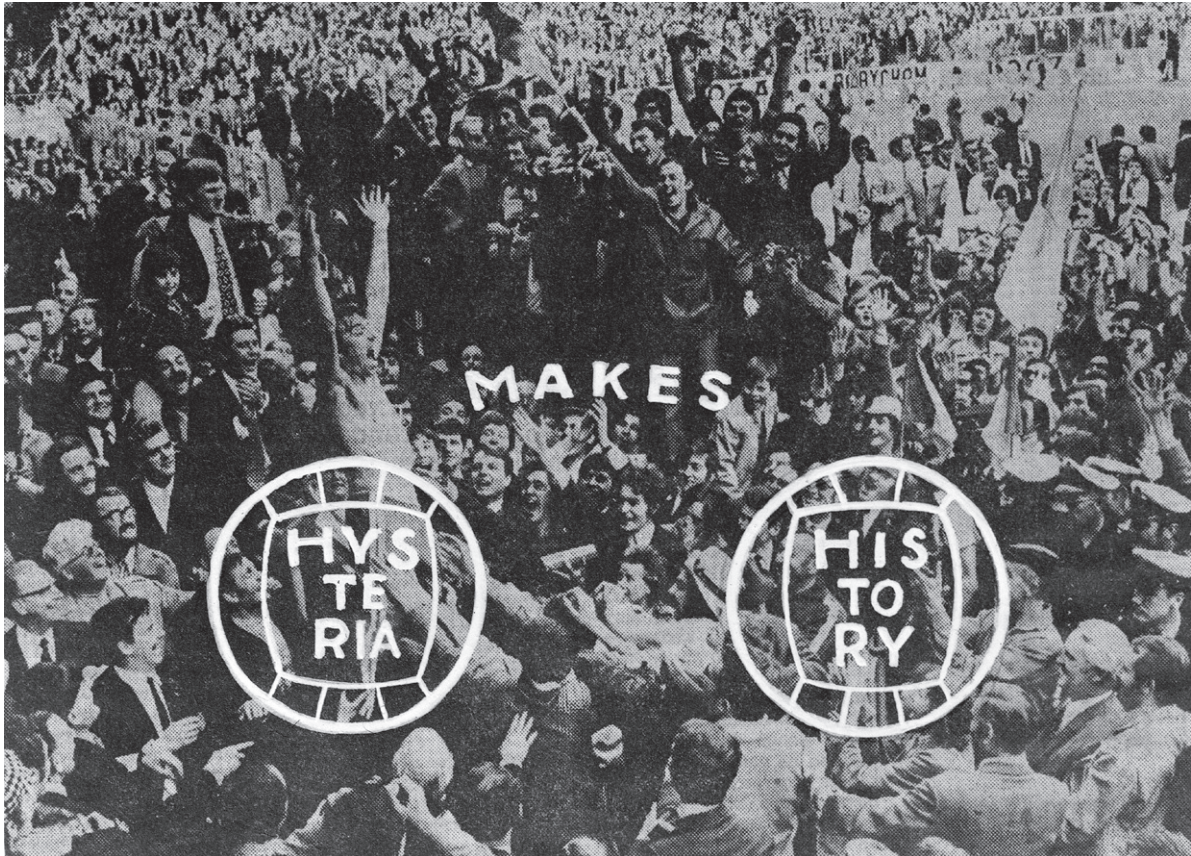


Engaged Visuality

The Italian and Belgian Poesia Visiva Phenomenon in the 60s and 70s

Organized by Maria Elena Minuto (ULiège; KU Leuven) and Jan De Vree (M HKA Museum, Antwerp)



Paul De Vree, *Hysteria Makes History*, 1973. Collection M HKA, Antwerp / Collection M HKA, Antwerp / Collection Flemish Community © M HKA

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Yale University



“To write means to construct language, not to explain it.”
Max Bense, *Entwurf einer Rheinlandschaft*, 1962

“Mi preme sottolineare come uno dei *trait-d’union* tra queste composizioni concrete, e quelle di molta altra poesia visiva, stia nell’urgenza avvertita da tutti questi ricercatori di accostarsi ad un tipo di comunicazione attraverso la parola che sia quanto possibile diretta e visualmente immediata; che si accosti all’efficacia drammaticamente coercitiva dello slogan pubblicitario.” Gillo Dorfles, “Poesia concreta (poesia visuale, poesia trovata, poesia tecnologica, poesia sperimentale),” *Modulo* no. 1, 1966

Since the 1950s, from Europe to Brazil, from North America to Japan, a dense network of poets and artists has given birth to an extensive body of new visual forms in poetry that have revolutionized accepted notions of linguistic production by attaching increasing value to the “verbivocovisual” (Joyce, 1939) nature of words. Traced back to the legacy of Futurist free-word compositions, Dadaist mixed-media poetry, Lettrist and Surrealist photo-collages, the broader and eclectic field of poetic concretism and visuality spans different traditions and locations and designates an international, intercultural, and multilingual movement that is both artistic and literary.

Influenced by Modernist art and structural linguistics, concrete poets experimented with the material presence of words, whereas visual poets trigger a more political and social-media approach in verbo-visual experimentations by using a large variety of different techniques (collages, cut-ups, fold-ins, ready-mades). The Vietnam War and the May 1968 revolt marked a turning point in the change of aims and tendencies between Concrete and Visual Poetry by extending poetic concretism into *engaged visuality*.

In Italy, this critical and paradigm shift in the concept of poetry took the name of *poesia tecnologica* (Gruppo 63, 1963-69) and *poesia visiva*, which, since their inception in the early 1960 (Gruppo 70, 1963-68) and their distinctive manifestations during the 1970s (Gruppo Internazionale di Poesia Visiva, also known as Gruppo dei Nove, 1972-79), enacted “a real semiotic guerrilla war” (Ori, 1979).¹

Closely related to counterculture and social activism, *poeti visivi* created intermedia dialogues between poetry, technology, and the products of consumer society by introducing political tensions in the poetic body through the collage of words and images taken from mass culture (advertisements, magazines, photographs, graphic novels, and so on).

We are faced with an extremely rich and hybrid scenario, in which different approaches, research, and tendencies greatly intersect, ranging from the technological collage-poems of Lamberto Pignotti, Lucia Marcucci, Eugenio Miccini, and Michele Perfetti, to the gender and media-critical investigations of Ketty La Rocca and Patrizia Vicinelli, from the Tape Mark poems of Nanni Balestrini and the performative actions of Alain Arias-Misson, Julien Blaine, Jean-François Bory, and Giuseppe Chiari, to the photographic text-compositions of Paul De Vree and Sarenco, or to the works of a series of artists (e.g. Gianni Bertini, Roberto Malquori, Luciano Ori, Franco Verdi) who have located in the relationship between verbal and figurative arts one of the expressive means with which to discuss the state of the poetry according to the logic of mediatized culture.

The terms adopted by art history and literary criticism to illustrate the daring and diversified expressions of *poesia visiva* in the 1960s and 1970s are numerous, and every attempt to reconstruct its lineages and development is frustrated by its shifting contours and media. As Herman Damen pointed out in *poesia visiva* (Studio Brescia, 1972) “a living *poesia visiva* uses all available information and participation media,” and could present itself as “phono-, ideo-, typo-, icono, photographical; mono-, stereo-, quadro-, ambiophonic; phonographic, bioscopic, kinetic; kinesic, eatable, odorous, tangible.”

¹*Poesia visiva* is one of the numerous and diverse tendencies displayed by Italian experimental poetry in the 1960s and 1970s. The extension of poetry beyond the conventional limits of its genre took place, among others, in *Ana Etcetera*’s integration of verbal-graphic signs and *Continuum*’s experiments in the liminality of word-image, as well as in *Scrittura simbiotica* and *Nuova Scrittura*’s logo-iconic interactions. In 1965, poet and artist Martino Oberto employed the adjective *visuale* instead of *visiva*, to underline not only the visual, but also the mental process behind the transformation of traditional poetry into a complex artistic form.

In 1965, Paul De Vree described this hybrid dimension as a form of “integratie poëzie” (*De Tafelronde* X/I, 1965) by advocating the groundbreaking principle whereby “de kunsten zijn met elkaar in fusie getreden” (“the arts have entered into a fusion”), while Dick Higgins (*Dé-collage* no. 6, 1967) and Adriano Spatola (*Geiger* no. 5, 1972) defined it as “intermedia.”

Combining insights from the fields of art history, literary criticism, and media studies, the conference aims at investigating the impact of new media, political imagery, and technologies on the *poesia visiva* phenomenon by focusing on a bilateral case study rarely analyzed from a comparative and transcultural perspective: the foundation of the poetry magazine *Lotta Poetica* (first series: 1971-75) by Sarenco and Paul De Vree, i.e., the aim of Italian and Belgian international visual poetics, co-authored initiatives, and cross-disciplinary inquiries. The voice of a militant critic and in opposition to the capitalist and institutional artworld system, *Lotta Poetica* drew a cutting-edge roadmap within the wider and multifaceted context of neo-avant-garde experimental poetry by creating a unique model of interdisciplinary cooperation where verbo-visual research, media discourses, and social criticism strongly converged.

In *Profilo storico della poesia visiva* (1972), Sarenco and De Vree called for an aesthetic and cultural integration of knowledge in poetry and grounded it firmly in the soil of ideological commitment: “la poésie vivise entre en lice comme un moyen de transformation actif de la société, soit au niveau du langage et des moyens para-linguistiques, soit au niveau de l’appui à la lutte de classe.”

Without losing sight of the vast cultural heritage and references of the historic avant-gardes as well as of Beat Poetry, Fluxus, and Conceptual Art verbo-visual production, the symposium examines a key moment in the international history of Visual Poetry and focuses on some pivotal questions regarding the specificity of the Italian and Belgian critical axis: What particular sources were re-examined and re-enacted through the critical reception of the historical avant-gardes, notably in the context of Belgian multilingualism and in the highly politicized scene of the 1960s and 1970s? To what extent and in which ways did the advent of information aesthetics and technologies work in post-war visual poetics, and what, on the other hand, changed in the visual writing forms of the Italian and Belgian poets? How did *Lotta Poetica* leave a mark on the development of the Visual Poetry movement, and what political, cultural and social factors made it the core of interartistic exchanges between Italy and Belgium in the second half of twentieth century? Why and how *Lotta Poetica* differs from literary magazines such as *Rot* (1960-97), *Labris* (1962-73), *Integration* (1965-72), *Tèchne* (1969-76), and *L’humidité* (1970-78), and in which ways did it contribute to foster verbivocovisual experimentations and artists’ publications with regard to intermediality and interdisciplinarity? How does the Italian and Belgian *poesia visiva* phenomenon perform “genetic interaction in the fields of arts” (Miccini and Perfetti, 1972), and how does it still reverberate today through engaged visualities, performative, and dissent poetry?

We welcome proposals from scholars, research fellows, artists, and poets of any discipline in order to prompt a cross-disciplinary, dynamic, and international debate on the issues, and to examine an outstanding and collaborative editorial project that reflects the scope and the importance of Italian and Belgian cultural transfers in the 1960s and 1970s, deepening the historical and critical understanding of its legacy in the history of neo-avant-garde visual poetics.

Key Words: Neo-Avant-Garde; Visual Poetry; *Poesia visiva*; *Lotta Poetica*; Protest Poetry; Interdisciplinarity; Intermediality; Transculturalism; Italy; Belgium.

Exhibition and Beinecke Library’s holdings projections on *poesia visiva*: Based on documentary archival materials from the Paul De Vree Archive, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, and M HKA Collection, the showcase exhibition and holdings projections in the library of the Academia Belgica of Rome will provide a concise and refined overview of *Lotta Poetica*’s transnational network and counterculture activities during the early 1970s. In addition to the question of the impact of mass image circulation, political imagery, and technologies on *poesia visiva* phenomenon, the participating scholars, artists, and poets will deal with the representation and reception of neo-avant-garde visual poetics in international cultural, theoretical and socio-critical production since the 1960s to the present.

Engaged Visuality: The Italian and Belgian *Poesia Visiva* Phenomenon in the 60s and 70s. An International Symposium organized fifty-one years after *Lotta Poetica* foundation.

July 7, 2022, 09:00 am – 6:00 pm (Accademia Belgica, Rome. Sala Conferenze)

July 8, 2022, 10:00 am – 6:00 pm (Università degli Studi “La Sapienza”, Rome. Aula Odeion, Museo dell’Arte Classica)

Conference language: English, French, and Italian. **Open to the public.**

Scientific Partnerships: Università degli Studi “La Sapienza” di Roma – Department of History, Anthropology, Religions, Art History, Media, and Performing Arts; Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library (Yale University); Université de Liège, Belgium – Department of Modern Languages and Department of Historical Sciences; KU Leuven, Belgium – Department of French, Italian and Spanish Literature; Royal Holloway University of London – Department of Languages, Literatures and Culture; Università degli Studi di Milano – Department of Cultural Heritage and Environment.

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Scientific Committee: Jan BAETENS (KU Leuven), Julie BAWIN (Université de Liège), Laurence BROGNIEZ (Université Libre de Bruxelles), Michel DELVILLE (Université de Liège), Jan DE VREE (M HKA Museum, Antwerp), Elio GRAZIOLI (Università degli Studi di Bergamo), Maria Elena MINUTO (Université de Liège; KU Leuven), Johan PAS (Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Antwerp), Giuliana PIERI (Royal Holloway University of London), Kevin REPP (Beinecke Library, Yale), Bart VAN DEN BOSSCHE (KU Leuven).



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