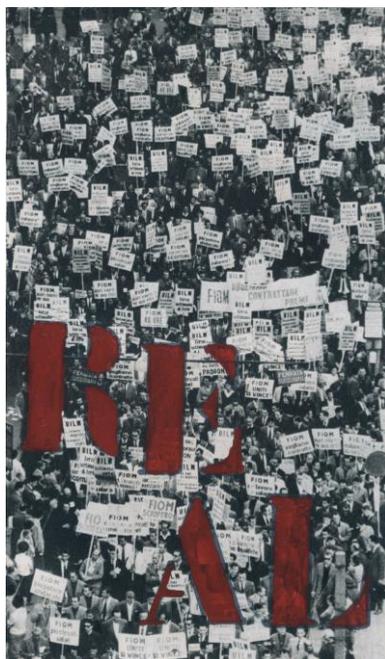# Image Writing. Verbo-Visual Arts from the Late Twentieth Century to Today │ Avant-Garde, Neo-Avant-Garde, Mass Communication

Sarenco, *Real*, 1976

"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 1921

"Every word is a generalization."
Lev S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 1934

The relation between word and image is a source of endless and controversial debate, and is at the core of contemporary theoretical and aesthetic reflection. To give just a few significant examples of the lively encounter between the verbal and visual arts in the twenty-first century we can mention Tris Vonna-Michell's film-installation *Finding Chopin* (2005–2018), a tribute to the great French poet and performer Henri Chopin; the artists' books *Counter / Weight* (Beaulieu, 2018)

and *Alphabetized Bible* (Auerbach, 2006), where the typographic experiments are rooted in the formal experiences of the Concrete and Visual Poetry of the 1950s and 60s; and the refined dialogue between writing and drawing in Gianfranco Baruchello and Michele Mari's *Dreams* (2017). Over the last years, a range of initiatives have brought into focus the complexity of this extremely varied cultural context that showcases the fertile exchange between poetic and visual research, stretching from the twentieth century to the present day. These include the books *Radium of the Word. A Poetics of Materiality* (Dworkin, 2020) and *Women in Concrete Poetry, 1959–1979* (Balgiu; de la Torre, 2020); the exhibition cycle *Poésie balistique* (La Verrière, Brussels, 2016–2019); the exhibition *Intermedia* (Museion, Bolzano and Mart, Rovereto, 2019–2020); and the editorial project *Meta* (Fondation d'Entreprise Richard / Art-Agenda, 2019).

The subversive and desecrating experiments of the historic avant-gardes set before us snippets of phrases, words and letters inserted on assemblages of urban debris, mounted alongside newspaper clippings and photographs or juxtaposed with *objets trouvés*. About fifty years later, the neo-avant-gardes assimilated and critically reinterpreted the experience of collage, montage and the assemblage of signs, words and objects. On this basis they continued to foster verbivocovisual research and practice, once again celebrating the visual nature of the word, its ability to figure in space beyond mere significance.

Fluxus, moving along the confines—and sometimes employing the expressive tools of neo-avant-garde visual poetics—found in language a critical and intermedia device for reconceiving the meaning and role of art in society. Azimuth and the Zero Group used it as a radical means to create a Zero-Zone free from any informal and neo-expressionist residue. The conceptual artists interpreted language as a dimension in which reflection on art could tautologically coincide with art itself.

Concrete poets worked on the physical presence of language and its structural elements, creating mechano-poems to be assembled and disassembled. The exponents of international visual poetry instead experimented with intersemiotic relationships, introducing new social and political tensions into the poetic body using photos and iconographic elements drawn from mass media culture.

This is an extremely varied and complex panorama comprising researches that are highly differentiated from each other. They include, for instance, the alchemical distillation of Emilio Villa, Mario Diacono and Luciano Caruso, but also the analytical, linguistic and anthropological-cultural investigations of Martino and Anna Oberto, Ugo Carrega, Vincenzo Ferrari, and Luca Patella. Then there are the incursions of the word into the works of the Italian exponents of Arte Povera, in

the actions of Joseph Beuys, Ketty La Rocca, Vito Acconci, and Bruce Nauman, and in the operations of Gianni Bertini, Piero Manzoni, Vincenzo Agnetti, Luciano Fabro, Giulio Paolini, and Alighiero Boetti. Or, again in the works of a series of artists including Maria Lai, Louise Bourgeois, Irma Blank, Amelia Etlinger, Annette Messager, Mona Hatoum, Rosemarie Trocke and Ghada Amer, who found in the tension between verbality and textuality a means of expression to shape their own images and personal memories.

Due to the number, quality and engagement of the essays collected, this special issue of "piano b." is divided into two parts, the second of which will be published in March 2021. It focuses on the interaction between literary and visual culture in the late twentieth century, exploring the variety of supports and expressive media through which it became manifest. *Image Writing* presents a selection of historical and critical contributions addressing a broad range of the complex manifestations and multiple ramifications of verbo-visual experimentation. The publication examines intermedia works, independent publishing initiatives, and seminal exhibitions that have, at least partially, been left on the sidelines by the main lines of investigation of recent historiography.

In this first volume, several aspects of the debated relations between avant-garde, neo-avant-garde and the languages of mass communication are reinterpreted in a historical, critical, and aesthetic perspective. This offers further insight into some of the leading exponents of Italian and international verbo-visual poetry, as well as emblematic exhibitions, artists' books and critical anthologies devoted to the encounter between text and image.

Caterina Caputo (Università degli Studi di Firenze) investigates the presence of the word in the *collages verbaux* of E.L.T. Mesens, reconstructing his relationships with the Italian Nucleari and the Cavallino and Naviglio galleries in the 1950s and 60s. Stelio Maria Martini's seminal artist's books *Schemi* (Documento-Sud, Naples, 1962) and *Neurosentimental* (Continuum, Naples, 1974) are the subject of two in-depth analyses in the essays of Dalila Colucci (Harvard University) and Davide Colombo (Università degli Studi di Milano). Pasquale Fameli (Università di Bologna) identifies the theoretical writings and studies of Luciano Caruso and Martini himself on the Futurist "Parole in Libertà" (Words in Freedom) as a key moment in the evolution of the avant-garde conceptualization and practice of the two Neapolitan artists. Marco Rinaldi (Accademia di Belle Arti di Roma) explores the outstanding exhibition *Schrift und Bild*, conceived by Dietrich Mahlow in 1963 for the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam and the Staatliche Kunsthalle of Baden-Baden. The subject of the contribution by Chiara Portesine (Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa) is the dialectic exchange, on an equal and not subordinate level, of

Gianfranco Baruchello's "anthological-visual-literary-conceptualizing-activating work" with the literary neo-avant-garde of the Sixties. Finally, Livio Belloï and Michel Delville (Universitè de Liège) reinterpret Tom Phillips's labyrinthine artist's book *A Humument* (1966–2016) through its parodistic and poetic relations with the popular language of the comic strip.

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