

‘But does there exist a revolutionary essence of the avant-garde?’ – Aspects of *Poesia Visiva*

“... the words and images (but also the gestures, sounds, etc.) of *poesia visiva* are a strange and authentic aesthetic recycling of the enormous output of the mass media. As a result, what is involved is not a parody, not an exclusively ironic awareness, but a critical awareness that inverts the sign and the meaning of social communication, that acts at the heart of the system like a Trojan horse. In a word, *poesia visiva* is a ‘semiological guerrilla’.”

Eugenio Miccini. ‘La diversità della poesia visiva.’ Exhibition catalogue, *Visual Poetry*. Illasi (Verona): Rara International, 1990.

<i>poesia visiva</i>	is mobilization of sign & symbol
<i>poesia visiva</i>	is use a concrete mixer

Herman Damen. ‘Poesia Visiva: Mobilization of Sign & Symbol.’ Brescia: Studio Brescia, 1972

One can safely state that specialised artists’ magazines always play an important role in the system of contemporary art, as informative and critical instruments for providing information concerning art practices and activities, and more particularly as a theoretical and reflective platform for artists, critics, and avant-garde groupings. Of the various avant-gardist reviews appearing post-WWII, most interesting in terms of artistic innovation and theoretical musings are the artists’ periodicals. By ‘artists’ periodicals’ we mean a periodical review or magazine established and led by artists, and used by them as a means to promulgate their artistic practices and ideas.

Since the 1960s various artists’ periodicals traced out a transcultural network of vanguard poets and artists that experimented with poetry as a visual and political medium according to social and cultural dissent. The advent of the mediatized culture, the Vietnam War, and the May revolt in 1968 marked a crucial shift in the relationship between language and politics, by pushing neo-avant-garde experimental poetry in the soil of public space, mass communication, and ideological commitment.

Within this vibrant historical and cultural framework, the Italian visual poet Sarenco and Belgian poet Paul De Vree co-founded and published in June 1971 the first issue of the international poetry magazine *Lotta Poetica*. In the decade of the 1970s this review was to become the voice of militant criticism, intermedia visualities, and the central hub for the international *poesia visiva* movement.

Traced back to the legacy of historic avant-gardes (Futurism, Dadaism, Constructivism) and grounded in the highly politicised scene of the 1960s and 1970s, *Lotta Poetica* creates transcultural models of interdisciplinary cooperation where verbo-visual research, political imagery, and social activism greatly intersect. In opposition to the capitalist and institutional art world system and closely related to radical protest poetry, *Lotta Poetica* spans multiple networks and geographies, as well as various cultures and historical contexts by outlining a strong vision of the outstanding influencers and practitioners of concrete and visual poetry: from Herman de Vries’ *random objectivations* and Augusto de Campos’ *poemi concreti*, to Jiří Valoch’s *one word poems* and Clemente

Padin's *poemi processo*, from Julien Blaine's *poésie élémentaire* to Lamberto Pignotti, Lucia Marcucci, Eugenio Miccini, Michele Perfetti, and Luciano Ori's *poesia visiva*. *Poesia visiva* is an Italian phenomenon arising from the Gruppo 63 and the Gruppo 70 in 1963. They used this name to distinguish their poetry from concrete poetry. *Poesia visiva* is the equivalent of visual poetry, but the term has several dimensions. 'Visiva' is clearly reminiscent of 'vision' and immediately points at its socially committed nature. Apart from this, the *poesia visiva* is also characterized by the use of e.g. photographic material from the world of advertising and journalism. Also, the visual character is reflected in its name. *Poesia visiva* is a continuation of concrete-visual poetry in which an attempt is made to extend the concept of poetry beyond its conventional means of expression and limitations, as well as expressing a social criticism.

'Phono-, ideo-, typo-, icono-, photographical; mono-, stereo-, quadro-, ambiophonic; phonographic, bioscopic, kinetic; kinesic, eatable, odorous, tangible' (Damen, 1972), *poesia visiva* is one of the numerous and diverse tendencies displayed by post-World War II experimental poetry. De Vree considers *poesia visiva* as the most progressive art form in the sense of the fusion or symbiosis of the arts advanced by Dada and describes it as 'regenerative of the awareness and view of a non-alienated world'. According to De Vree, the visual poet maintains a critical stance vis-à-vis society and records - in an ironical or satirical way - his protest against injustice, enslavement, exploitation, and indoctrination. Here the artist is not a mere passive chronicler; he wishes to actively contribute to raising societal consciousness through a poetry that participates in daily life and acts as a sign on the wall, a signal in the city, even the face of the world, and is a clarion call to action, to revolution. As Sarenco and De Vree pointed out in *Profilo storico della poesia visiva* (1972): 'C'est en 1963 que dans le monde entier commencent à naitre de nouveaux groupes et mouvements, qui ne se sentent pas à l'aise dans le corset de la poésie concrète et qui veulent travailler dans d'autres dimensions. Cette nouvelle génération s'attribue déjà des noms différents pour son travail : poésie spatiale (France), poésie expérimentale (Tchécoslovaquie), poésie fusionnelle (Pays-Bas), conceptual poetry (Amérique), public poetry (Belgique), etc., et même des courants idéologiquement anti-concrets se manifestent, surtout en Italie (poesia visiva) et en France (poésie élémentaire).'

The extension of poetry beyond the conventional limits of its genre took place, among others, in performative actions of Eugenio Miccini (*Poesia in piazza*, 1971), Lucia Marcucci (*Poesia murale*, 1971), and Alain Arias-Misson (*Pedestrian poem*, 1969), as well as in Vincenzo Accame and Franco Vaccari's experiments in the liminality of word-image.

During the course of *Lotta Poetica*'s first year, a deepening rapport and understanding grew among Jean-François Bory, Herman Damen, Paul De Vree, Lucia Marcucci, Eugenio Miccini, Alain Arias-Misson, Luciano Ori, Michele Perfetti, and Sarenco. From 1972 till 1979, they formed a group known as the 'International Poesia Visiva Group' or the 'Gruppo dei Nove'. Julien Blaine and Franco Verdi joined the group at the end of the 1970s. The group comprised an extensive network and grew all the more thanks to collective participation at exhibitions, the production of multiples, records, films and videos, the compilation of anthologies of international visual poetry, etc. As a group they were represented by various galleries in Brescia (Studio Brescia), Milan (Studio Santantrea), Venice (Galleria Il Canale), Antwerp (Galerie Jeanne Buytaert), Ghent

(Richard Foncke), and Aalst (New Reform). In 1973 De Vree organised a major exhibition on the *internationale poesia visiva* at the ICC in Antwerp.

In addition to highly hybrid poetic contributions, *Lotta Poetica* also contains outspoken polemic articles. After all, on the cover of the first twelve issues, editor and artist Gianni Bertini appears behind the barrel of a gun, aimed at the reader. First of all, the polemic was aimed at demystifying the art market. Frustrated by the commercial success of conceptual art, which, according to Sarenco and Bertini, is indebted to concrete and visual poetry, they wrote a series of articles entitled *Poesia Visiva and Conceptual Art / A Well-Organised Plagiarism*, illustrating concrete examples to make their claim. Dick Higgins writes a sympathetic letter in response, which Sarenco publishes in *Lotta Poetica 15-16* (1972), and speaks about the 'sick brouhaha of fashionable, marketable concept art' and 'the establishment renovators'. Shortly afterwards, Sarenco denounces the fraudulent launch of Enea Ferrari, allegedly Europe's very first monochrome painter and teacher of Manzoni. On the basis of testimonials and documents, he succeeds in making public the frauds of some Italian gallerists and critics.

In *Lotta Poetica 11* (1972), Sarenco and De Vree publish a manifesto against the Venice Biennale. Invited to the section *Il libro come luogo di ricerca*, they refuse to participate in the 'typically reactionary biennale'. In their view, participation implies a recovery and neutralization of their political action. The subsequent issue of *Lotta Poetica* tackles yet another cultural bastion: the Parisian Grand Palais. In the spring of 1972, a retrospective exhibition on ten years of French contemporary art takes place there. The exhibition, heavily contested by various artists, opens under police protection. The protest is documented in the magazine.

The many activities of the group itself are also documented in the magazine, new publications, sound recordings, and exhibitions. Important are the theoretical essays by Sarenco, De Vree, Miccini, Marcucci, Arias-Misson, in particular those by the Italian semiologist Rosanna Apicella. In addition, *Lotta Poetica* provides overviews of the state of affairs in the visual-poetic field in Great Britain (Nicholas Zurbrugg), North America (Richard Kostelanetz), South America (Clemente Padin), Italy (Lucia Marcucci), the Netherlands (Gerrit Jan de Rook), and Belgium. (Paul De Vree).

Compiling issues with contributions from all over the world turn out to be no easy task. From the spring of 1974, only monthly monographic issues were published, each time devoted to one artist. Sarenco kicks off, followed by Paul De Vree, Ewerdt Hilgemann, Klaus Staeck, Enrico Baj, Bernard Aubertin, Aldo Mondino, Alain Arias-Misson, Joseph Beuys, Jean-François Bory, Franco Fabiano, and Jiří Kolář. By focusing on one artist, the magazine acquires a more explicitly experimental character. Some issues document one project or aspect of the artist and thus function as a coherent paper exhibition format.

Not surprisingly, the magazine is of such a polemical nature that it gets isolated artistically from other movements. However, conceived as a 'total poetry', *poesia visiva* exhibits many points of commonality with comparable movements in the visual arts of the 1960s and 1970s, namely Pop Art, Fluxus, Body Art, Performance, Happening, Arte Povera, Minimal Art, Mail Art, Video Art, Sound Sculpture, and Conceptual Art. In 1972, poet and artist Delfino Maria Rosso published in the Italian literary magazine *Pianeta*, the 'Inventory of the types of experimental poetry', to underline the transformation of traditional poetry into a hybrid and complex artistic form. The

plurality of adjectives employed by the inventory described an extremely eclectic panorama of international visual poetics in the 1960s and 1970s, in which very distant aims, forms, and attitudes of poetry can be traced.

In the end *poesia visiva* in particular, is a form that is intrinsically heterogeneous and polyvalent, with subject matter mined from many disciplines e.g., literature, graphics and visual art, typography, journalism, advertising and advertising-art, film and video art, photography, etc. They seem therefore to not have any history and yet comprise a hub where many lines of development and influences converge, not least in the shift from a literary to a visually oriented mind-set.

Whereas conceptual art owed its commercial success for a great part to the support of galleries and other institutions, visual poets were not bound by the commercial interests of the art market that are typical of visual arts. In spite of the many international exhibitions, the distribution channel of choice of visual poetry continued to be magazines and books, which – particularly for the *poesia visiva* – emerged as an alternative circuit in which one was definitely freer in one's actions but which also entailed the risk of becoming invisible for the official art circuit.

Jan De Vree and Maria Elena Minuto

*These topics will be further explored in the international symposium 'Engaged Visuality: The Italian and Belgian *Poesia Visiva* Phenomenon in the 60s and 70s' which will be hosted by the Academia Belgica of Rome and the Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza" on July 7-8, 2021 (<https://blog.muhka.be/open-call-international-symposium-engaged-visibility-the-italian-and-belgian-poesia-visiva-phenomenon-in-the-60s-and-70s/>).

PRINTS & POEMS (on the wall)

(from left to right)

Paul De Vree, *Revolutie*, 1968,
collection M HKA
Paul De Vree, *Contestical Mill*, 1969,
collection M HKA
Sarenco, *e in principio*, 1968
Sarenco, *Plasti-corp (Novara 1968)*,
1968
Eugenio Miccini, *Così meccanica
come dello spirito*, 1969
Sarenco, *Programma per una futura
avanguardia*, 1970

Gerrit Jan De Rook, *Kill*, 1971
Hans Clavin, *L'angerie (belle
époque/sehnsucht)*, 1970-71,
collection M HKA
Hans Clavin, *L'angerie (droom)*,
1970-71, collection M HKA
Timm Ulrichs, *Kauft nicht bei
kunsthändlern*, 1971
Sarenco, *Non eravamo poeti*, 1971,
collection M HKA
Paul De Vree, *Hysteria makes
history*, 1973, collection M HKA
Jean-François Bory, *Littérature*,
1971
Herman Damen, *Attempt to a 3
dimensional alphabet*, 1969
Lucia Marcucci, *La pace o la
rivoluzione*, 1972
Lucia Marcucci, *Attenzione!*, 1972
Luciano Ori, *Notturmo N°2 - Opera
743*, 1975
Michele Perfetti, *Italy Today*, s.d.
Alain Arias-Misson, *The Chomsky
Generative Grammar Public Poem,
Brussels 1972*, 1972-2011, collection
M HKA

Eugenio Miccini, *Sic erat in fatis?*,
1973-1975
Sarenco, *Poetical Licence*, 1971,
collection M HKA
Paul De Vree, *Kissinger*, 1972
(remake)

Antonio Scaccabarozzi, *Struttura
Sferica*, 1972
Antonio Calderara, *Senza titolo VII*,
1971
Ewerdt Hilgemann, *4 x 4*, 1970

VIDEO

Sarenco, *Lotta Poetica – One Day
Show (Zaffelaere)*, 1971, collection M
HKA
Journaal 23/05/1973, *Tentoonstelling
'poesia visiva' te Antwerpen*, VRT-
Archief

MAGAZINES, BOOKS & DOCUMENTS

(from left to right)

De Tafelronde X/1, 1964
Paul De Vree, *Poëzie in fusie*, 1968
De Tafelronde, XVII/2-3, 1972
Amodulo 1-2-3, 1968-1969
Approches 3, 1968
E.A. Vigo, *De la Poesia/processo*,
1969
VOU nr.118, 1969
MEC nr.1, 1969
OVUM 10 nr.3, 1970
Techné 8, 1970
Signal, 1970
Pages, 1970
Aménophis, 1971
ASA 7/71, 1971
L'Humidité, 1971

Lotta Poetica nrs 1-50, 1971-1975
Paul De Vree, *Handschrift
overeenkomst De Tafelronde-Lotta
Poetica*, april 1971
Foto's woning Sarenco-De Vree,
Milanino, Villanuova sul Clisi
Invitation card, Vecu, *Italiaanse
visuele poëzie*, 1971
Sarenco, *La Poesia visiva in Italia*,
1971

Sarenco, *Poesia e così sia*, edizione Amodulo, 1971
Paul De Vree, *PoëZIEN*, edizione Amodulo, 1971
Photos of De Vree and Tulia Denza, Villanuova sul Clisi, 1971
Il Libro 1968-1971, edizione Amodulo, 1971
Nahl Nucha, *Chairman Mao*, edizione Amodulo, 1971
Paul De Vree, *Audio-visuele gedichten*, cassette edizione Amodulo, 1971
Sarenco, *Political poems*, cassette edizione Amodulo, 1971
Archivio Denza - poesia visiva 1969-1971, Studio Santandrea, 1971
Invitation card n°23, Studio Santandrea, *Proletarismo e dittatura della Poesia*, 1971
Invitation card n°26, Studio Santandrea, *Poesia visiva internazionale*, 1972
Invitation card n°28, Studio Santandrea, *De Vree*, 1972
Invitation card n°29, Studio Santandrea, *Miccini*, 1972
Invitation card n°30, Studio Santandrea, *Sarenco*, 1972
Invitation card n°31, Studio Santandrea, *Isgrò*, 1972
Invitation card n°33, Studio Santandrea, *Alain Arias-Misson*, 1972

Jean-François Bory, *Made in machine*, edizione Amodulo 1972
Eugenio Miccini, *Poesia e violenza*, 1972
Lucia Marcucci, *Poesia Visiva*, 1972
Sarenco, *Enea Ferrari & Piero Manzoni*, edizione SARMIC, 1972
Herman Damen, *Langer vers*, 1972
Herman de Vries, *Random objectivations*, edizione Amodulo 1972
Eugenio Miccini, *Poesia e/o Poesia*, edizione SARMIC, 1972
Poesia Visiva, Centro d'arte Santelmo, 1972
Poesia Visiva Internazionale, Galleria 'Il Canale', 1972
Photos International Poesia Visiva Group at Venice, 1972
Invitation card, Galerie Richard Foncke, *Internationale Poesia Visiva*, 1973
Foto's, zaalzichten tentoonstelling ICC *Internationale Poesia Visiva*, 1973, ICC-archief
Invitation card, Centrosei, *Poesia Visiva*, 1973
Poesia Visiva Internazionale '74, Studio Santandrea, 1974
Chicago Review, *Poesia Visiva*, 1973
Visuele poëzie, het Badhuis, 1975
Lotta Poetica, Factotumbook 1, 1978

Colophon

Since 2017, the M HKA has been showing varying archive presentations. The museum is taking various steps to support visual art archives and legacies, with a view to their preservation, documentation, and accessibility.

By means of several works and documentary archive material from the Paul De Vree Estate, the ICC and the M HKA collection, the presentation attempts to render a portrait of the *poesia visiva* phenomenon in its era, as well as a brief overview of the transnational network and the versatile activities of this artist's magazine in the 1970s.

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SCAN DE QR-CODE VOOR MEER INFO EN VERTALINGEN M HKA zet in op onderzoek, herinnering en toegankelijkheid: op ensembles.org vind je extra informatie, foto's, interviews en meer.

The logo for CKV, consisting of the letters 'CKV' in a bold, stylized, black font.