VISUAL

POETRY
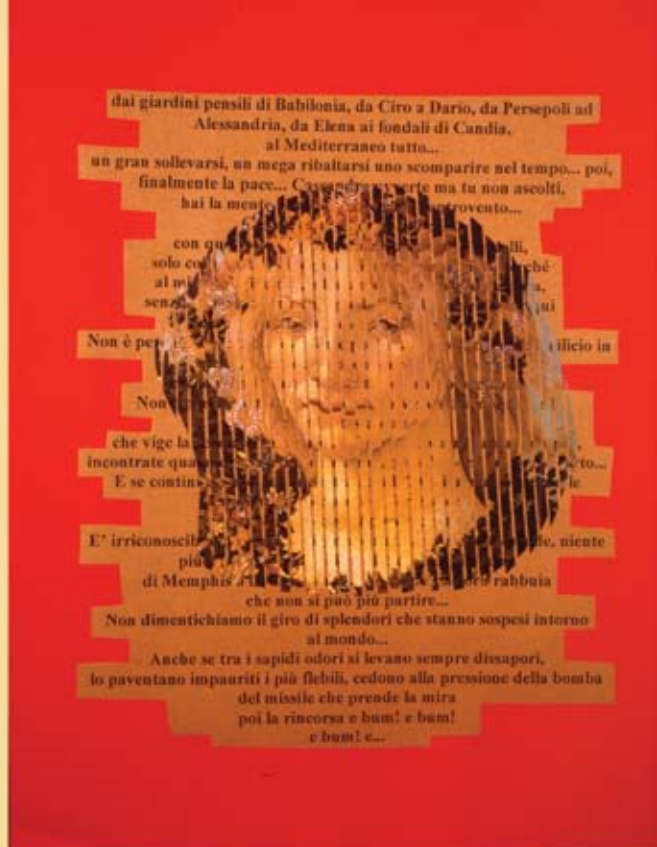
Miccini

Chiari

Francia

Pignotti

VISUAL POETRY

Contemporary Art from Italy

ARTISTS

Giuseppe Chiari

Claudio Francia

Eugenio Miccini

Lamberto Pignotti

Curtis L. Carter

Haggerty Museum of Art

Marquette University

Acknowledgments

The Haggerty Museum of Art is pleased to present **Visual Poetry: Contemporary Art from Italy**, an exhibition of works by four prominent artists from the Poesia Visiva movement: Giuseppe Chiari, Claudio Francia, Eugenio Miccini and Lamberto Pignotti. The movement called *Poesia Visiva* began in Florence, in the early 1960s. This art offers a critique of mass media and explores the relationship of poetry, language, and literature to contemporary media.

The purpose of this exhibition is to bring attention in the U.S.A. to powerful examples of this important artistic movement. Visual Poetry, influenced by the study of semiotics, extends poetry from the verbal into the visual arts.

Curtis L. Carter
Director

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   Collection of the artist

Le Figaro
1984

Eugenio Miccini

Série noire for letters,
mutations without government.
Visual, genetic poetry
is a free school against
the archaism of politics.
Come, come, come to the desert
with the red lining poets.
Visual poetry, speculation
on the spoken word's state of health
critical look, bilateral cooperation
between words and images, that wanted
to restore a soul to the opposition.
How can one be against,
for a more sincere, more profound
unity, all those who are brought
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New poets sons of the wind
Sow the tempest ahead of human meaning.
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Translated from the French by Sarah Cordova Davies

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The Artifacts of *Poesia Visiva*

Curtis L. Carter

I

The term *Poesia Visiva* or Visual Poetry, as represented in the art of Eugenio Miccini, Lamberto Pignotti (the initiators and theoreticians of the movement) and other artists such as Giuseppe Chiari and Claudio Francia working in Italy since the 1960s, refers to a particular type of experimental poetry formed as an amalgam of language and pictorial elements positioned simultaneously in the same image. In Visual Poetry the multi-linearity of comics, picture stories and illustrated magazines replaces Gutenberg linearity. In its use of both the linguistic and the pictorial, it differs from concrete poetry which mainly works within the field of a single language code.[1] Instead of approaching Visual Poetry from the perspective of a detailed comparison with its counterparts in the evolving avant-garde, or examining its broader societal context, I will focus on the artifacts of Visual Poetry themselves. This analysis will include a look at Visual Poetry's characteristics, (formal, aesthetic, and pragmatic) followed by discussion of particular works in the Haggerty exhibition.

The formal elements of Visual Poetry may vary with the individual artists. For example, Chiari works mainly with musical sources, but they include some common features. Their basic components are words and fragments of pictures abstracted from printed materials. The two are merged in part by means of collage and various other graphic art techniques. Typographical and linguistic features of the words yield to their visual features, and the images give up their representational functions. In their new context, words and images are arranged freely according to the imagination and intent of the artist and become a new whole, where the verbal and the visual function in creative tension. It is useful to think of a visual poem as a metaphor which compresses its message into a complex symbolic form that is intended to stimulate a creative response from the viewers that may include aesthetics as well as ideas and actions.

In what sense does Visual Poetry relate to poetry in its traditional linguistic modes? At the very least it can be said that conventional poetry—from Aristotle's mimesis and the Romantics through the Visual Poetry of the late twentieth century—aims at lifting the human conscious out of the mundane narcosis of routine daily experiences. Poetry aims to inspire through heightened states of emotion and aesthetic pleasure, or perhaps to incite people to action. Both traditional poets and visual poets share a love of the well-crafted object, whether in metric schemes or in juxtapositions of the respective verbal and visual elements. It is nevertheless true that traditional poetry typically invokes a more intimate experience between the reader and the page. Perhaps a critical difference is that traditional poetry is both read and spoken, while Visual Poetry is viewed; a fact that allows Visual Poetry a place in the categories of the visual arts. However, this circumstance did not preclude the visual poets from performance art, which includes both elements of the spoken word and the visual, as the careers of Miccini, Pignotti and the others attest.

On another level, a principal element of Visual Poetry is its critical engagement with the languages of mass communication including advertising in magazines, TV images, and posters in public spaces. A comparison of the still images of Visual Poetry and modern advertising images conjoining words and images confirms the connection. But the images bor-

borrowed from advertising are used in a different way. The new structures of Visual Poetry attempt to subvert the manipulative stereotypes of advertising images. This is accomplished through Visual Poetry's displacement of existing forms and meanings and substitution of critical consciousness-raising images in a new sign system.[2]

Unlike forms of 'pure' poetry, valued solely for aesthetic or literary merits that depend upon the sensibilities of a cultivated reader, Visual Poetry draws upon the contemporary vernacular of newspaper captions and magazine advertisements. It aims for accessibility to the same audience as does mass media, the public at large. The exception is that Visual Poetry embraces elements of socio-ideological commentary intended as a critique of the culture of mass communication. In this respect, the Italian visual poets were among the first to offer a critique of the visual and verbal language of mass culture. They propose first to analyze and then decompose the sign systems of mass communications.[3]

Mass communication is seen by the visual poets as a means of subjugating people and turning them into inactive social instruments. By activating a spirit of experimentation in their art and in the minds of audience members, the visual poets raise their voices against institutional and market coercion of human freedom that would result in a homogenized culture of consensus and conformity. Yet, as has been remarked, this critical function of the artist has become very difficult in a world in which the art market absorbs the artist's products quickly allowing little or no opportunity for the artist's critique to effect social change.[4]

To place the artifacts of Visual Poetry in a context of parallel international art movements, it is useful to compare it with Pop Art. Curiously, Pop Art and Visual Poetry emerged on the cultural horizon at about the same time, around 1960 in England and the United States. Both art movements responded to changes in mass culture, but their approaches were quite different. The objects of Pop Art address both Abstract Expressionism, their immediate art historical precedent, and also objects in popular culture such as Campbell's soup cans or images of Marilyn Monroe. Pop Art repudiates the premises of Abstract Expressionism, the latest brand of high art. It restores figuration while substantially embracing the core of a commercially based popular culture of the media arts, especially celebrity culture. At times influenced by collage, as in the case of Robert Rauschenberg's constructions, the artifacts of Pop Art mainly revert to a stylized figurative painting as seen in the works of Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and James Rosenquist. Its reception among the public and traditional art historians was ambivalent, detested by traditional art lovers while admired by the younger generations who identify with mass popular culture.

There are additional differences between Visual Poetry and Pop Art. Pop Art absorbs and reflects the banalities, as well as the ironies of mid-twentieth century life. Visual Poetry also appropriates materials from the visual language of popular mass culture, as well as images from the history of art, but it transforms these elements into a critical commentary. Missing in Pop Art are the analytic and critical perspectives brought to mass culture by Visual Poetry. Unlike Visual Poetry, Pop Art seems more attracted to, than repelled by the dominant media forces of popular culture.

Visual Poetry and Pop Art also differ in their foundations, and in their uses of language and the visual. Pop Art is grounded first in the history of the visual arts. To the extent that Pop Art incorporates language, it is mainly as a secondary element. On the other hand, Visual Poetry begins with the textual language of poetry and is notably influenced by theoretical studies of language in semiotics. It gravitates toward the visual, primarily as a means of extending the domain of poetry.

A little-noticed contribution of the visual poets is the recognition given to the previously ignored visual aspects of written text for the aesthetic appreciation of poetry. Historically, this aspect of poetry has been largely ignored by philosophers and others who discuss the aesthetics of poetry. For example Benedetto Croce "treats the written text as merely a sign for producing certain sounds."[5] Similarly, the aestheticians Mikel Dufrenne and Monroe Beardsley disallow the written symbols any aesthetic relevance, claiming instead that only the oral and the meaning aspects of poetry have any aesthetic relevance.[6] All of this changes for Visual Poetry where the aesthetic features of the typography are integrated with the total image and form an integral part of the experience.

II

One of the earliest works in the Haggerty Museum exhibition is Miccini's *1968* (cat. no. 21), a collage referencing the Vietnam War. A prominent feature of the piece is its title, *1968*, placed near the upper right in bold red type. In the upper left is an image of U.S. military figures juxtaposed against missiles placed above the U.S. flag. Opposite is a fighter plane in flight. Between the two images are the words "Vietnam Ventun Anni Di Guerra Senza Gloria" or "Vietnam: years of war and destruction without glory." On the lower left is an aerial photo of New York City skyscrapers with the inscription in red: "Yankee Go Home." On the opposite lower right is a soldier uttering a cry of anguish. Between them is a pictogram in the shape of a human hand covered with a colored montage of photographs incorporating power symbols of politics, mass media, religion, and corporate business. Depicted across the out-spread hand are political leaders including Lyndon Johnson, Leonid Brezhnev, Fidel Castro, Charles de Gaulle, the Pope, a media commentator, an entertainer and corporate figures. A military rocket, television screens, cars, airplanes, and a bundle of cash are dispersed throughout the image. The overall effect of Miccini's *1968* is a fairly transparent commentary on the story of the United States' problematic intervention in the Vietnam War. Here Miccini integrates almost seamlessly the interplay of the words and the images to create a work that expresses more than either part represented separately.

Much of Miccini's art in the Haggerty exhibition represents his recent work created between 1999 and 2004. During this period, he experiments with a range of processes where the form becomes increasingly important. The result is Visual Poetry that is octagonal, round, or in some cases in the form of a dancer in motion, or the shapes of a living flame. The two round images entitled *Una misura espressiva nuova*, 1999 (cat. nos. 24, 25) are composed of cut strips of words from publications arranged in a swirling pattern extending out from the center. These pieces have the energy of centrifugal force. In them, the words become submerged into the visual pattern so completely that the didactic is subjugated to the formal elements. *E' in edicola il mondo* or *The World It's On Newsstands,* 2004, returns again to a theme focusing on social commentary; this time the subject is the abuse of war captives as represented in the media.

Pignotti's Visual Poetry of the 1960s draws upon media images paired with typography appropriated from a newspaper or magazine to comment on societal issues in the age of media technology. The words and images are formed, using collage technique, into new constructions that convert literal intentions into the artist's own critical purposes. *Un poeta "può" dire la verità* or *A Poet "Can" Say the Truth* (cat. no. 33), 1966, is divided into three vertical columns, perhaps suggesting the columns of magazine or newspaper pages. The upper right column begins with a proclamation (or is it a question?) concerning the role of the poet: "Un Poeta, 'Può' dire la verità." Literally, a poet can tell the truth. Or perhaps it is the ques-

question: can the poet tell the truth? The quotation marks around the word *può* (can) alert the viewer to Pignotti's use of irony concerning the very enterprise of poetry itself. Below the text are two images: the upper one is of the Three Musketeers; the other portrays a military procession of British soldiers. At the top of the middle column is an image of a hooded Ku Klux Klan figure holding a flaming torch in each hand. Below are the words "Certo, per la pace e il progresso," or "Certainly for peace and progress," as if to affirm, perhaps mockingly, the truth-telling capability of the poet in the face of a giant media enterprise that seeks to control thought and action. The image in the right column shows a suited man towering over a street scene with a man wielding a pistol. The difference in scale between the man and the street scene heightens the tension in the overall composition and draws the eye to the words below: "la sconfitta era già segnata." These words proclaim that defeat is already determined. Pignotti leaves it to the viewer to decipher the meaning of his enigmatic juxtapositions. What links the three columns? Perhaps it is the question: what is the role of poetry in a world challenged to the point of breaking by the threat of powerful forces over which the individual has no control?

In his *Chi si difende si salva*, 1965 (cat. no. 32), or *Who Defends Oneself Will Be Saved*, Pignotti again addresses the theme of the individual's response to the stress of contemporary life. This time he makes reference to an advertisement for a popular alcoholic drink made from extract of artichoke. He incorporates into the piece the familiar words of the advertisement: "Contro il logorio della vita moderna," or "Against the stress of modern life," as a means for expressing, with clever irony, his concerns for human survival in the age of technological mass communication. The wider context of the piece incorporates references to global Marxism.

Also represented in the exhibition is a selection from Pignotti's series of works bearing the heading *Visibile invisibile* from the 1980s. "Visibile" refers to what can be seen, "invisibile" refers to the hidden messages in seductive advertisements. Pignotti produced these works as a critique of fashion used as a means of manipulating consumer choices through the media. This aspect of Pignotti's Visual Poetry is represented in the exhibition by two works (cat. nos. 36, 37) each bearing the title, *Visibile invisibile*, 1982. The images feature beautiful female models elegantly clothed and photographed in enticing poses. When linked with a commercial product their aim was to attract attention to the product. Here, they are removed from their mass media advertising context and branded with the words "Visibile Invisibile" again leaving the viewer to ponder their new meaning.

Chiari shares with Miccini and Pignotti a distrust of the mass media. His performances and his Visual Poetry images are intended to counter the indiscriminate use of information by mass communication for manipulation of the relations of market conditions to everyday life.[7] Chiari's visual poetry is strongly influenced by his identification with avant-garde Fluxus artists such as John Cage, and his identity as a composer and performer of avant-garde music. For Chiari, whose work as a visual poet derives mainly from the perspectives of music and performance, the chief weapons of technology might be the microphone, the recorder, the radio, the record, the computer synthesizer, internet downloads and CDs. These are the means whereby music is produced, transmitted, and controlled for the mass market.

Chiari's works in the exhibition incorporate pages of musical scores altered with bright color blotches and markings interspersed with newspaper copy. The abstract colored marks effectively break down the conventions of traditional musical language. Hence his Visual Poetry, as in *La Serenata* (*The Serenade*), 1995 (cat. no. 2) alters the language of the music. His *Decisions*, 1996 (cat. no. 3) is a mixed media collage incorporating overlays of media text with a sheet of music and with red, green, and purple markings. In *Untitled*, 2001 (cat. no. 9) the artist forms a collage of colored paper strips and

and torn sections of an advertisement of Bernardo Bertolucci's film, *The Sheltering Sky*, 1990. The overall shape forms a guitar on a black background.

Not shown in the exhibition are Chiari's famous terse and provocative statements written in large black letters of India ink on paper or applied to canvas, or his action pieces involving such events as deconstructing a piano or dragging a piano across the stage as if it were a cart.[8] These efforts underscore his role as activist-performer.

Writer, filmmaker and poet, Claudio Francia first became involved with Visual Poetry in the mid 1980s. This led to a film *De la poésie visuelle à l'art total,* which is included in the exhibition. Among his Visual Poetry shown in the exhibition are *Gioconda integralista*, 1997 (cat. no. 11), *Leonardo's Dream*, 1997 (cat. no. 12), and *La Presse*, 1998 (cat. no. 13). Gioconda is dressed in black and covers her head in the manner of a Muslim woman with only her eyes revealed. Large black letters in block typography bleed into the costume completing the image. In *Leonardo's Dream*, an airplane projects into the artist's brain. Beneath the artist's portrait are the printed words "Leonardo's Dream."

La Presse, 1998 (cat. no. 13) comes closer to the earlier works of Visual Poetry in appearance and message. In the center of the image is a large splotch of black ink; underneath is a cut out text of newspaper copy with red ink. The words placed on top of the image, some French some Italian, "La Presse. Ne s'empresse pas de pressentir …Moindre impression de Son pressapochismo" offers a stinging critique of the press for its hasty, slapdash work leading to inaccuracies.

As a second generation artist with respect to Visual Poetry, Francia approaches the medium primarily from his background as a visual artist and poet. In this respect, he differs from Miccini and Pignotti whose work is grounded in semiotics and philosophy. As a result his works differ in aesthetic tone from the Visual Poetry of the earlier generation. They reflect a stronger affinity to the aesthetic of visual fine arts.

III

What then is the outcome of the Visual Poetry movement as represented in the works of the four artists considered here? First, their contributions to the visual culture of the late twentieth century join those of other twentieth century artists such as the Futurists, who wished to question the practice of limiting artistic explorations to the internal boundaries of a particular art form such as painting, music, or film. In this sense, they belong outside the main-stream of modernism which sought to purify and isolate art in a particular medium. They are not the first to challenge these boundaries, but they can be classified as practitioners of post-modernism where diverse arts are combined without regard for historical or media boundaries. Still their scientific grounding in semiotics and humanistic philosophy, especially Miccini and Pignotti, sets them apart. Their theoretical understanding of mass communication provided them with special tools to carry out their radical social program. This knowledge enabled them to decode and expose the practices of mass communication. On another level, they were free to explore new artistic opportunities arising from inter-relationships between the linguistic and artistic functions of words and visual images. Perhaps their greatest contribution lies in their refusal to yield the spirit of experimentation, which is essential to creativity in art and in all aspects of life, to a spirit of consensus and conformity that so easily follows from the mindless influences of mass communication on the daily lives of us all.

1. Lucianno Nanni, in Henri Veyrier, *Poesia Visiva, 1963-1988*, exh. cat., Palazzo Forti, Verona, October-December 1988; Museo Mediceo, Florence, December 1988-January 1989; Castell del 'Ovo, Napoli, January-February 1989: Paris: Edizioni cooperativa "La Favorita,"1981, p. 341.

2. Edigio Mucci, "Eugenio Miccini or the Manipulation of Signs," *Eugenio Miccini: Critical Anthology,* Colognola Ai Colli; Adriano Parise, 1991, p. 12.

3. Ibid.

4. Maria Rita Sbardella, *Giuseppe Chiari: musica e segno,* Prato: Gli Ori, 2003, p. 240.

5. Cited in Richard Shusterman, *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002, p. 160.

6. Richard Shusterman kindly referred me to his essay, "Depth Theory and Surface Blindness," pp. 159-172, which draws attention to the neglect of the visual and asethetic aspects of written poetry. See Shusterman, *Surface and Depth* cited above.

7. "Art and Society: A Heated Debate," in Sbardella, *Giuseppe Chiari: musica e segno*, p. 240.

8. For examples of this aspect of Chiari's Visual Poetry see Giuseppe Chiari, *Frasi*, Turin: Martano Editore, 1999.

4. Giuseppe Chiari
   Humoreske, 1996
   Mixed media and collage on cardboard
   18 7/8 x 26 in. (48 x 66 cm)
   Collection of Carlo Palli

Manifest Poetry Again

Four Protagonists of Italian Visual Poetry

Enrico Mascelloni

I

Visual Poetry is a complex artistic movement, very extended over time and greatly divided by space. Succinctly put, it can be said to have been founded on the coexistence of various linguistic codes, in particular those of words and images. As we shall see later, the doings (the works) and the theories presuppose a diversified multiplicity of intentions. Even while it aims to distinguish its development from that of "Concrete Poetry" and "Sound Poetry," both of which are generally assimilated by it but which find their greatest successes in the 1950s, Visual Poetry builds upon their best results and begins to manifest its own identity as of the early 1960s.

Formed within national and even local micro-groups, when not by individualities scattered and hardly aware of each other (in places such as Florence, Naples, Genoa, Marseille, Paris, Lisbon, Tokyo, Buenos Aires, Prague...), Visual Poetry, unlike Futurism and Surrealism, lacked a charismatic leader and a recognized capital from which to spread its doctrine. But soon this original fragmentation disappeared, giving rise to a vast network of alliances, groups, publications, all of them international in the strictest sense of the word, so much so that the national characteristics of the particular groups or individuals have become tightly woven into a sort of common language which claims, as do all expressions of the avant-garde, everyone's understanding.

Among the neo-avant-garde movements of the post World War II era, it remains the least decipherable, mainly because it has done very little to allow itself to be deciphered, almost as if it held that the state of being identified, measured, named would decree its demise. To suppose that one's destiny remains unfulfilled is also a way to distance death; even though in the avant-garde, as in the case of Divine Kings, the best way to renew oneself remains that of being killed and eaten.

Together with its avant-garde "sister," Fluxus, and with its other "stepsisters" (such as Letterism), Visual Poetry has origins that cannot be simply traced back to the realm of the visual arts. The term "stepsister" indicates that the mother—that is to say, poetry—was the same for both and that the father, as usual, could turn out to be anyone who might have passed that way. In this sense, the name "Visual Poetry" already speaks clearly, placing the poetic component above the artistic or any other component, in the same way that Fluxus, at least at its origins, was more musical than visual. Many of the protagonists of our Visual Poetry still like to define themselves as poets, just as those of Fluxus feel themselves to be more musicians than artists. Yet, even today, such movements are much more well-known in an artistic context than in a literary or musical context. The reason for this is no doubt linked to the clearly more dedicated attendance in that environment than in all the others. And such a choice is due more to actual historical opportunities, or—one could better say—to logistical opportunities during the years of the movement's novitiate, than to decisions of an aesthetic or programmatic nature. The

central role of the artistic milieu in the practices of our movement, in fact, diminished during the 1950s and 1960s, when the art circuit was the most uninhibited and the most open to non-conventional languages, thereby proving much less conservative than the literary or musical milieu. Even in the latter areas, as far as disruptions to their respective traditions were concerned, all sorts of things had happened, but the intrusion of other discourses was poorly tolerated or at least rarely attempted. Artists' books, a pioneering example of what today would be called "multimedia," were almost always produced by private galleries or by art collectors. However, above all, the forms of production and promotion of literature and music were much more codified than those of the artistic field. In a certain sense, they lent themselves to becoming a "cultural industry" much more easily and much more rapidly than visual art did, which, as a result, left wide open areas not entirely codified and less besieged by the exigencies of economic profit or techno-media compatibility. In fact, the era is also the one that saw techno-media systems dominate and rapidly spread, soon without substantial competition. Their pressure on cultural areas would not be any less decisive than that which they would exercise on the daily lives of millions of people. And it is from this very point that an overview of Visual Poetry can be initiated through the works of four of its Italian protagonists.

II

At the beginning of the 1960s, Italians realized that they were no longer farmers. The country had become highly industrialized only in the northern regions, but sharp polarities are one of its historical characteristics: North/South; developed/developing; Communists/Catholics (or Fascists) reprise the contrast between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines that had defined Italian conflicts for many centuries. And the 1960s–handed down to future memory as an era of development and of hope in the future–will never cease to also represent an era of often ferocious conflicts, in those places where economic development and trust in the future did nothing but accelerate such conflicts. In 1963, which is also the year when one of the major groups of Italian Visual Poetry was founded, the Tambroni government fell (supported by the Neo-Fascists of the MSI–The Italian Socialist Movement), under blows from violent public square demonstrations that were violently repressed by the police, as is still the custom today (note the 2002 events of the G8 in Genoa, which is also the place where the riots of 1963 started). At any rate, Italy, which had traced the coming age of modernity for all of Europe several centuries earlier, had finally set out to become modern and moderately rich.

Miccini, Pignotti and Chiari, all Florentines, are among the founders of Gruppo 70, which, in that very city of Tuscany, launched, in 1963, its program of "Technological Poetry," that is, the use on the page (and why not on canvas or elsewhere) of words and images taken directly from magazines or from any other industrial (or technological) container. There is no longer, therefore, the simple visualization of the sheet of paper liberated from the severe bars of its lines, leaving to words the "pictorial" task of invading space in the most varied forms. This is what was desired by the lessons of the *Un Coup de dés* (Throw of the Dice) of Mallarmé and of the *Parole in libertà* (Words in Freedom) of Marinetti, which appeared to still belong to an "artesianal" phase of the avant-garde and which yet remained the unavoidable "incunabula" of the Concrete Poetry of Gomringer (Germany) or the De Campos Brothers (Brazil). Now in the era of unbridled media, it appears useless to resist the invasion of technology; rather, it is necessary to use its resources and better yet to accept them in order to "return [them] to sender" (Pignotti). Such a position is Neo-Futuristic in its premises and in some cases it will remain so in its results. Above all, it will characterize the language of Miccini and Pignotti more than that of co-founder Chiari, who,

in fact, quickly dropped anchor in the much less programmatic (and technological) ports of Fluxus, where he became one of the most refined exegetes of the "death of Art," which, precisely as a result of contributions such as his, demonstrates that it continues to enjoy excellent health.

The history of Gruppo 70 is instead contemporary and parallel to the entirely literary one of Group '63 (founded by Umberto Eco, Nanni Balestrini, and many others among the protagonists of Italian literature open to new "technologies" of narration). There never has been any real collaboration between the two groups, even though the network of friendships and personal relationships certainly gave rise to areas of permeability. Umberto Eco was able to jokingly state that he belonged to Group 133 (the sum total of Gruppo 70 plus Group '63). At any rate, the differences, even in their destinies, do not have less import than their affinities, which also concern the aging of Italian culture and its interest in (and even its employment of) formalism, structuralism, and revisionist Marxist criticism in Frankfurt or in Paris.

But the "technology" of Gruppo 70 remained too "futuristic" not only on the linguistic plane, but also on that of its permanent conflict with the cultural system. In addition to the mixing of words-images-etc., it entered into competition with the frantic activism of the true protagonists of contemporary technological melange: television and advertising, joined from their very beginnings in an inextricable multimedia embrace. In its conflicting relationship with the media, the language of Visual Poetry, like that of any other neo-avant-garde movement, contains within itself its own drawback, which is fundamentally the unequal struggle against the soft belly of the techno-media universe and with its reabsorbing capacities. Thus, the messages were truly returned to sender, as Pignotti wished; but the technological media did not even realize it (or perhaps they had moved to a new address). While the members of Gruppo 70— together with other protagonists of Italian Visual Poetry (Carrega, Sarenco, Stelio Maria Martini, and others)—continued elaborating conflicting projects and inciting rebellious incidents, even if these were elegantly multi-medial, the *tout court* intellectual members of Group '63 were proceeding toward a horizontal take-over of the industry of culture, managing to gain some prominent positions even in the very powerful (and after 1976, very thick) weave of the Italian radio-television system. While so-called refined culture remained solidly in the hands of the historic left and particularly of the intellectuals who were linked to the PCI (the Italian Communist Party), television was the domain of the DC (Christian Democrats), at least up to the time of the appearance on the scene of private television channels and of the formation of new technocratic and transversal powers (the Mediaste group). Despite originating almost entirely from the first sphere, the promoters of Group '63 knew how to effectively situate themselves within the new organizational structure set up by the television system. In so doing, they confirmed their adaptability to the political mutability which has characterized the modern history of the Italian intelligentsia (and not only the modern history). Such political nonchalance (to use a euphemism) was already very active in the so-called years of "ideology" (the 1970s), when the television sector transformed itself substantially.

III

In order to understand the importance of television in Italy, it would be sufficient to highlight its contribution to the unification (still paradoxically incomplete in the 1950s) of the Italian language. If to this is added the role of cultural homogenizer for a country that is small, but traditionally fragmented into very deeply-rooted micro-cultures and geographically isolated by islands, mountain ranges, and a few besieged plains (only one of which is of considerable size), one

One can better understand its strategic centrality, as a constant center for the conflicts raging among all the political forces. One understands even more why the current Head of State, Silvio Berlusconi, can also be the owner of all the major private television stations and how his aim at political longevity is based on his substantial control of the public stations as well (with the exception of one, which remains the prerogative of the opposition). But until the second half of the 1970s, Italy was, in fact, the most fragmented country in all of Western Europe, crisscrossed as it is by powerful social and political tensions. The goals of Visual Poetry were mainly internal at that time of conflicts, and one of the most radical publications of the Italian avant-garde (founded in 1971) was the journal *Poetic Struggle*, inspired by two such Visual Poets as Sarenco and the Flemish Paul De Vree.

Miccini would remain close to this publication as well as to other extremist cultural experiences, but his language, always highly coherent, never would cease to be markedly "Florentine," if there were ever others in the history of recent Italian art. "We Visual Poets have aimed low, at the language truly spoken by the masses, which is our source of inspiration, our lexicon, and our object of redemption," Miccini has recently confirmed; at any rate, the vocabulary does not overlap with the language, since the former is effectively the new visual Esperanto of late modernity, while the latter is very cultured and always based on a cultured matrix. The visual field is clean and elegantly set on the page, even when details and heterogeneous elements abound. Emotion is dominated and restrained by a lucid and skeptical gaze, even when the theme turns out to be an *Insurrectional Project for the City of Florence*. When speaking of Florence, reference to the Renaissance is obligatory, even on coffee cups used in public bars. And yet, for Miccini's language, it is more fitting to evoke Mannerism and, naturally, its Tuscan variant, with its need to pursue clarity even among the flames of Hell. In a place like Florence and even several centuries away from Rosso Fiorentino and Daniele da Volterra, the art that can describe the chaos of the contemporary visual Babel also wants to organize it, or at least to subject it to the scrutiny of visual and poetic rigor. Dante had even restructured the layout of the afterlife in order to arrange before us the infinite variety of human destinies.

IV

It may still seem strange that Gruppo 70 was born in what is perhaps the most culturally conservative Italian city. Florentines are still convinced that they have given art to the world, just as they gave their own language to Italy. But for the achievements of Gruppo 70, what mattered instead was the noteworthy twentieth century and primarily Florentine tradition of avant-garde publications such as Giovanni Papini's *Lacerba*, to which many of the early declarations of Miccini and of his friends are similar in tone, if not entirely in theories. And yet the group was too disparate to be expected to last long. The path taken by Giuseppe Chiari started from very particular premises but soon, as we shall see, turned toward other areas. Sylvano Bussotti, a musician who is among the greatest musicians of the second half of the last century, did not distance himself from the centrality of music, even while measuring it and contaminating it with every other type of language. Antonio Bueno, Silvio Loffredo, and Alberto Moretti were primarily painters and they remained so in the years that followed. Miccini and Pignotti, who were similar in their theoretical approach and were capable of creating a social group that does not cease even today to generate complicities, are nevertheless different in the style of their works and this difference appears perceptibly even in their earliest works, when the social group was tightly-knit enough to foster affinities rather than differences. Their common approach was then defined "semiological guerrilla warfare," a phrase that served as a conflicting alter ego to the more reassuring "technological poetry." Very quickly, Semiology–thanks also

central position that Umberto Eco, already a true star of the Italian intelligentsia, occupied—became highly fashionable among the intellectuals of the *Bel Paese* (Beautiful Land). But if the field is left to professional semiologists, such as the likewise authoritative Omar Calabrese, the following can be read: "...without studies of mass communication, without linguistics, without semiotics, perhaps Visual Poetry would not have existed" (1975), a claim about which even the Visual Poets who are most aware of the impact of semiology on their art would have more than a few doubts.

But the assertion, which is much more dated than its subject, is nothing but the culmination of a courtship that has produced equivocations, many misunderstandings, and only a few rare clarifications (Prieto). To maintain, as was almost taken for granted during the 1970s, that Visual Poetry was interpretable and "criticizable" only by or primarily by semiotics, was a rather naive tautology. It would be somewhat similar to saying that surrealism could only be understood in the context of psychoanalysis. While it may be somewhat true that a part of surrealism (but not all of it) served to interpret psychoanalysis, similarly a part (but certainly not the entirety) of Visual Poetry interprets semiotics.

V

Is the critique of existing media, for Pignotti as for Miccini, a test of reason and a requirement for those who do not accept the limits of their own era? The Visual Poetry of the 1960s is a phenomenon that in technological society and in the civilization of the image— which were revealing and fostering debates at the time— appears at first sight to be almost familiar. And yet it mocks, contests, critiques and tends to overturn the most negative aspects proper to the culture of technology and the culture of the image. One can say that in a certain sense Visual Poetry in a similar context represents the very best retaliation against the abuse of images; an act of retaliation furthermore effected in the spirit of the law of "an eye for an eye": that which one gives, one gets. Visual Poetry, as is said in jest, represents in the final analysis "merchandise returned to sender," as Pignotti wrote. It has already been noted that the "sender" was in this instance a bit distracted, as has been the case with any other neo-avant-garde, technological or otherwise. Pop Art itself, in its first phase, had a disruptive impact especially on the reductionist milieu of contemporary art, resulting in its going almost completely unnoticed elsewhere. Only recently has advertising re-appropriated what had been taken from it, using Lichtenstein and Warhol to sell some new brand of beans. At any rate, the lesson of Gruppo 70 and more generally of Visual Poetry has weight and importance in the developments of the most innovative Italian culture. Pignotti remains, together with Miccini, one of its most assiduous historians. And it is only the maniacal specialization of the late modern period that can ill tolerate the fact that it is possible to function at the same time as protagonists, historians, and critics of the same movement.

Pignotti's visual-poetic language quickly put into play a baroque irony that already distinguishes his first works from the drier and more conceptual works of Miccini, or of any other protagonist of the first Italian Visual Poetry, which was still linked to the concretist heritage as found in Carrega, Oberto, or Spatola. At the risk of being accused of pursuing the picturesque, he distances himself from Concrete Poetry in a much sharper manner than any of his traveling companions. The technique remains that of "sabotage": to infiltrate enemy languages and to extract whatever can damage them. Phrases that appear in his works are always ironic and subtly critical, but they reveal with difficulty Miccini's ideological intractability. Nevertheless, the images that he cut out and pasted were already quite seductive and became increasingly more so in subsequent years. Half-dressed young girls—who in their original context served to sell cars, toilet paper, or

cans of tuna—began to abound. Pignotti seems to challenge technological languages in the most heated and besieged area: the production of seduction. When they no longer seem to be selling anything, his scantily clad young girls provoke som e laughter, posed as they are in an effort to draw our attention to something that is no longer there. And yet, they remain beautiful and desirable. Is it really so simple to break down the mechanisms of technological languages? He seems to ask this of himself and of us with a sly smile. And we continue to ask ourselves if Pignotti truly intends to deactivate their main drive, namely, seduction. In his last works, he plays at this with extreme refinement (it is not by accident that *Visible and Invisible* is the title of a cycle that he began in the '80s). The game is baroque and light, belonging as it does, to an era in which the war against techno-medial systems could be considered over; and naturally, lost.

VI

As far as lightness and sovereign skepticism about the destinies of art are concerned, there are few who can challenge the musician Giuseppe Chiari. His militancy in Gruppo 70 alternates very early on with his participation in Fluxus, of which he became, together with Gianni Emilio Simonetti, the principal Italian exponent (although the group remained primarily an American and Northern European avant-garde movement). For a musician such as he was, and for a saboteur of codified languages as he will always remain, Fluxus offered a boundless reserve of practices and theories. Fluxus originated in the first place as a result of the work of musicians such as La Monte Young, and while its principal promoter, George Maciunas, is not strictly speaking a musician, the territory of music itself would suffer its most brutal transgressions. Chiari gladly participated in those public displays of the gutting of a piano that would cause Fluxus to rise to the honor of media fame. These "modified pianos" consequently punctuated his entire artistic itinerary, but rather than gutted bodies, it would deal with very complex collages under which the piano could still be played, even if each sound would not seem to be anything other than a disjointed contribution to a new ensemble. However, in the 1960s, his most emblematic works were large sheets of shiny paper on which written words stand out, such as "Enough of art. Let's all quit together," or simple photocopies in which the artist/musician and his musical instrument appear to be ghostly blotches that levitate from another era and from another culture of images. On this work of demolition is soon superimposed, through the writings that punctuate every work, a taste for elegant and rapidly-written calligraphy. A sort of new "orientalism" coexists with the constant axiom: "I don't mind blowing up categories of work because I sense that this disturbs, and, naturally, I am pleased that it disturbs...." In his most recent works, Chiari returns to test his mettle on the pentagram, which he turns into a sort of oriental garden, perfectly compartmentalized, in which blossom knowing stains of color.

VII

Miccini felt it was important to specify that Visual Poetry "does not persuade people to consume cheese, nor does it induce irrational or unconscious persuasions which are rerouted toward a consumption of foodstuffs, but rather toward the consumption of culture itself, to state it briefly…." Around the end of the 1960s, the "consumption of culture" was considered by the most radical poets as just another form of consumerism, at least as far as the reproduction of those technological mechanisms that our poets intended to sabotage instead. The ultra-radical lesson of the

International Situationalist gained a fairly large following in Italy. It is not a coincidence that its founder, Guy Debord, moved to Italy for a time and to Florence in particular. The generation of Gruppo 70 was succeeded by a younger generation of visual poets (Sarenco in Italy and the Frenchman Julien Blaine are considered among the most important), who grew up in the social and political irredentism of the second half of the 1960s and who by 1968 were already fully active. The issues of "the consumption of culture" faded into the background and all the energies of these new protagonists of Visual Poetry turned toward the re-proposition of poetry as an existential, and above all revolutionary, aesthetic whole. The lesson of Marinetti, Tzara, and Breton takes central stage once more, but no longer or not simply as appreciation of the lyrical quality of their verses or of the literary tension of their manifestos. Ours were born poets in a naturally more conventional acceptation than that which was to follow, but from the outset quite close to that restless identity, active on multiple levels, which had made Marinetti or Breton something by this time irreconcilable with a Mallarmé. "Armed" poets, therefore, if that term is permissible.

The wave of 1968 was long enough in Italy (more so than in any other Western European country) to fully involve the succeeding generation also, that to which Claudio Francia belongs. The end of the 1970s is the time of increased political and social clashes, at times with violent demonstrations in the piazzas, between the variegated extra-parliamentary parties and a coalition government which saw the PCI and the DC united for the first time (the Historical Compromise). Italy imported—with the enthusiasm typical of those who are the last to discover something—the so-called "Reagan hedonism," which whitewashed many ghosts that were still very much alive and that would not take long to resurface. Craxi's PSI (The Italian Socialist Party) became the pivotal point of Italian politics, and to many it seemed that a new "economic miracle" was in full swing, even if the ones receiving the miracles were above all the leaders of the parties in power, as the trials of "Tangentopoli" in the 1990s would demonstrate. Claudio Francia moved to Paris in 1979, still maintaining close poetic ties in Italy. In his difficult choice to remain a poet through and through and without distractions, he no doubt gambled his friendship with Adriano Spatola, one of the pioneers in Italy of Concrete and Visual Poetry. Then came the meetings and the complicity with other protagonists of that strange and tough group of stars, which in the midst of the 1980s and 1990s tirelessly produced exhibits and magazines in many parts of the world. Especially in France, where Julien Blaine became deputy Mayor and Cultural Councilman of Marseille for five years, and in Italy, where Sarenco became wealthy (even if for just a few years), as an art dealer. Francia let himself be captured willingly in the vast and soft net of Visual Poetry. It remains for him the field without any barriers for whoever wants to still communicate with the world. In addition, his choice to be an exile in Paris, the historical homeland of every exile, is a reason for poetical coherence and for coherence *tout court*. He, too, is a linear poet, a visual poet, a filmmaker, and a musician. But his apprenticeship already belongs to a critical phase of the avant-garde and his work, through the strong individualism which characterizes it, assumes all its historical dimension. Which, for a poet thinking of taking up the heritage of the avant-garde—that is, constant experimentation and rare condescension to its current rules—means remaining an orphan of the principal "order," that is, the cohesion of the militant group. This means, at any rate, imposing upon oneself an "ideological tension that forgives little," as he has recently written. Consequently, his works, extremely free in the medium and in the disparate materials which he uses in them, do not ever belie the creation of a world and the construction of a style absolutely his own. A world of subtle shifting of meaning, where the image is constructed with the most simple and everyday objects, almost memories of an under-consumeristic, and as such, profoundly Italian childhood (coins, wind-up toys, candies, Tuscan cigars…). In the latest works, musical motifs that are dear to him increase rapidly: the pentagram, the violin key signature are inserted in the writing and are arranged on extremely long surfaces like Chinese rolls or like music rolls for player pianos. A gesture is enough to make them roll up and to reduce them to a dimension small in space and light in weight, since every one of his works

his works tends toward lightness of perception. Already his large "musical fans" required only a simple hand gesture to transform them into manageable canes, or walking sticks, if you will. Poetry hides everywhere: "There are many who believe that poetry has been abandoned for almost a century. Nothing is more false. Poetry today is found in the most disparate manifestations. The artist is a poet, the musician is a poet, the rebel is a poet, I am a poet simply because of my cr y of crisis and, who knows, perhaps even of breakdown (…) led, as I am, by that ideological tension that for gives very little, flogs me if I become discouraged, and rebukes me if I become distracted."

Translated from the Italian by Marisa Gatti-Taylor
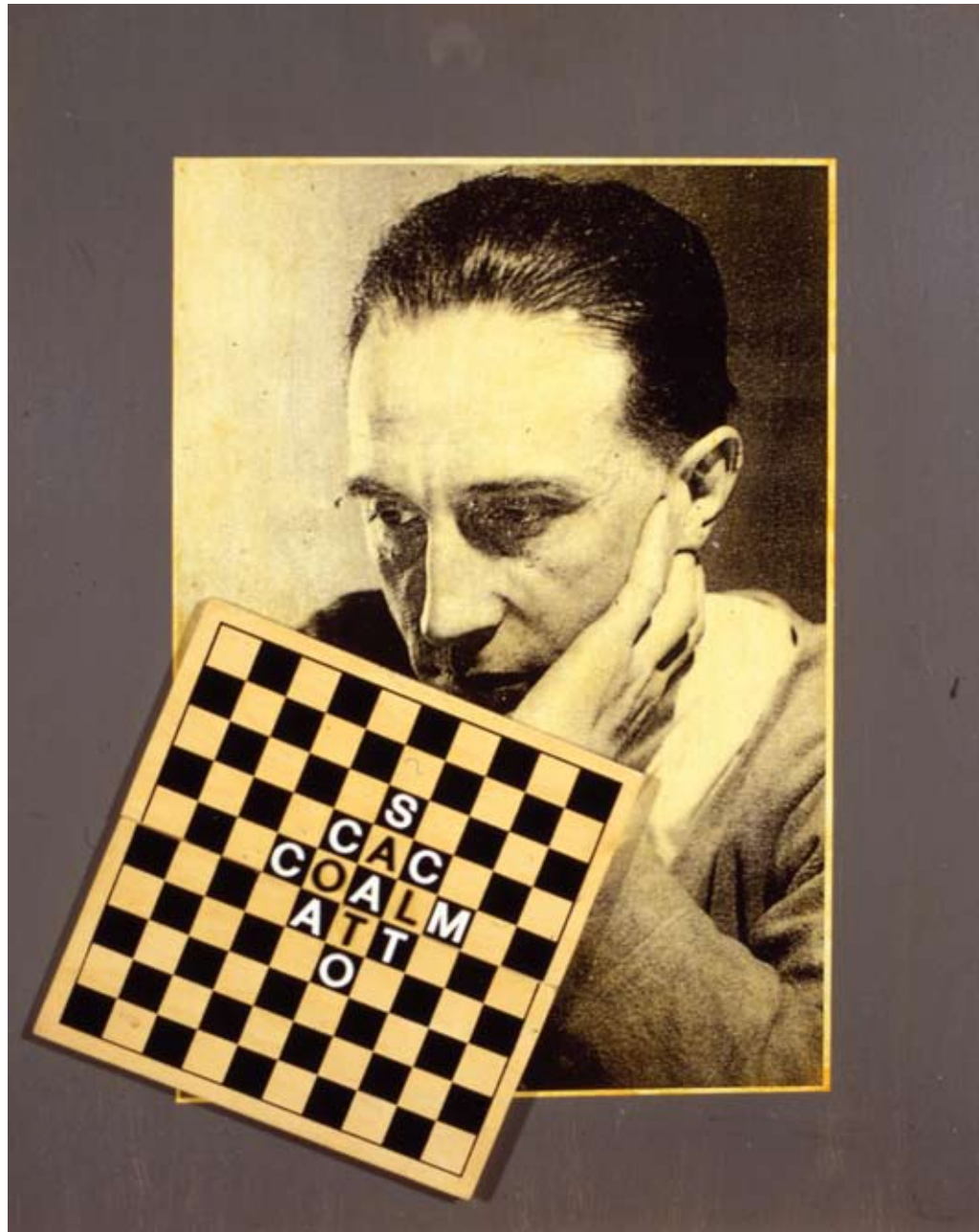
16. Claudio Francia
   Scacco al matto, (Checkmate to the Mad One), 1998
   Mixed media and collage on plywood
   22 1/2 x 17 3/4 in. (57 x 45 cm)
   Collection of Carlo Palli

A True Interaction[1]

Simon Anderson

The purpose of this essay is to put the work of Giuseppe Chiari, Claudio Francia, Eugenio Miccini and Lamberto Pignotti into a wider context, one which, perhaps at the discomfort of some purists, positions their work within a broad and long tradition. This tradition includes *Poesia Visiva*, optophonics, alphabetical and letter poems – from tautogram to glossolalia – and has a history which stretches from the advent of writing through illuminated manuscripts to computer generated holopoetry. The works constitute "…a large number of poems, in many languages, by poets both major and minor, concerned with religions, the cosmic or the comic, or poetry for poetry's sake."[2] One thing that connects this heterogeneous spectrum is a tendency to reach into the visual realm, as with Francia, or into sound and theatrics, as in some of Chiari's work, where poetry involves the entire body. However, this expanded view of a genre makes some unlikely bed-fellows: Miccini argues that the *Poesia Visiva* that he and Pignotti initiated in 1963 is semiological warfare, and he maintains the impossibility of extending the designation to other poetries without an ideology in common. Like his Futurist forbearers, Miccini repudiates the past and insists that the poet must be the conscience of, and witness to, the present

In the last few decades, a number of poets have worked to uncover and publish what remains of their heritage. Others have been assiduous in anthologizing, using regional, generational or theoretical frames to collect disparate styles in exhibition or publication. In the face of four such different artists, it is worth considering an expanded picture, a continuum with Visual Poetry equidistant from, but nevertheless connected to, language art and *poesie sonore*.

Speech is a sonic art, and writing a visual one. This poetry plays with words, plays with pictures, plays with the constant and dynamic interplay between signs and significations. Dom Sylvester Houedard refers to it as 'eyear poetry.'[3] It is a true interaction between disciplines and between the senses. It could be argued that readers generally tend to recognize poetry as such by the arrangement of the type on the page. The length of line, the codes of punctuation and capitalization, each offer visual clues quickly differentiated from those of prose. And these signals play a part which perhaps precedes the acknowledgement of rhyme or meter. Though hardly qualifying as pattern, these arrangements of words and lines offer another key to the primary importance of the visual in poetry. That primacy can be further glimpsed in the long history of pattern poetry.

Pattern poetry reaches back over three-and-a-half millennia to a six-and-a-half inch double-sided disk of clay decorated with pictographic spirals, manufactured not later than 1700 BCE. It was discovered in 1908 at the site of a palace in Phaistos, in southern Crete, and the poem features signs readily identified as women, walking men, animal skins and unrecognizable images of unknown meaning. Not only has it yet to be translated, there is no consensus on the direction of the text, and no other evidence of this pre-alphabetic script has been found. This artifact may rightly be claimed as the world's first typewritten document, as it was made by taking a stamp, or raised pattern, and pressing this into wet clay.[4] In his exhaustive bibliographic survey, Dick Higgins asks whether an undecipherable text can be called poetry. Yet, he includes a full-size illustration of one side of this enigmatic spiral, and quickly counter questions the validity of making distinctions

distinctions between poetry and prose at such an early stage in the history of writing.[5] Such fundamental questions continue to arise, and could easily be asked of the Visual Poetry on exhibition: where does poetry become collage? At what point does vision cede to reading – or interpretation meet action? This essential dilemma hovers over the work of Francia and the other artists shown in the Haggerty exhibition, giving the issues they address a far-reaching validity.

Pattern poetry seems to be universal. Higgins found it simpler to list those languages for which no pattern poetry could be found. There are Sanskrit, Chinese, and Egyptian word-images, to offer a few examples. Six well-known Greek poems of the Hellenistic period survive, set in the figures of an egg, an axe, altars, wings – all simple shapes taken from familiar objects. Subjects of the poems varied from riddles to evocations of music, in the case of one verse in the shape of pan-pipes. Emperor Constantine employed a poet [Optatian ca. 325 CE] whose panegyrics to his employer sometimes took a rectangular shape, with interior texts weaving patterns and images within an overall grid of lettering. The early Christian period saw the production of a number of cruciform poems, and religious themes are common throughout the history of the genre, for which Latin was the predominant language. Higgins maintains that Jesuits supported pattern poetry, and other religious communities tolerated poet-scholars who enquired in this arena.

Whilst never a common or popular mode of writing, pattern poetry maintained a faint presence throughout European history up to the nineteenth century. Renaissance poets were aware of the ancient classical works, and new shapes were devised to complement them. The activity was considered by George Puttenham, in his 1587 treatise *The arte of english poesie*. In this text, he averred that the roots of the activity lay in Persia and Tartary, where there is indeed an early practice of visually oriented Islamic texts. He also suggested and illustrated fifteen figures considered suitable for pattern poetry, although his typology did not include the cross, nor wings nor altar – these last two being used by George Herbert, perhaps the best known English poet who wrote in shapes. The form was evident enough to be attacked in the sixteenth century for its frivolity and absurdity, and was slighted by the playwright Ben Jonson as "A pair of scissors and a comb in verse". This was the usual criticism of pattern poetry, even in Germany, which had a strong tradition of *figurengedichte*, both serious and popular, beginning in the sixteenth century with a New Year's card, and continuing into the eighteenth century, with poems in complex mazes or forming sophisticated imagery such as a man, a bear, or a delicate vase. This practice eventually began to decline, as neo-classical ideas took hold and design poems were seen increasingly as mere novelties. These novelties might include such shaped poems as the familiar "Tale of the Mouse" in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, by Rev. Charles L. Dodgson, writing as Lewis Carroll, but it would seem in other ways that the tradition died away. It was not to be revived until the very end of the nineteenth century, with the publication of Stephané Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*.

Maurice Blanchot has written that since *Un coup de dés*, "every certainty has vanished". He adds that the organization and typographic particularity of the poem "opens up a new dimension for literature in a combined effort of dispersal and concentration through the discovery of more complex structures."[6] In the absence of such certainty, a program becomes a priority, and this is what the Italian Filippo Tommaso Marinetti – who would substitute Mallarmé's notions of beauty with "geometric and mechanical splendor"[7] – offered in his Futurist Manifesto, published in Paris, 1909.

The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism, written in 1908, was not Marinetti's first venture in shaping a new culture to represent the new reality. He opened the publishing house and periodical *Poesia* in 1905 as a vehicle for radical new ideas. With Futurism, Marinetti hurled defiance to the stars, recommended the burning of libraries and the demolition of muse-

feet of man". Later, in an appendix to the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature* [11 May 1912], he introduced the concept of "Parole in Libertà," freeing words from their Latin prison. His words-in-freedom masterpiece came two years later, in *Zang Tumb Tumb*, 1914, in which his description of battles uses not only a new and unknown syntax, but displays an innovative and dynamic deviation from typographic conventions. Although he disparaged "curious typographic disproportions," he nevertheless celebrated "This new array of type, this variety of colors, this original use of characters," and explained the power of invented words. "The strident onomatopoeia *ssii*, which reproduces the whistle of a tugboat on the Meuse, is followed by the muffled *fiiufiiu* coming from the other bank. These two onomatopoeias have enabled me to dispense with the description of the breadth of the river…"[8] Marinetti and his gathering of young radicals wanted to introduce new and more contemporary concepts – smell, weight, and sound, for example – in order to free language from the restrictions of syntax, the ego of the writer, or the deadening grip of the past.

Many of the Italian Futurists experimented with words-in-freedom. For example, Balla, in his performance score for *Macchina Tipografica* explores the actions, sounds and forms of a printing press and exploits the typographic revolution. Cangiullo made word-collages, and Carrà, Severini, Soffici, must be mentioned for their ingenious permutations of 'parole in libertà', along with Fortunato Depero, whose 1928 publication *Depero Futurista* is a hugely influential masterpiece of typographic invention and of the artistry of the book. With industrial-strength bolts as binding, the publication combines multi-colored pages, text in manifold and surprising shapes and directions, with a fold-out essay on Depero by Marinetti, set in the shape of the subject's name. A later Futurist adherent, Carlo Belloli, continued these ideas into the 1960s and beyond, from wall-texts into the realm of audiovisual poetry. The dynamism of this heritage makes it easier to understand the vigorous variety visible in the contemporary poems and collages of Miccini, Pignotti, Chiari and Francia.

Despite the international effect of Italian Futurism, which flowered and propagated new forms of art across Europe – from Russia's agitprop, constructivism and formalism to England's Vorticists – Marinetti's was not the only response to Mallarmé and modernity. In Paris before the First World War, as Picasso and Braque juxtaposed painted or pasted magazine headers and newspaper copy, they simultaneously illuminated and erased the lines between object, image and text. Their friend and avant-garde impresario Guillaume Apollinaire began his *Calligrammes* in 1912. These drawings in words — a clock, a horse, a house, cigar smoke — were quickly published in typographic form. Almost simultaneously, Wassily Kandinsky published descriptions of a poetry which had not been smothered by the meaning of the word. These phenomena, and others such as the nonsense songs and rhymes that were then popular in Germany were combined, during the chaos of war, by the artists who constituted Dada.

Dada was born of disgust for all catalogued categories and language was a particular object of their scorn. Like the Futurists, from whom they happily appropriated the concepts of 'noise-music' and 'simultaneity,' the Dadas wanted to end the tyranny of philological and syntactical conventions. Hugo Ball, acolyte of Kandinsky in Munich, later co-founder of Dada in Zurich, wrote of having stretched the word to unsurpassable limits. His *Lautgedichte* (sound poems), famously performed at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916, were almost alchemical in their processes. Richard Huelsenbeck declared his desire to make literature with a gun in his hand, and aim an assault on the public. He wrote a series of *Fantastic Prayers*, designed to be read aloud, containing intervals of pure sound. Tristan Tzara, a conduit of new and futurist ideas, introduced chance procedures and the cut-up in his recipe for a dada poem made of the randomly reordered words of a newspaper article of appropriate length.

Dadasoph Raoul Hausmann invented a language he felt more descriptive of the grim reality of post-war Germany. Optophonetic poetry utilized this language that was not a language. It was formed in type of varying font and size, with some letters backwards. In the twenties, Hausmann worked in vain on a machine that would change light into sound, reaffirming the interest in cross-disciplinary ideas. His performances, collages, recordings and publications resounded through the 1950s and 60s, when a resurgence of interest led to the phenomenon of neo-dada. Kurt Schwitters, dada fellow-traveler, created collages and assemblages, and made great contributions to sound poetry with his *Ursonate.* These works successfully erase the boundaries between the arts in a similar manner to his merz pictures, installations and architecture. A collaborator with Theo Van Doesburg and other constructivists of the De Stijl group, Schwitters provides another bridge between anti-poetry and poésie concrète.

After the Second World War, many different kinds of experimental poetry emerged, merged, and often diverged across international and aesthetic boundaries. In 1947, Isidore Isou announced his long-held ambition to create language anew, as reparation for its degradation by modernist adventurers. His Paris-based Lettriste movement, which included Maurice Lemaître, wanted to settle what they saw as an uneasy relationship between seeing and knowing, and between reading and looking. They integrated different languages, and created new, almost pictographic letter-forms, which were arranged in grid patterns. They made films, recorded performances and wrote novels. They also engaged in spectacle and publicity stunts. French members of the Situationist International broke off from Isou's group in the 50s, and borrowed from Lettriste technique.

The new signs and signifiers of Lettrisme point to the science of semiotics, the structures and systems of which began to enter poets' commentary during this period. As mentioned, Eugenio Miccini places his and Pignotti's work firmly in this realm, albeit at an oppositional stance. Semiotics grew as an important element in post-war Italian literature, and the rise of semiotics as a discipline surely influenced an entire generation of artist-poets. Öyvind Fahlström's early 1953 *Manifesto for Concrete Poetry*, written in Sweden, implied semiotic methods when he argued for a poetry of structure which treated words as concrete material. "Squeeze the language material, that is what can be titled concrete."[9] Fahlström's use of the term concrete continued a problematic elasticity which perhaps began with Kandinsky and continued through innumerable analyses into the present day. Eugen Gomringer, a follower of the artist Max Bill, played a central role in disseminating the term concrete, and is the poet most closely associated with the use of this concept.

In 1953 Gomringer published his first book of *Constellations* in which he made poems using very few words. His 'Silencio' consists of that word arranged in a phalanx of fourteen, around a central space where the silent fifteenth might fit. The purity and simplicity of Gomringer's work helps to define 'concrete' as did his influential 1956 essay on the subject. Gomringer included the Brazilian group of Noigandres poets in his definition. Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatari, Haroldo De Campos and Pedro Xisto named their group after an almost parenthetical mention in Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, and perhaps express shades of difference with some contemporaries in their acceptance of Mallarmé, Joyce, and others in a rich heritage.

By the 1960s, concrete poetry had become a widely used international term, covering a range of poets whose connections were in reality much more ineffable. Exhibitions and anthologies of concrete poetry showed growing rosters of groups and individuals without any adherence to a universally accepted label.

Contemporary with this development came Fluxus, itself a gathering of like minds and similar approaches, rather than a definitive group or program. Fluxus, a deliberately international collection of artists who collaborated loosely and worked in the interstices between, as well as across, disciplines, was associated first with neo-dada – despite the protestations of a few of the living originals. Fluxus artists such as Ben Vautier declared that poetry could be everything you say, or it could be silence. Like co-founder George Maciunas, Fluxus artists tended to eschew conventional systems of thought, design, and action, preferring to concentrate on the music of chance, the theatre of the street, the sculpture of rescued detritus and the poetry of everyday exchange. Artists like American George Brecht fused poetry and action into performed events. Brecht's editorship of the Fluxus newspaper, *V TRE* cast a wide net, by including not only work by Fluxus co-founders Alison Knowles and young German convert Tomas Schmit, but also poems by Eugen Gomringer, Philip Krumm, and Ruth Krauss. Jackson Mac Low was an important factor in the formation of Fluxus, through his contacts, ideas and his poetry, which variously combined chance, structural systems, shape and pattern. Fluxus co-founder Dick Higgins established the Something Else Press, which published numerous contributions to the ancestry of what he christened *Intermedia*. Something Else Press made available a wide field of innovative writing, from Gertrude Stein to Marshall McLuhan, and from Bern Porter to Richard Kostelanetz.

In 1967, Higgins published *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* edited by poet Emmett Williams, and thereby joined the debate around the term concrete – a discussion enriched by fellow American Mary Ellen Solt in her equally ambitious 1968 catalogue, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*.

Fluxus was not alone in exploiting the new freedoms in poetry and the possibilities offered by developments such as cheap and tolerant international postal services including advances in reprographic technology as simple as the portable typewriter or the photocopier. Each manifestation was fueled by the fashion for innovation which characterized the 60s. Expanded poetry blossomed into an international phenomenon, with practitioners from Iceland to Japan.

In Belgium, Paul de Vree wielded a powerful influence beginning with the 1962 *Exposition of Objective Poetry*. From Germany, 'typoet' and publisher Hansjorg Mayer defined the look of a generation through his consistent use of lower case futura type. Czechoslovakia's Jiri Kolar introduced illiterograms, looniegrams and transparent poems along with "Evident Poetry," which he described as "all poetry that eschews the written word as the mainstay of creation and communication."[10] In France, Pierre Garnier wrote a *Manifesto for a New Poetry – Visual and Phonic*. Bernard Heidsieck valorized 'Action Poetry' and experimented with the tape-recorder. Henri Chopin, active since the early 50s, founded the periodical *OU* in 1964, claiming it as a first ever anthology of sound poetry. Chopin worked across many media, and with a considerable number of experimental poets and word-artists, publishing a range that moved from Ian Hamilton-Finlay's elegant and laconic poem-objects to William Burroughs' cut-up nightmares.

The following decade, Julien Blaine edited *Doc<k>s*, a vigorous assemblage of international experiments with the verbal-visual, that also acted as a bulwark for the expansion of Mail-art. England's Bob Cobbing was another indefatigable force in the dissemination of language arts from sound poetry to the dissection of the letter-form. Publishing prolifically under the imprint "Writer's Forum." He collected, with Peter Mayer, a fascinating selection of facts, statements and examples concerning Concrete Poetry, which, with a plethora of contradictions, utterly obscured any fixed meaning. Cobbing's career defied definition, shifting from historian to performance artist as easily as his oeuvre moved between patiently layered patterns and photomechanical destruction. Britain provided a venue for many influential sources of activity, includ-

including Dr. MLHL Weaver's *First International Exhibition of Concrete and Kinetic Poetry* held in Cambridge 1964, and the annual series of meetings, exhibitions and publications held in Arlington, Gloucestershire, from 1966. These featured local work such as Dom Sylvester Houedard's typewriter drawings and John Furnival's landscapes of language, but also included international and historical comparisons and contrasting versions of concrete and visual poetry from Europe, the Americas and beyond.

Disputes about the use of 'concrete' continued into the 70s, literally questioned in the Dutch exhibition *Concrete Poetry?* which featured over one hundred artists, with a comprehensive and historically-minded catalogue containing scores of varied images, texts, propositions and facts.[11] Amsterdam is also the base for Michael Gibbs, a restless and innovative poet, artist, critic publisher and editor of *Kontexts*, a periodical that featured an international array of younger artists who like him, push the boundaries of poetry beyond language art into process, performance, and life.

As definitions dissolve, it is convenient here to conclude by returning to Italy, where the seeds of this still marginalized poetic activity were propagated early in the twentieth century. Marinetti's mantle passed to Carlo Belloli, and after the Second World War, Italian visual poetry grew in variegated profusion, from Gianfranco Baruchello to Adriano Spatola. Anarchic and occasionally schismatic, the Italian scene was capable of containing the contrasting approaches of semiotician and remains dynamic. The poetic struggle encapsulated in Sarenco's long-running publication *Lotta Poetica* from which featured Miccini, Pignotti, and less frequently, Chiari – is revealed as part of a larger dispute over freedom of interpretation. The given meanings of words battle with their look, their sound, their proximity to others. The implied meaning of images is further denied by context, position, or name. This is the nature of language and looking, between which these artists and poets play. Their history begins with the first signifier, and continues while signs remain. Unique in their experiments – from Fluxus gestures to syntactical maneuvers, from the politics of meaning to the myths of art, Chiari, Pignotti, Miccini and Francia represent by their diversity the true interactions allowed by the poetry of experience.

1. I would like to acknowledge the help of Sally Alatalo and Hannah Higgins in the completion of this text, whose title comes from a statement by Lamberto Pignotti featured in the Finch College Museum exhibition catalogue, 1973.
2. Peter Mayer, ed. *Alphabetical and Letter Poems: A Chrestomathy*. London, The Menard Press, 1978.
3. Dom Sylvester Houédard. *Ceolfrith 15*. Published on the occasion of an exhibition at Sunderland Arts Centre, July 1972, Sunderland: The Gallery, 1972.
4. John Chadwick. *Linear B and Related Scripts*. University of California Press. 1987.
5. Richard C. Higgins. *Pattern Poetry: guide to an unknown literature*. Albany, New York, State University of New York Press: 1987.
6. Maurice Blanchot. "The Book to Come." in Clay, Rothenberg, eds., *A Book of the Book*. New York, Granary Books, 2000.
7. Luigi Ballerini, ed. *Italian Visual Poetry 1912-1972*. Published on the occasion of an exhibition at Finch College Museum, April 1972. Istituto Italiano di Cultura, New York, 1973.
8. F.T. Marinetti. "Geometric and Mechanical Splendor and the Numerical Sensibility" in *Italian Visual Poetry 1912-1972*, New York, 1973.
9. The entire manifesto is translated in Mary Ellen Solt's *Concrete Poetry: A World View*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968.
10. Solt, 1968.
11. *Concrete Poetry?* Published on the occasion of the eponymous exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1971.

1. Giuseppe Chiari
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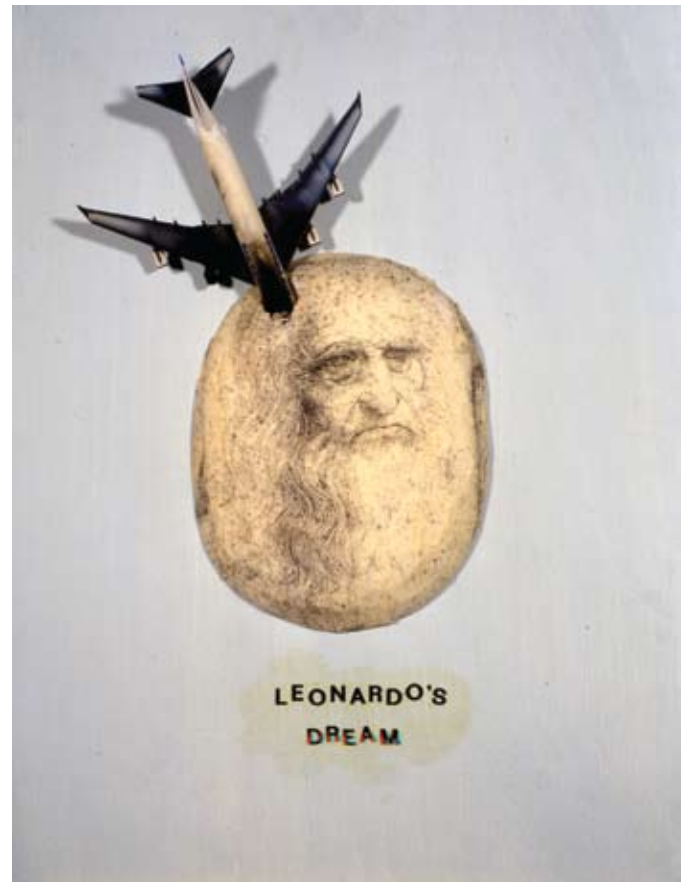Collection of Carlo Palli

9. Giuseppe Chiari, *Untitled*, 2001
   Mixed media and collage on cardboard
   39 3/8 x 27 1/2 in. (100 x 70 cm)
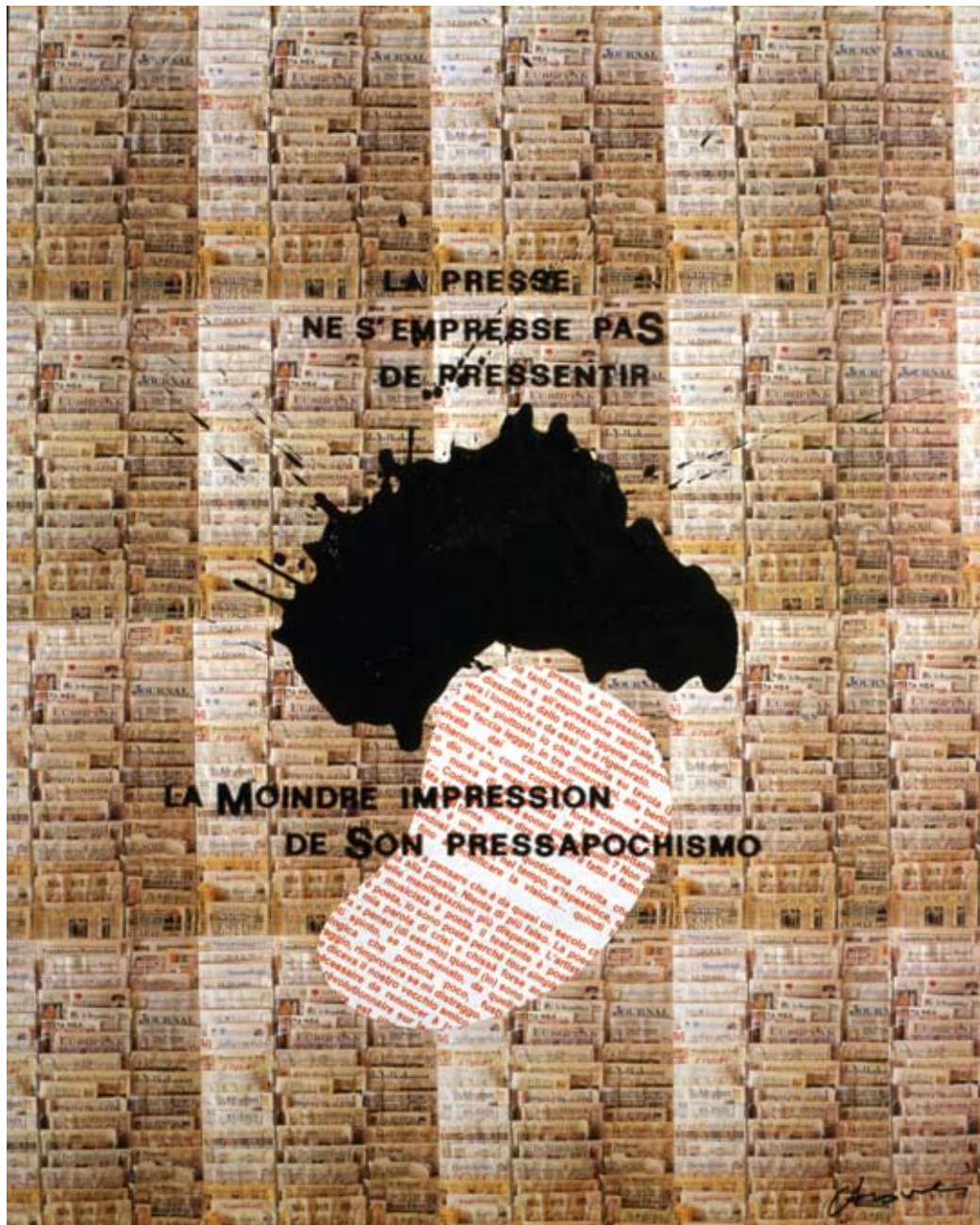   Collection of Carlo Palli

10. Giuseppe Chiari
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Ready made in Italy?, 1998
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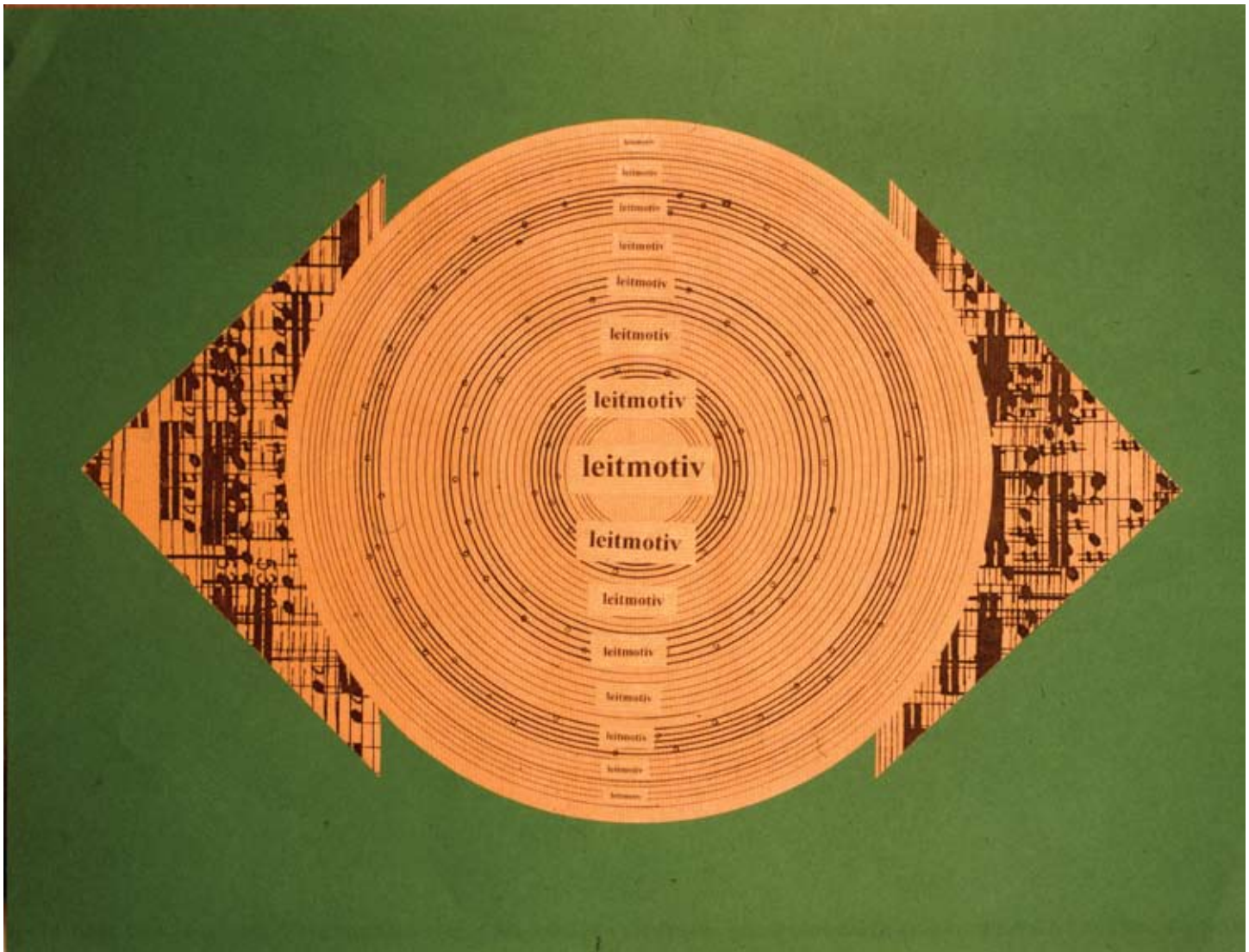Collection of Carlo Palli

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19. Claudio Francia
Leitmotiv, 2004
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dai giardini pensili di Babilonia, da Ciro a Dario, da Persepoli ad
Alessandria, da Elena ai fondali di Candia,
al Mediterraneo tutto...
un gran sollevarsi, un mega ribaltarsi uno scomparire nel tempo... poi,
finalmente la pace... Cassandra avverte ma tu non ascolti,
hai la mente [...] rovento...

con qu[...]lli,
solo co[...]ché
al m[...]a,
sen[...]qui

Non è pe[...]ilicio in

Non [...]

che vige la [...]
incontrate qua[...]rto...
E se contin[...]le

E' irriconoscib[...]de, niente
più [...]
di Memphis [...] rabbuia
che non si può più partire...
Non dimentichiamo il giro di splendori che stanno sospesi intorno
al mondo...
Anche se tra i sapidi odori si levano sempre dissapori,
lo paventano impauriti i più flebili, cedono alla pressione della bomba
del missile che prende la mira
poi la rincorsa e bum! e bum!
e bum! e...

20. Claudio Francia
   Cassandra, 2004
   Collage on cardboard
   25 5/8 x 19 5/8 in. (65 x 50 cm)
   Collection of the artist

21. Eugenio Miccini
    1968, 1968
    Collage
    19 5/8 x 27 1/2 in. (50 x 70 cm)
    Collection of the artist

22. Eugenio Miccini
   Bella, (Beautiful), 1986
   Collage
   13 3/4 x 19 5/8 in. (35 x 50 cm)
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24. Eugenio Miccini
Una misura espressiva nuova
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Collage
diameter: 35 3/8 in. (90 cm)
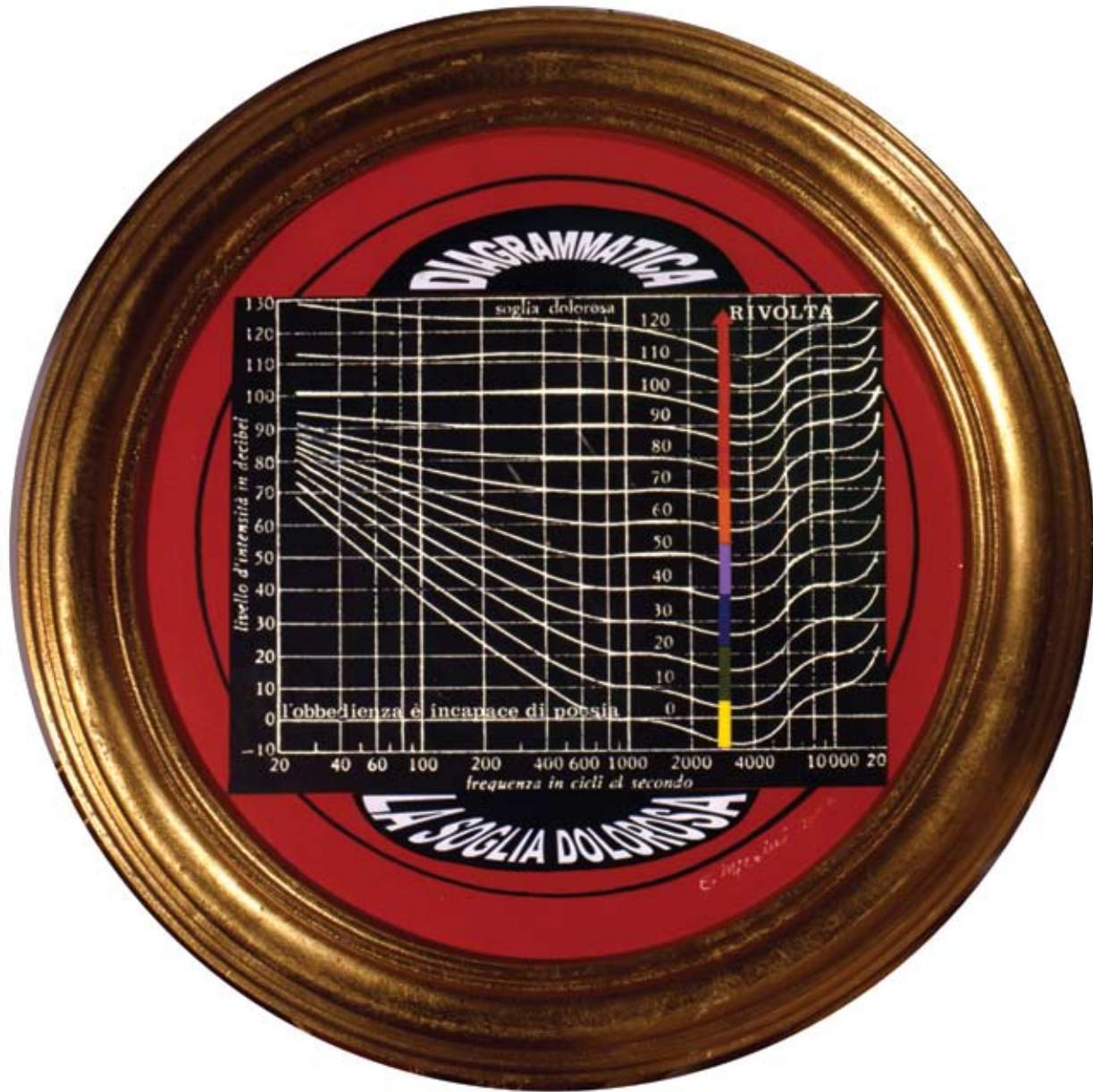Collection of the artist

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   image: 13 in. (33 cm)
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   Collage
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28. Eugenio Miccini
   Felice quel popolo
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   Collage
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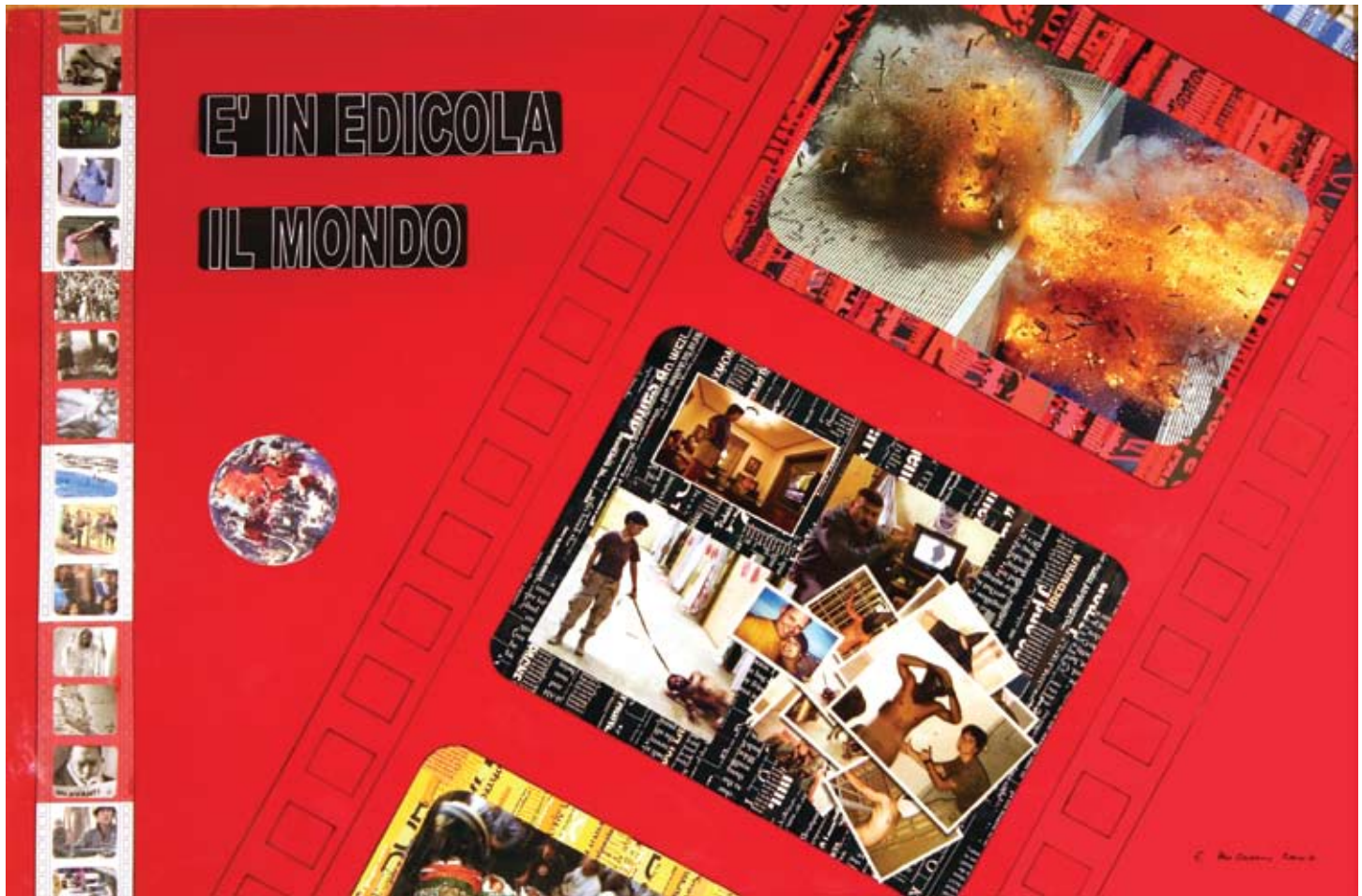
30. Eugenio Miccini, *E' in edicola il mondo*
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    Collage on cardboard
    27 1/2 x 41 3/8 in. (70 x 105 cm)
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31. Lamberto Pignotti,
    Gli indifferenti in ogni casa
    (The Indifferent People in Every Home), 1964
    Collage on cardboard
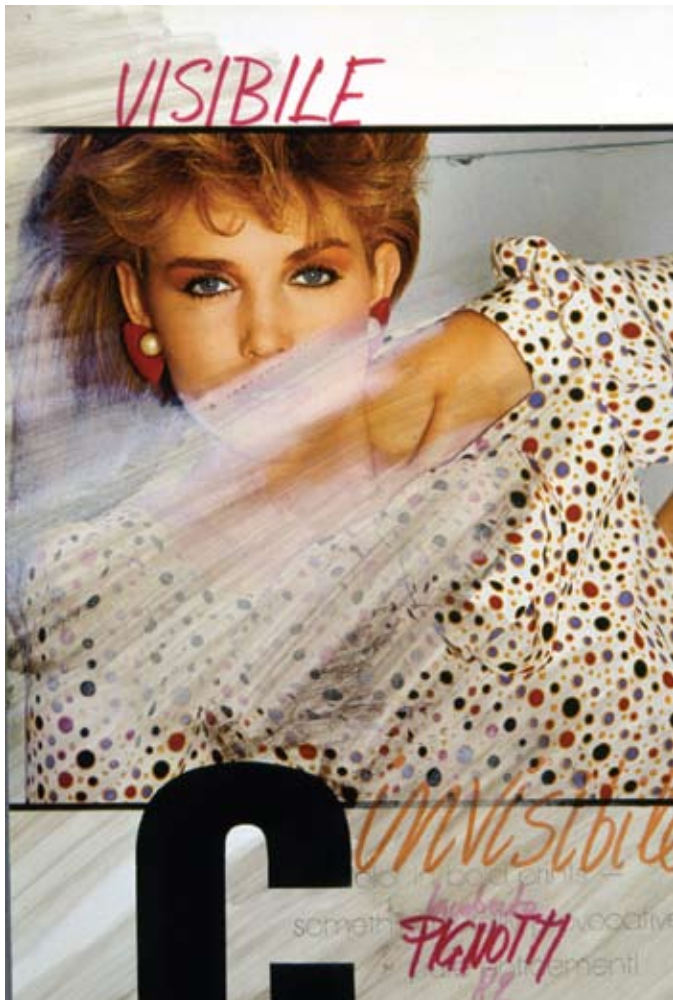   19 5/8 x 27 1/2 in. (50 x 70 cm)
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Chi si difende si salva
(Who Defends Oneself Will be Saved), 1965
Collage on cardboard
13 x 17 in. (33 x 43.3 cm)
Collection of Carlo Palli

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   Living Theatre, 1970
   Felt pen on cardboard
   4 1/8 x 5 1/4 in. (10.5 x 13.5 cm)
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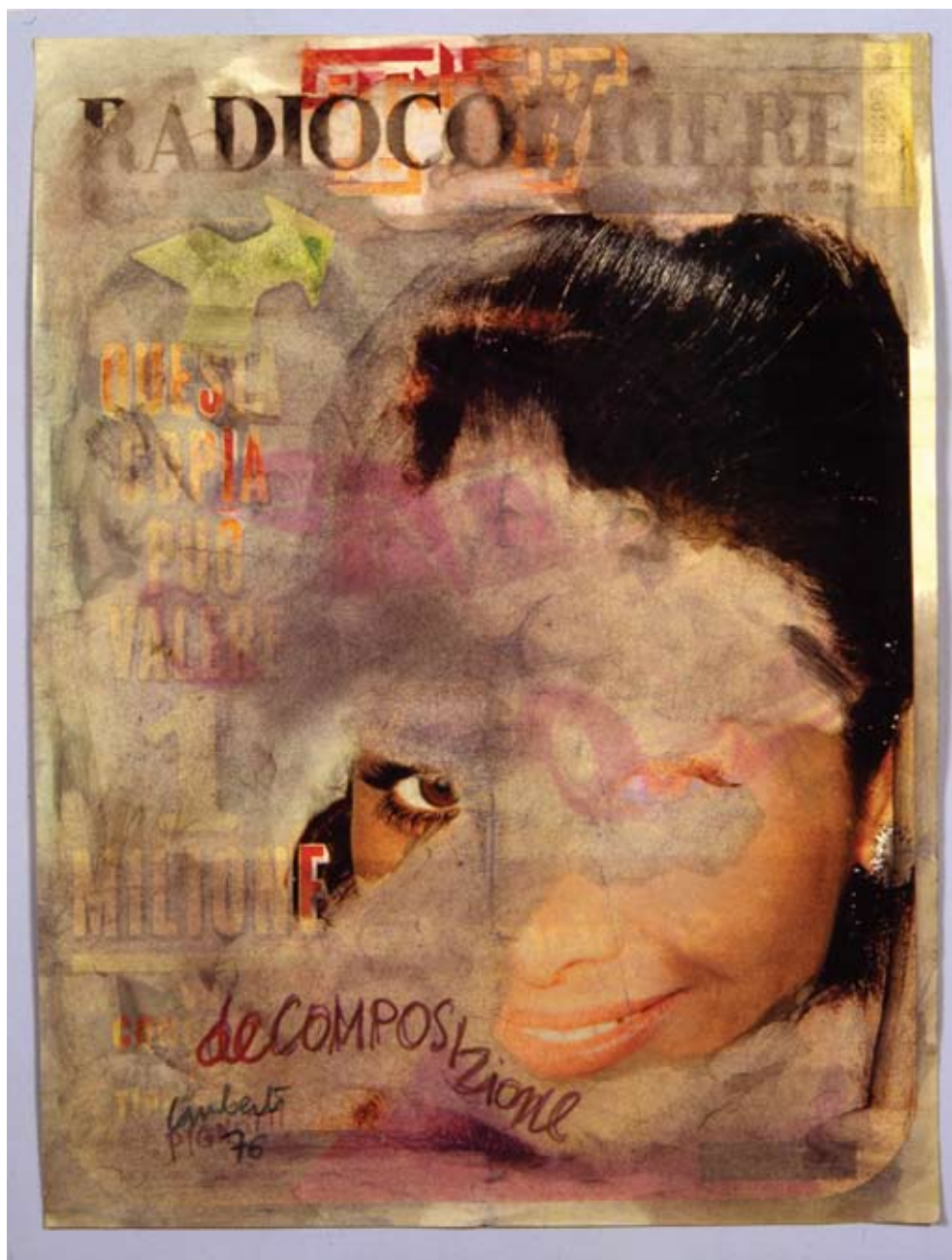
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Decomposizione (Decomposition), 1976
Mixed media
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36. Lamberto Pignotti
    Visible Invisible, 1982
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    12 1/8 x 8 1/4 in. (31 x 21 cm)
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    Visible Invisible (2), 1987
    Mixed media on cardboard
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Artists Biographies

Giuseppe Chiari (b. 1926)

Giuseppe Chiari studied engineering and music at the University of Florence. Since the 1950s, he has been experimenting with musical composition. Together with Piero Grossi, he co-founded the *Vita Musicale Contemporanea* (Contemporary Musical Life Association) in 1961.

In 1962, Chiari joined the international Fluxus movement and participated in the first Fluxus Festival held in Wiesbaden, Germany. In the 1970s, Chiari began making collages using newspaper fragments, colored paper, sheet music and actual instruments. He would negate the sonorous function of instruments by making them unplayable. He turned a piano upside down and identified it as an "Object Placed in Position Opposed to its Function."

Chiari's performances include the New York Avant Garde Festival in 1963 and 1965, the Internationales Performance Festival in 1978 at the Österreichischer Kunstverein, Vienna, and the Teatro Santa Caterina di Prato, 1996. Chiari also performed at the Venice Biennial in 1972 and 1978. Chiari became Italy's most notable Fluxus artist when he was included in the 1989 *Happening and Fluxus* exhibition held at Galerie 1900-2000 in Paris.

He has published several books including *Musica senza contrappunto*, 1969, *Musica madre*, 1973 and *Teoria* in 1992.

Claudio Francia (b. 1952)

The artist, writer and director, Claudio Francia was born near Rimini, Italy in 1952. Since 1980, he has lived in Paris and London. As a young artist, Francia was interested in abstract painting and linear poetry. His first direct contact with other visual poets took place in 1984 in Paris. Since then, he has produced poetry, painting, film and video in magazine format. This allowed his work and the ideas of other poets, artists, musicians, authors, and playwrights to be aired to a broad audience.

In 1986, Francia began to direct films. His films including *Afternoon in Verona with Emmett Williams* have been shown on French television and acquired by museums and cultural centers, including the Center Georges Pompidou in Paris. Francia's first film on visual poetry, *Of the Visual Poetry and Total Art*, was produced in collaboration with the Ministry of French Culture. From 1981 to 1989, he published four books of poems – *Rétrospectives; Quanto basta e altro (How Much to Stop and Others); Oggetti sparsi (Scarce Objects) and Taccuino…anche di viaggio (Notebook…also of travels)*.

Eugenio Miccini (b. 1925)

Born in Florence on June 22, 1925, Eugenio Miccini studied pedagogy, Greek, Latin and philosophy. He wrote poetry in Greek and Latin, and studied music with Domenico Bartolucci. After attending seminary, he fought in World War II, but deserted the army to join the Italian Resistance Movement.

After the war, Miccini resumed his studies at the University of Florence. He won first prize at the City of Florence poetry competition in 1961, and served as the editor of *Literature*. In 1962, he started making visual poetry. A year later, Miccini co-founded *Gruppo 70* with Lamberto Pignotti, and participated in *Gruppo 63*, the group that coined the term *Poesia Visiva*. During the 60s, Miccini organized activities, shows, performances, and publications of Visual Poetry. In 1969, he founded Centro Téchne, an innovative and experimental workshop for newly founded theatre companies. Miccini also directed its magazine and smaller texts dedicated to visual poetry, and cultural and political debates. In 1970, Miccini

wrote poems and edited the magazine *Lotta Poetica*. He later taught semiotics at the University of Florence, and contemporary art at academies in Verona and Ravenna. In 1983, Miccini founded *Gruppo Logomotives* with Arias-Misson, Blaine, Bory, De Vree, Sarenco, and Verdi.

Miccini's work has been included in Italian and international poetry anthologies. In 1988, Miccini and Sarenco edited *Poesia visiva 1963-88 cinque maestri* (Visual Poetry 1963-88 Five Masters). His work was featured at the 1993 Venice Biennial, and in exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Gallery of Modern Art in Mantova among other venues.

Lamberto Pignotti (b.1926)

Lamberto Pignotti was born in Florence in 1926, and studied at the University of Florence. Through the influence of avant-garde artists and writers, he began his first experiments with verbal-visual artwork. In 1954, Pignotti published his first collection of poems, *Odissea* (Odyssey)*,* in the form of condensed sentences without punctuation. In 1956, he became a cultural critic and founded the magazine *Quartiere*. Since 1961, Pignotti has been a regular collaborator to publications including *Country Evening*, *The Nation*, *Unity*, and *Re-Birth*, a RAI television network cultural program he helped found.

In 1963, Pignotti and Miccini founded *Gruppo 70* as a critical response to the advent of mass media and other cultural developments. The following year, *Gruppo 70* organized a conference and festival of poetry and music called *Arte e Technologia*. In 1965, Pignotti compiled the first *Anthology of Visual Poetry,* using images published in newspapers and magazines. As a professor at the Universities of Florence and Bologna since 1971, Pignotti taught courses showing the link between the avant-garde and mass media based on similarities in structure and function.

In 1987, Pignotti won the Acquasparta Prize for art criticism with his book *Figure Scritture*. He has organized and curated exhibitions of visual poetry, and festivals on contemporary culture. Pignotti continues to pursue his multi-sensory artistic vision and theories. Currently, he lives in Rome.

Works in the Exhibition

Giuseppe Chiari
Italian (b. 1926)

1. *Untitled,* 1995
Mixed media and collage on cardboard
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Collection of Carlo Palli

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4. *Humoreske,* 1996
Mixed media and collage on cardboard
18 7/8 x 26 in. (48 x 66 cm)
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5. *America novanta,* (America Ninety), 1997
Mixed media and collage on cardboard
27 1/2 x 39 3/8 in. (70 x 100 cm)
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6. *Chitarra,* (Guitar), 1998
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16. *Scacco al matto*, (Checkmate to the Mad One), 1998
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36. *Visibile invisibile*, 1982
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37. *Visibile invisibile* (2), 1987
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39. *Parole toccanti* (Touching Words), 1992
Collage on cardboard
11 x 7 7/8 in. (28 x 20 cm)
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40. *Majakovskij,* 1994
Collage on cardboard
19 5/8 x 28 1/4 in. (50 x 71.7 cm)
Collection of Carlo Palli

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Eugenio Miccini, *1968*, 1968, Collage, Collection of the artist
Claudio Francia, *Cassandra,* 2004*,* Collage on cardboard, Collection of the artist
Lamberto Pignotti, *Gli indifferenti in ogni casa,* (The Indifferent People in Every Home), 1964, Collage on cardboard, Collection of Carlo Palli
Giuseppe Chiari, *Untitled,* 1995, Mixed media and collage on cardboard, Collection of Carlo Palli

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