

UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY
UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

POESIA VISIVA

Italian Concrete & Visual Poetry
of the 1960s & 1970s



[1]

EXHIBITION
17 MAY – 19 JULY 2009

SYMPOSIUM
3PM – 5PM FRIDAY 29 MAY

**Giulia Niccolai,
Adriano Spatola
& the creation of
the Poesia Visiva
Collection**

Nerida Newbigin

The University of Sydney's collection of Italian visual and concrete poetry was assembled by Adriano Spatola and Giulia Niccolai in 1978, in response to an invitation from the Frederick May Foundation for Italian Studies and its director Gino Rizzo to participate in the First Australian Conference on Italian Studies and Italy today. The invitation was particularly appropriate in that it introduced Spatola, a poet, theorist and patron at the cutting edge of the Italian visual poetry movement, to the Australian scene. At the same time, it acknowledged Frederick May's interest in the literary and theatrical experiments of historic avant-garde of Futurism (1909) and of the *neoavanguardia* which had appeared in Italy with the *I Novissimi* (1961) and the *Gruppo 63*.

Spatola (1941–1988) had developed an interest in poetry that took the deconstructing of language to its very limits, shattering not only the linearity of discourse but even its single words and letters. He had moved into 'poesia concreta' [7]. In 1967, with his younger brothers Maurizio and Tiziano, and glue and stapler, he had begun *Edizioni Geiger* on the kitchen table. The *Geiger* anthologies were loose-leaf albums of visual and concrete poetry [11]. Each page was hand-made, numbered and signed, then submitted in 300 copies by its author. The anthologies were then assembled on the Spatolas' kitchen table: every page of each of the ten issues is an artwork in its own right.

In 1972, even as the *Geiger* anthologies continued, Spatola established *Tam Tam*, a small format quarterly which had various subtitles, including 'international review of poetry, a-poetry and total poetry'. *Tam Tam* marked a rift with the poets of the *neoavanguardia*, through its refusal to maintain political engagement, and its claim that poetic and artistic research had to be independent of political and social context.

Frederick May, Professor of Italian at the University of Sydney from December 1963 to his premature death in January 1976, had long been interested in the Italian Futurist theatre, both as an important influence on Pirandello and as a theatre form in its own right. Futurism's engagement with Fascism made it unfashionable in post-war Italy, but the *neoavanguardia* of the 1960s brought renewed interest in the historic *avant-garde*. In 1969, May's colleague Jennifer Lorch taught a course on the new poets, and May directed a program that included plays by two of the poets in this exhibition, Spatola and Lamberto Pignotti [2]. He began experimenting in collage as a process of creative reading and literary criticism, and later wrote a major but unpublished essay on Italian concrete and visual poetry.

His use of collage in his examination papers was memorable. Italian papers were already famous for their generosity in inviting students to demonstrate what they knew, rather than testing them to find out what they didn't know. In 1969, students in Italian had staged their own little student revolt, and were granted the

further privilege of being able to submit their own exam questions, and answer them by handing in essays rather than attending exams. May had always used past papers as a teaching aid, and from 1970, his papers made increasing use of collages of word and image, to represent the literary and sensual associations he found in texts. Italian examination papers became collector's items and cult objects.

In this context, Gino Rizzo's invitation to Spatola was particularly magnanimous, and their response was no less generous. Spatola called in favours from their *Geiger* contributors, and brought them to Australia in two large art portfolios. My recollections at this point become slightly confused. I remember collecting two very large poets from the airport in my Mini Minor, and taking them with their luggage and the two portfolios to a hotel in Kings Cross. In addition to mounting the exhibition in the War Memorial Gallery, they did radio interviews, met poets, and, after prodigious imbibing, Adriano performed his legendary *Aviation/Aviateur* (still available on YouTube) at the Civic, then a poets' pub on Castlereagh Street. The exhibition and the curators subsequently travelled to the National Gallery of Victoria and the Melbourne Italian Festival, as Kris Hemensley reported in the *Meanjin Quarterly* later that year; Giulia Niccolai published her own fragmentary recollections of the visit in 'Bad Ragaz (e altre lezioni)', *Harry's Bar e altre poesie 1969-1980* (Feltrinelli, 1981).

When the Frederick May Foundation for Italian Studies ceased to exist, the collection remained in the Department of Italian Studies where it continued to be used as a teaching collection. Early in 2008, thirty years after the original gift, the collection, together with books, a selection of *Geiger* anthologies, audio materials, letters and documentation, has now found a home in the University Art Collection.

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[2]

Poesia Visiva

Maria (Connie)
Tornatore-Loong

The University Art Gallery's *Poesia Visiva* exhibition celebrates a recently acquired and highly significant collection of Italian concrete and visual poetry from the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, concrete and visual poetry became one of the most active neo-avant-garde international movements spanning the visual arts. Treating the poem as an object, artists combined language and visual imagery directly influenced by Dadaism, Futurism, Surrealism, FLUXUS and the readymade. Italian concrete and visual poetry sought to challenge the conventional art work by dematerialising and publishing the art object. Concrete poetry is loosely defined as 'image as word', whereas visual poetry is a 'fusion of word and image', an amalgamation of linguistic and pictorial expression. Thus, concrete and visual poetry is positioned between the discourses of art, language, poetry and critique. For visual poet Lamberto Pignotti, 'Poesia Visiva returns to the tradition of interactions between words and images, but it does so in terms of a discourse on communications in our modern world'.¹

Italian concrete poetry first emerged during the 1940s. Carlo Belloli is accredited as the leading figure that refused to 'regard poetry as a narrative or lyrical genre but as word patterns, a form of verbal architecture in space-time dialectic'.² Remarkably, his fortuitous meeting with Marinetti in 1944, directly influenced works including *Bimba bomba*, (from *Parole per la guerra – Words for War*).³ Despite Marinetti's nationalism and his political affiliation with Mussolini's fascism, he was primarily a Symbolist poet who experimented with typography, creating poems that were textual and visual. To this end, Belloli and others embraced Marinetti's aesthetic and poetic legacy rather than his political beliefs. According to Marinetti, 'with Belloli, poetry has become visual art ... transformed into ... word-ideas and progressive architectonic text-poems'.⁴ Belloli later disassociated his poetry from the label 'concrete' even though his work consisted of words arranged in simple geometric patterns to create textual structures in space.⁵

Experiments in concrete and visual poetry continued in the 1950s and early 1960s. Artists and poets formed the *neoavanguardia I Novissimi*, *Gruppo 63* (Adriano Spatola, Pignotti and Giulia Niccolai) and *Gruppo 70* (Pignotti, Eugenio Miccini, Michele Perfetti, Lucia Marcucci and Luciano Ori). Spatola and Niccolai advocated that visual poetry was of lesser importance for the literary-focused *Gruppo 63* members who debated the structure and essence of poetry and literary language. In *Zeroglifico (Zeroglyphic)* 1966 [7] and 1978, Spatola referenced Franz Mon's theories on the poetry of surface, advocating the de-construction and rejection of language's established function.⁶ His concrete poems re-construct language by typographical rearrangement of text (letters of the alphabet) to generate optical effects. During the 1970s and early 1980s Spatola's leftist, non-militant tendencies

were promoted in publications such as *Majakovskiiiiiiiij* 1975 and *Tam Tam* 1971–1988 [8] in which he denounced political and social engagement in the realms of concrete and visual poetry.

Alternatively, the *Gruppo 70* artists, writers, musicians and poets explored visual and technological imagery from advertising, photography, newspaper headlines, slogans and comic strips to actively protest against the culture of mass media and consumerism.⁷ These artists sought to expose the materiality of communication by using art as a *sign*.⁸ Miccini and Perfetti declared visual poetry a guerrilla war, 'and used not only the word and the image, but also light and gestures, in fact all the visible instruments of communication ... towards the transformation of its own means into those of mass communication ... to transform society itself'.⁹

Perfetti's *Siamo tutti insieme* [3] and *Thrilling* 1977 reflected the interrelationship between language, art, poetry and social commentary. Miccini used graphic models, diagrams and text, creating ambiguous images while presenting himself as the 'voice of the polis'.¹⁰

The elements of concrete and visual poetry differed for individual artists. Indeed, visual poet Sarenco claimed that, 'Poesia Visiva represents an encounter or a mixture of various arts'.¹¹ They used collage, photomontage, type, mass media and images of popular culture. Their works included not only concrete and visual poems but also braille, photography [10], scores, objects [6], stories and letter poems as well as calligraphy and artist books [11]. In using these various forms of 'poetry', the artists sought to decipher, challenge and transform the signs of mass communication. Notably, Ori stated that visual poetry was the 'aestheticization of mass media formal structures, which [visual poetry] adopted as its own model, while denouncing their negative role in the social context'.¹² For Pignotti, visual poetry was a 'form of expression which experimented at various levels with relations between words and figural images, pursuing finality and fusing results in a single context'.¹³ His series of postage stamps such as *NO!* 1974 and *AUTO!* 1976 [2] reduce Italy's history into miniature images marked with subversive handwritten captions.¹⁴

In this regard, Italian concrete and visual poetry in the 1960s and 1970s portrayed socio-political and cultural concerns that developed around various controversial referendums like the Italian Divorce Referendum in 1974, student and women's liberation movements. Feminist visual poets Mirella Bentivoglio, Betty Danon, Marcucci, and Niccolai rejected masculine and patriarchal imagery to represent the female condition. Bentivoglio's visual poems are autobiographical and concern nature, fertility and reality. In *CICLO (= cycle)* 1975 [4], the artist represented two crescent moons as a symbol of fertility and archetype

of femininity. Bentivoglio's engagement with poetry, fertility and the cosmic element (the moon) expressed her belief in the feminine.¹⁵ Tomaso Binga abandoned her name in favour of a male pseudonym to critique the role of the 'female' artist, whereas Danon eliminated the written word in favour of the *sign* aiming to destroy any trace of male gender in language. Her poems alluded to relations between space and time, sign and rhythm.¹⁶

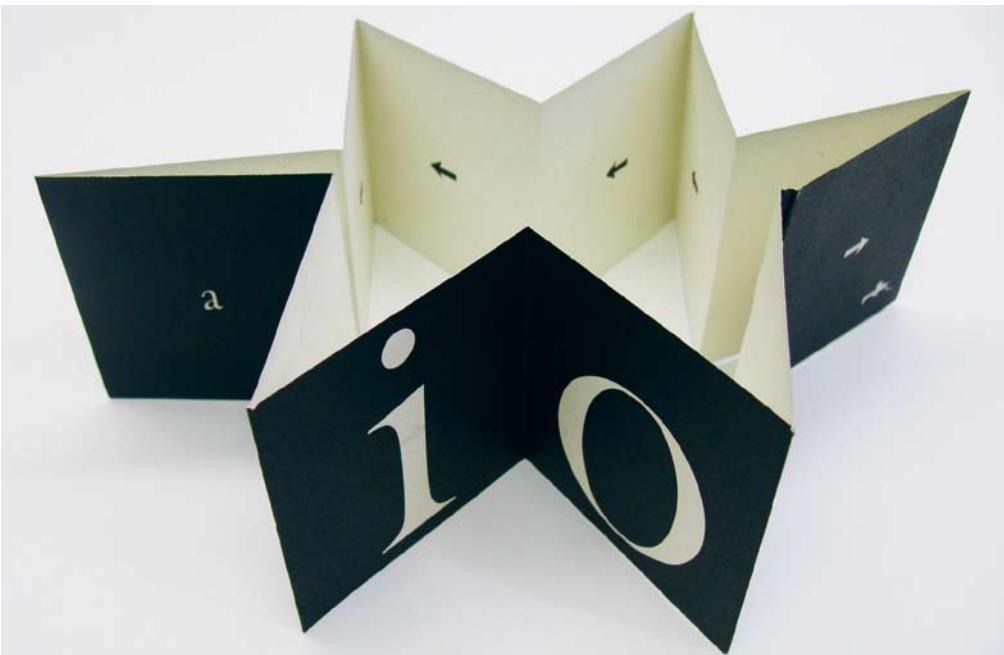
Marcucci employed themes of female identity and gender difference as 'una forma di guerriglia'.¹⁷ From the 1970s, she began the series of the *Impronte* (Imprints) including *Il paesaggio falso* (*The false landscape*). In *Il paesaggio è obbligato* 1976 [9], the artist supplemented the verbal-visual code of language by the personal, physical participation and 'imprinting' of her female body. In contrast, Niccolai painted and photographed everyday objects – typewriter (*Scultura 'poema'* 1975 [1]); spools of thread (*Cinque colori* 1974).¹⁸ Her visual poetry employs puns to create a sense of temporal order and disparity between the word and the material (the word *poema* and the typewriter) in which the viewer is caught between the moment of surprise, contemplation and enjoyment.¹⁹ In Niccolai's words, 'my visual texts are almost always born from a "nonsensical" interpretation of language and reality'.²⁰

It is timely that this exhibition opens on the centenary of Marinetti's, *Manifesto del futurismo* 1909. Undeniably, *Poesia Visiva* pays tribute to the communiqué and the Futurist *parole in libertà* and highlights the dialectical encounter between verbal elements and the iconographic that characterised the overtly leftist and socio-cultural commitment in Italy during the 1960s and 1970s.²¹ For Pignotti, Perfetti, Marcucci, Bentivoglio, Sarenco, Niccolai and others, an ongoing critical engagement and commitment to the pictorial and verbal language of popular culture remains integral to their concrete and visual poetry.

NOTES

1. Lamberto Pignotti quoted in Henri Veyrier, *Poesia Visiva 1963–1988 – 5 Maestri – Ugo Carrega, Stelio Maria Martini, Eugenio Miccini, Lamberto Pignotti, Sarenco*, Edizioni Cooperativa 'La Favorita', Illasi, 1988, p. 64.
2. Carlo Belloli quoted in Mary Ellen Solt (Editor), *Concrete Poetry – A World View*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, London, 1970, p. 41.
3. Carlo Belloli's *Parole per la Guerra* was published in 1944 by Edizioni di Futuristi, Armi, Milan, Italy.
4. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti quoted in Mary Ellen Solt (Editor), *Concrete Poetry – A World View*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, London, 1970, p. 38.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 38–39.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
7. Giulia Niccolai and Adriano Spatola, *Concrete & Visuale: Contemporary Italian Poetry as form & image*, Exhibition Catalogue, University Art Gallery, University of Sydney, 27 August – 13 September, 1978 and National Gallery of Victoria, St. Kilda Road, Melbourne, 20 September – 8 October, 1978, p. 7.
8. John Picchione and Lawrence R. Smith, *Twentieth-Century Italian Poetry – An Anthology*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1993, p. 17.
9. Eugenio Miccini and Michele Perfetti from *Poesia visiva politica pubblica*, Techne, Firenze, 1972, as quoted by Luigi Ballerini (Editor), *Italian Visual Poetry 1912–1972*, Finch College Museum, Istituto Italiano di Cultura, New York, 1973, p. 64.
10. Veyrier, p. 45.
11. Sarenco quoted in Henri Veyrier, *Poesia Visiva 1963–1988 – 5 Maestri – Ugo Carrega, Stelio Maria Martini, Eugenio Miccini, Lamberto Pignotti, Sarenco*, Edizioni Cooperativa 'La Favorita', Illasi, 1988, p. 58.
12. Luciano Ori, *La Poesia Visiva (1963–1979)*, Exhibition Catalogue, Firenze, 1979, not paginated.
13. Lamberto Pignotti quoted in Luigi Ballerini (Editor), *Italian Visual Poetry 1912–1972*, Finch College Museum, Istituto Italiano di Cultura, New York, 1973, p. 34.
14. Veyrier, p. 37 & 46.
15. Rinaldina Russell (Editor), *The Feminist Encyclopedia of Italian Literature*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1997, p. 350.
16. Romana Loda, *MAGMA: Rassengna International Women Artists*, Third Edition, Castelvecchio Museum, Verona, Italy, February 1977, p. 22.
17. The artist refers to her practice as 'a form of guerrilla warfare'. Lucia Marcucci, *Poesia Visiva*, Exhibition Catalogue, Techne, Firenze, 1972, not paginated.
18. Russell, p. 350.
19. Milli Graffi, *Giulia Niccolai, Poema & Oggetto – Poem & Scope*, Edition 346 / 400, Geiger, Turin, 1974, p. 12.
20. Giulia Niccolai quoted in Luigi Ballerini (Editor), *Italian Visual Poetry 1912–1972*, Finch College Museum, Istituto Italiano di Cultura, New York, 1973, p. 33.
21. Ballerini, p. 8.

Maria (Connie) Tornatore-Loong is the *Poesia Visiva* exhibition curator, University Art Gallery and Art Collection, Sydney University Museums.

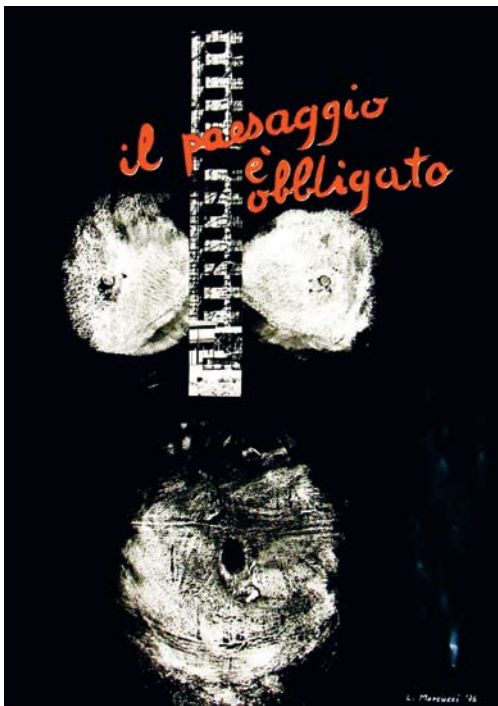




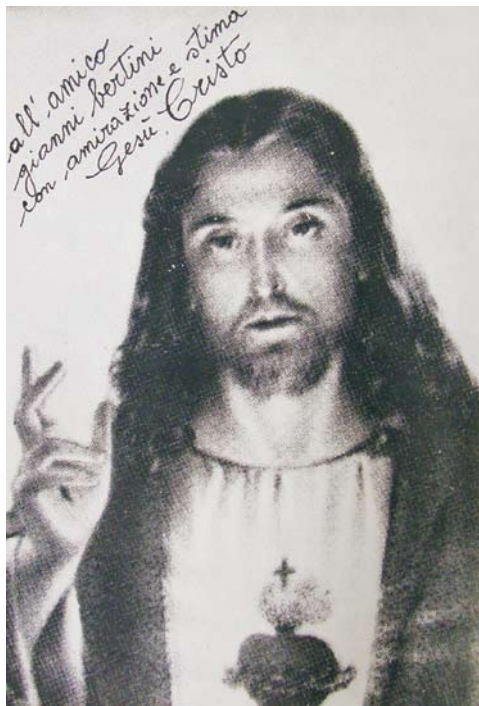
[7]



[8]



[9]



[10]

[7] Adriano Spatola
Zeroglyphico
Zeroglyphic 1966
silkscreen on cardboard
Art Collection, University of
Sydney
© Courtesy of the artist

[8] Giulia Niccolai,
Poema & Oggetto 1974;
Adriano Spatola, *Tam Tam*
– review of *International
Poetry*, 29 1982;
Adriano Spatola,
Zeroglyphics 1966–1976;
Adriano Spatola,
majakovskiiij 1975
Art Collection, University of
Sydney
© Courtesy of Giulia Niccolai
and Adriano Spatola's Estate

[9] Lucia Marcucci
Il paesaggio è obbligato
The landscape is one way
1976
black and white photograph
and lacquer
Art Collection, University of
Sydney
© Courtesy of the artist

[10] Gianni Bertini
*All'amico Gianni Bertini
con ammirazione e stima,
Gesù Cristo*
*To a friend Gianni Bertini
with admiration and
esteem, Jesus Christ* 1972
black and white photograph
Art Collection, University of
Sydney
© Courtesy of the artist

[11] Geiger 1, 3, 4, 5, 6
1968–1974
(Issue 1, Gianni Bertini,
Un fiore 1968)
Art Collection, University of
Sydney
© Courtesy of the artists and
Adriano Spatola's Estate



[11]



[3]

[1] Giulia Niccolai
Scultura 'poema'
Sculpture 'poem' 1975
black and white photograph
Art Collection, University of
Sydney
© Courtesy of the artist

[2] Lamberto Pignotti
AUTO!
HELP! 1976
lithograph and ink on
cardboard
Art Collection, University of
Sydney
© Courtesy of the artist

[3] Michele Perfetti
Siamo tutti insieme
We are all together 1977
ink on paper
Art Collection, University of
Sydney
© Courtesy of the artist

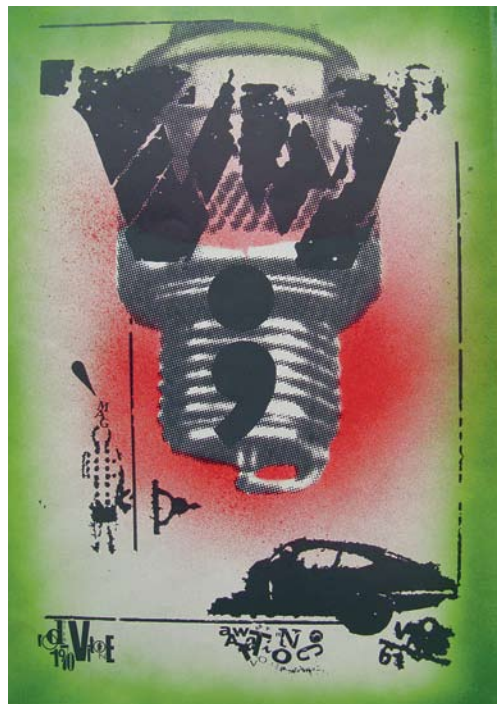
[4] Mirella Bentivoglio
CICLO (= cycle) 1975
ink on cardboard
Art Collection, University of
Sydney
© Courtesy of the artist

[5] Rodolfo Vitone
We 1970
ink and paint on paper
Art Collection, University of
Sydney
© Courtesy of the artist

[6] Mirella Bentivoglio
Itinerario
Itinerary 1973
ink on cardboard
Art Collection, University of
Sydney
© Courtesy of the artist



[4]



[5]

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Unless otherwise indicated all works have been gifted by the artists to the Frederick May Foundation for Italian Studies, University of Sydney in 1978. The Frederick May Foundation transferred the collection to the Department of Italian Studies in 1999. The collection was later donated to the University Art Collection in 2008.

POESIA VISIVA: Italian Concrete & Visual Poetry of the 1960s & 1970s

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