The Hand & The Mouth

Retracing writing in art practice

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Writing is a practice that has origins deeply rooted in the evolutionary history of mankind. Like speech, it is strictly intertwined with the development of man's primary tools — the hand and the facial muscles. Again like speech, it has gone through a series of stages of transformation that not only refined the skill itself and the way the human brain and body relate to it, but — like any evolutionary process — dispelled and replaced certain critical traits of the practice itself. The working assumption that this paper proposes to analyse and test through the use of historical examples is that writing must be intended as a self-sufficient language. As such, it is closely connected to the social and cultural bodies that apply it and is subject to a constant process of re-definition. This is not the place to embark on a comparative linguistic study between different cultural systems, but it goes without saying that such differences are reflected and implied in the writing itself, in the form of different alphabets, grammars, orthographical structures and vocabularies, evolving into something novel in pace with historical changes. We are not therefore talking about a fixed reality, a finished, complete and all-inclusive product of culture and society, but as a dynamic stream of different instances that have to be examined in close relation to their context of origin and, even more crucially, their use. "The use is the meaning"[1] as Ludwig Wittgenstein stated.

The aim of this study is to trace a history of written practice, with particular focus on some decisive stages of its evolutionary process. Each of these stages can be examined from multiple perspectives; for the purpose of this essay, we will be focusing on the relation between writing and art practice. This particular case of study has the benefit of demonstrating multiple facets of the dimension in question not only through logical discourse — which is nevertheless present as self-reflective moment — but also through the symbolic, the abstractive, the representative. One artistic stream in particular is chosen as material for our investigation: the so-called Visual Poetry movement, with a focus on the Italian experiences which spans approximately the three decades of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. "Visual poetry" is a broad definition with unclear boundaries for what kind of artistic and poetic practices it encompasses; the term was coined by a specific collective hailing from Florence called "Gruppo 63" that

[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *(2001) [1953]. Philosophical Investigations. Blackwell Publishing.*

described its stylistic direction as "technological poetry". Main traits of the Gruppo 63 were the use of collage and cut-up as techniques to craft visual compositions with strong ideological connotation. Their abrasive aesthetics and subversive intents had its roots in futurism, the works of Filippo T. Marinetti and Carlo Belloli being examples of early verbovisual experimentations. However, going back to the term "visual poetry", we are going to use it not as indicated by the Florentine collective, but as a broad sum of the different artistic instances that were scattered throughout the Italian territory starting from the post-war experiences up to the beginning of the 1980s.

The idea of a practice that pushes the boundaries of written language, however, has a much longer history that must be addressed, if not in its entirety, at least in order to trace an interpretational path to realise the complex network of applications in which the written dimension has been protagonist. A first example in the line of precursors is Simmia from Rodi (it should be noted, a focus on Western culture is here implied, although an encounter with figurative writing systems such as hieroglyphic and Ugaritic writing could indeed be in order). In Simmia's work, linguistic expression collides with an awareness of physical space, showcasing the boundaries between the signifying elements of language and support. Various authors during the Medieval era dedicate themselves to expanding the network of connections between image and language. In this sense, the iconography of traditional Christian figurations recur in both word and image in order to enhance the mystical message; it is therefore a more functional purpose than an expressive one. With the advent of print, a new visual dimension of the written text is born, and different approaches follow consequently.

It is, however, with Symbolism that the word will regain a central position as a "linguistic fact" with its multiple facets and features. With such writers as Baudelaire the word starts to question its meaning and makes a first step towards an ambiguity of the signified. Word isn't anymore the mere lexical significance; it shifts the balance and, in doing so, opens up multiple possible interpretations of the same sign, the same concatenation of letters; the word begins to incorporate the magical, the evocative, it begins to become fluid, malleable, constantly shifting in a system of relationships and correspondences where the meaning begins to reside "elsewhere", and the words themselves elicit uncontrollable and unforeseen reactions. With 1873's *Bateau Ivre* by Arthur Rimbaud, word, sound and colour are in constant interplay and seek out each other in the poetic game. But the final blow to traditional poetic language is brought by Stephane Mallarmè with his *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard*, published in

1897. In the poetics of Mallarmè, a progressive erosion of grammatical and syntactical structures leads to a definitive departure from common lexical values, similar to the attempt of bending and outdoing the limits of tonal system, as exemplified by Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* Prelude - an ambition that consequently lead to Arnold Schönberg and atonalism.

Mallarmè not only looks for extraverbal relationships in the word; the very relationship between signifier and signified is questioned and the element of space is brought in focus and addressed linguistically, as a sign in its own right. For the first time, poetical discourse rises to the intents of linguistic research, and the two become inextricably intertwined. It is an important first step towards a definition of visual-poetic practice and interdisciplinary aesthetic research - more significant in approach than successive experiences of Marinetti and Guillaume Apollinaire - and to a certain extent it directly connects to the experiences of 1950s concrete poetry where a new research phase begins. Jean-Clarence Lambert's definition of the poet as a "semiologist at wild state"[2] seems apposite for Mallarmè, a poet who not only "invents" language but also uses it in a concrete fashion, beyond representative and connotative values of the linguistic code.

Another author who expands the definition of sign is Alfred Jarry. Unrightfully overlooked by critics, Jarry's opus is traversed by semiological tensions, taking the concept of the ambiguity and polyvalence of the sign even further than Mallarmè, although maybe lacking his linguistic focus and privileging intuition over reflection and methodological research. Nonetheless, in his work the sign is never a given, fixed reality, and the more significances attached to a sign, the better; the fact that probably readers won't grasp them all is, in this sense, by no means a negative attribute.

While the work of James Joyce was indubitably a major influence on the research in phonetic models of language, and *Finnegan's Wake* has to be credited as a beacon for several attempts at phonetic and sound poetry — the best example being Luciano Berio's and Cathy Berberian's *Omaggio a Joyce*, another author stands out as a verbo-visual avant-gardist: Ezra Pound. "In his *Cantos*", states Adriano Spatola, "Pound uses the ideogram as a structural principle of interaction between conceptual blocks that

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[2] Jean-Clarence Lambert, "Poesie concrete: la grande dissociation", in *Opus international*, n. 40-41, january 1973

criticise, repeat and highlight themselves, while by doing this the relationship between thematic cores and graphical space is stressed and becomes an essential feature in the body of the poem."[3] The Chinese ideogram as linguistic image, as natural synthesis between signifier and signified is already an institution for the poetic-visual discourse, but for Pound its importance lies in in its functionality as tool for the linguistic conceptualisation of the poem's body; to create a back and forth dynamic, an in-between zone where the ideogram radiates towards the word and vice versa.

Finally, the work of E. E. Cummings displays a different approach to the poetical language which, instead of derivating from phonetic sign and translating to the written dimension, becomes a theatre where both dimensions compete with each other and create a subversion of the internal structures of poetic language. The unorthodox use of punctuation, the truncations, the accentuated spacing, verbs-becoming-substantives, the inverted brackets, just to name a few, split and reorganise the rhythm of the phonic matter and plunge it into a dimension that gains visual value.

The points of coincidence and division between written dimension and speech are a key feature of the research presented in this paper. Hand and mouth – and their extensions, writing and speech - are regarded as primary tools in mankind's evolution, not only for the purpose of technological improvement but as means of both communication and expression that imply an inward movement, a self-reflective instance about oneself's activity, presence and participation in the development of a *socius*, a community, a certain reality in history. Similarly, the concerns of artistic production in the post-war 50s, 60s and 70s, the experiences of so-called "sound poetry" and visual poetry, tend to evolve on parallel tracks, overlapping at various times, bridging instances of poetry, literature, performance and musical composition. If, on the one hand, sound poet Bernard Heidsieck declared that written poetry had no reason to exist anymore, others, such as Henri Chopin, Francois Dufrene, Bob Cobbing, Adriano Spatola and Arrigo Tora Lotino were shifting their practices back and forth between visual and auditory dimensions: Spatola defined his interdisciplinary practice as the attempt to move towards a "total poetry". It becomes clear that the approach of such artists to fuse and confuse practices in order to encompass, in their work, the multiple dimensions of research about poetical language, was at the forefront of what has today become the standard *modus operandi* for verbo-visual-sonic experiments.

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[3] Adriano Spatola, *Verso la poesia totale*, Rumma ed., Napoli, 1969

Such an interdisciplinary attitude gives its best outcomes when supported by a thorough, methodical investigation into the possibilities, features, similarities and possible applications of the dualistic nature of written and spoken dimensions.

This paper is part of a wider practice which had its first phase in extended research on Italian visual poetry carried out mainly in the archive of Rovereto's museum for contemporary art, MART, the most complete collection of documents and works related to the above artistic scenes. One basic characteristic of Italian visual poetry has to be underscored at this stage: the scene itself was scattered in different major Italian cities (Genoa, Milan, Rome, Florence, Naples) and was never regarded as a coherent artistic movement. Rather, what we now could consider calling the Italian visual poetry "movement", was the sum of different, at times contrasting approaches to verbo-visual matter. This fact resulted in tensions between the smaller artistic factions, and thus never made its way into the mainstream of the art industry, nor did it get the proper attention from art criticism. This resulted in a series of artists taking the matter of envisioning the key features of artistic practices and analysing the theoretical background and implications of such practices into their own hands. It has been from the start a scene with a strong self-reflective component, one that found its best way of formalisation through an intricate and vital network of periodic publications and artist magazines, essential tools where the pairing of the two moments of practical application and conceptual self-reflection found the most fitting medium for their concurrent, yet at times hardly coexisting, nature. The aim of the practice (in which this paper represents the final phase) is, formally, to readapt the aforementioned dualistic conception of the artistic process in order to include both the written and spoken dimension of its unfolding. The question first dealt with and soon discarded was posed as follows: whether the radiophonic and written realities should be addressed in parallel instances or not? Instead, the structure that seemed to fit the practice would be a linear one, but each step of the process would be concatenated to the previous one through a network of elements traversing the graphic and sonic dimension; a constant translation between two mediums and two disciplines.

The result of the research phase was a restriction of the topic; six authors were picked out of the national scene. Obviously the style of each one was different, but the logic behind the authors' selection was not merely to emphasize such diversity, and had its roots in a particular book that was of great inspiration and paved the way for the forthcoming phases of the practice. *Scrittura Attiva* (Active Writing), written by Ugo

Carrega, the Genoese visual poet, gallerist, and essayist, was part of a series of publications about design, curated by Bruno Munari. The book attempts to give an insight on the national scene of visual poetry, focusing on presenting diverse authors and selected work by them. The work is in no way an authoritative or exhaustive summary of the different experiences taking place in those days, nor are the parts on single authors extensive enough to give an encompassing take on their work to the reader. It appears, on the contrary, that Carrega arranged the formal structure of the book and selected the works of single authors in order to fit them to a narrative process. Each author's work on display is therefore functional to his narration and addresses a different problematic concerning the sign and its linguistic attributes. Such an approach was critical in choosing the six authors as establishing a direct connection to the second phase of the practice, which was writing the script for a radio drama (hereafter: "The Hand & The Mouth"), a narrative piece that took the form of an investigation about the history of sign, its qualities, its transformations throughout different art practices, where each author was related to a stage of such "evolutionary" process. Since the topic of the investigation was the sign, the graphic expression of the hand, the natural correspondence would be to employ exclusively the voice as sonic material to represent and translate it into the auditory dimension: voice that would not only be the tool of communication to tell the story of writing, but also as direct transformation of the writing itself. The point was, however, not to portray the single authors or take one work per each author and replicate it in the auditory dimension, but to attempt the extraction and condensation of their style, then translate it into the compositional strategy for a sound piece and utilise it to show a concrete application of the conceptual framework that each stage of the storyline provided. "The Hand & The Mouth" would therefore try to replicate the model of a visual poetry publication and unite reflective and creative actions. Furthermore, while writing the script, the choice was made to conceal the references to single authors and structure the storyline as a poetical narration, to then reveal the network of concepts and connections at a later stage, in this essay. The advantage of using poetic tools and phrasings was the chance of using recursive and associative mechanisms to better connect the single chapters to each other. This choice was also made in order to address the peculiar characteristics of the radiophonic medium, one in which a constantly shifting focus level of the listener is an issue that has to be acknowledged and dealt with on both linguistic and technical levels. Moreover, the radio format

seems to be the fitting auditory counterpart to the kind of publications that visual poets were utilising as tools for poetical research and experimentation. "The Hand & The Mouth" was divided into six chapters and an introduction, most chapters containing a theoretical-narrative element and a sound piece, which was composed and performed in connection to the introductory narration as well as to the author that was taken as reference for that chapter's topic and a counterpart in the area of sound poetry. The constant research – in this case, historical – to look for coincidences between the two dimensions and analyse the compositional mechanisms behind both in order to transmit a certain technique into the other dimension (and vice versa), has been a *fil rouge* throughout the whole process. This striving revealed the importance of the translating activity, not only in linguistic terms but as a broader action involving the graphic and the auditory and also between concrete and conceptual approaches. An activity that inevitably leads to gains and losses, alterations of content and even of concept, and at the same time constantly produces new connections and interactions between the two fields, each step bringing the intertwining tighter. The final purpose of this "tightening" would create different products of artistic research that exist as autonomous entities but carry the respective traces of one another, phantasmagorical connections to hint at the bigger picture, the practice itself, that becomes more than the sum of its parts, it becomes the framework in which the single products are enacted and acquire context.

The structure of this paper will therefore follow that of "The Hand & The Mouth", but for each chapter will not only dwell on the defining concepts and its practical realisation but attempt to describe the translation process, and thus discover new correspondences and incoherencies of this investigation.
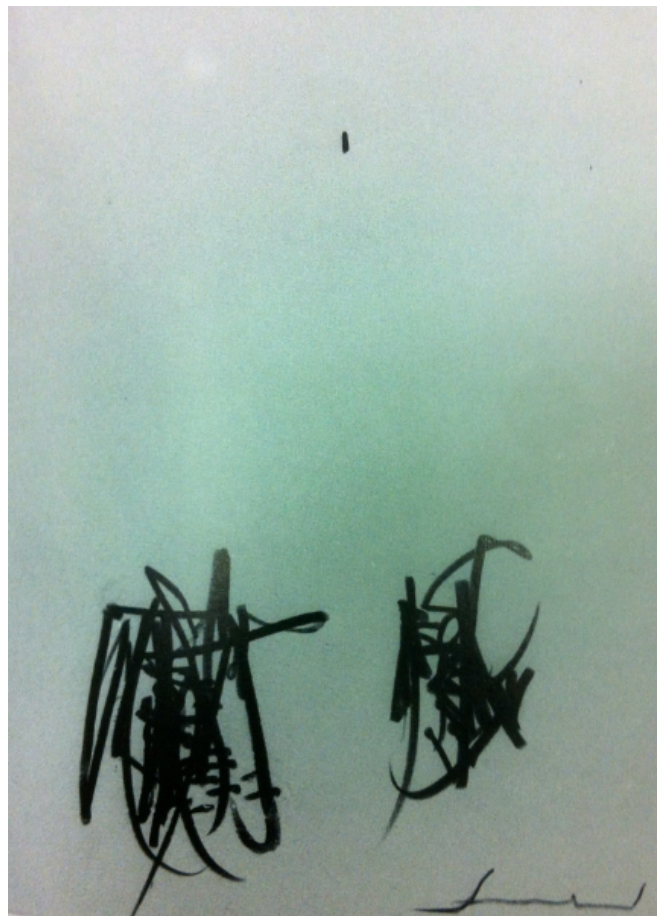
In the beginning there was the sign. The sentence that opens the first chapter of "The Hand & The Mouth". Sign had to indeed be the beginning of the research, as the smallest graphical unit that concurs in the creation of a linguistic system, but even before, as the trace, the display of the hand's activity. Already after the first couple of lines it becomes clear that the "sign" eludes a fixed definition. It is therefore not a completely useless exercise to consult a dictionary and look up the term. According to Merriam-Webster, sign is "a fundamental linguistic unit that designates an object or relation or has a purely syntactic function", "a mark having a conventional meaning and used in place of words or to represent a complex notion", and again, "something indicating the presence or existence of something else."[4] So, nothing more than individual tiles that don't bring us closer to a definition per se, but are indicative of different perspectives on an extremely complex matter: on the one hand the symbolic and representational concept prevails, the sign is regarded as a certain something that substitutes, is put in place of something else, something that is not perceivable through senses. By the other formulation, however, the other hand, sign is a mark, a unit, a certain "something": it has a physical presence and is regarded as object per se. An underlying ambiguity shrouds the matter from the very inception of the research. It might be more helpful to write about "signs", using the plural form to imply its indeterminate nature. However, this raises the question: is such indetermination not a feature common to other areas of human speculations, also based and relying on fundaments that are at its very best approximations or interpretations instead of fixed and verified notions? F. Accame and V. Barosso move such critique[5] to the operation of Ferdinand de Saussure, "founder" of modern linguistics, objecting that notions such as linguistic sign, signifier and signified, word are not precisely defined in his conceptual system. The same holds for Charles Morris, again the "founder", this time of semiotics. V. Accame objects that "when reading Morris, a fact stands out: a definition of "sign" does not exist. The best way to reach the sign is through the analysis of its behaviours."[6] The attempt to define sign is reduced to the definition of its qualities and behavioural patterns; it might be deemed as a "relation", something that exists only as part of a larger network in connection

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[4] http://www.merriam-webster.com/

[5] Felice Accame and Guido Barosso, "Omaggio a Saussure", in *Nuovo 75*, n.1, 1967

[6] Vincenzo Accame, *Il segno poetico*, Mount Press, 1977

with other units, or as an effect of such connections. Without dwelling too much on the research for an exact definition, the interesting fact that stands out is the role that ambiguity plays at a primal level in the sign's nature. As already mentioned previously, ambiguity plays a critical role in the endeavour to elude traditional traits of poetical language. Another interesting trait emerges from the Merriam-Webster definition of sign: its double-sided nature, split between presence and absence. This concept transports the research to a different dimension, one that is connected with the ancient history and evolutionary process of mankind, one that depicts the sign as trace. "The primitive man left us the first traces of his presence scraping the fingers against soft clay or spraying colour around the hand leaving the negative imprint on stone," states U. Carrega.[7] Those spontaneous gestures of the hand are an index of the stupor and wonder that man must have felt witnessing for the first time the hand's activity as both verification of one's existence and the concrete demonstration of presence in the *now*. In his book "The Gesture and the Word", Andrè Leroi-Gourhan states that the most ancient traces date back to 35.000 B.C., during the Chatelperron period, contemporary with the discovery of colorants and ornamental objects.[8] Such traces are sequences of marks carved on bones or stone and testify the origin of a system not directly related to figurative purposes but arranged in some kind of rhythmical fashion. Based on analysis of Australian *Churinga,* small flat stone plates with abstract motives, such primordial figurations were probably connected to a practice of magical recital, where the performer would point at the graphical shapes and use it as some kind of score to impose a rhythm to the vocal material of his invocation. In this interpretation, both centres of expression then concur in crafting a ritualistic practice pointing to the fact that the origins of graphism do not reside in the representation of reality but rather in the realm of abstraction. This would mean that the graphical dimension is in its primitive form closer to language than to figurative art and establishes from its inception a direct correlation to phonetic expression. This connection, however, is based on concurrency rather than coordination: the faculty of the image to articulate itself in the three dimensions of space has an advantage against vocalisation that conversely unfolds in time. Such multidimensional freedom lacks in linear writing and is unbound by narrative prescriptions of speech, that in

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[7] Ugo Carrega, *Scrittura Attiva,* Zanichelli ed., 1980

[8] Andrè Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, MIT Press, 1993

return is unable to provide a continuous phonetic translation of the graphic imaginary; the two dimensions appear to be intertwined through performative practice but ultimately independent in their configuration.

Such statements had a deep resonance in the works of Jaques Derrida and his attempt to rehabilitate the independence of the written to the spoken and even move one step further into affirming the supremacy of the sign over the phoneme. The title of his ground-breaking work "Grammatology" echoes a publication by Ignace T. Gelb, who in 1952 published a book with the name "Fundamentals of Grammatology", in which the theorisation of writing systems assessed the hierarchical superiority of the alphabet compared to previous systems, since - as already pointed out by Hegel - it is the closest systemisation resembling the vocal dimension. Such an assertion is, to Derrida, a clear product of a traditional logocentric assumption, that is, voice is the expression of conscience. What he proposes is to invert the logic and interpret voice, communication and the general production of sign as manifestations of the writing; the subduing of the written to the spoken is not merely a theoretical issue, but becomes emblematic of the many collective suppressions of the Western civilisation. From this perspective, logocentrism is a "moral sickness" from which Western civilisation must attempt to be healed, for it is the main cause of an axiological unbalance that has of it a whole assortment of by-products such as egocentrism, ethnocentrism, phallocentrism and every other totalitarianism. The voice as presence and conscience is the "good", whereas writing as difference, the subconscious as suppressions or discards of logocentrism are the "evil". From the clash between the suppression and the ideal (the voice as presence) emerges our tradition and its darkest corners. From Derrida's perspective, the main issue is not even the conflict between written and spoken as linguistic agents. Writing, seen as trace, as inscription — whatever form it might take — is really more of a condition or vehicle for transmission of senses, the condition of the possibility of experience. Any kind of relation we develop with the world is mediated and made possible through the inscription of a grammè, of traces self-articulated as signs, codes, languages and consciousness and therefore creates the necessary conditions for thought as well as experience. If - and Derrida does not pretend to have decisive facts to support this claim - a structure would be found as a definitive fundament of our experience, it would have the form of the trace. The trace is the instance between the I and the world and its character is two-faced, it is passive (a trace is inscribed onto something) as well as active; words and codified conceptual

iterations used by the intellect are, after all, traces in their own right. It shows both presence, its own, and absence, of the subject that performed the inscriptive gesture: the hand. It is both, and therefore opens up an in-between space, not only between the subject and his surrounding objectivity (the I and the world) but, in terms of operative processes, between the tool and its practice. It documents the gesture of the hand before actual writing takes place.

These concepts are reflected in the early works of Emilio Scanavino (Genoa, 1922 – Milan, 1986), who went on to later become one of the most renowned painters and sculptors of Italian abstract expressionism, although always eluding strict categorisations. In his paintings, the focus on the graphical sign leads towards the shaping of an abstract alphabetical system, as in his "Alfabeto senza fine" (Endless alphabet), the first in the series being from 1957. His attempt to isolate the graphical gesture and iterate it through different variations creates an organism where connections emerge, already pointing towards something more than just the pure experience of image; the matrix of linguistic articulation, though still unbound by linguistic logic. In respect to such an approach, the practice of drawing gains critical importance compared to the one of painting. As G.M. Accame states "the drawing travels on the fringes of the work and makes of this distance the ungraspable inscription of thought. Moving outside of painting and sculpture, it shows what those conceal: the moment of initiation. The accomplished work shows us his complexity [...] but leaves no trace of the beginning, of the solitude that envelopes the artist in such moment."[9] In Scanavino, the drawing becomes the first movement, the first reaction to the expressive impulse. It relates to the in-between condition given by the trace, and it becomes the rediscovery of the hand as primary tool for empiric knowledge, of which the work is then the representation. Throughout the years, his drawings tend to become less and less dense, as if the sign was attempting a process of emancipation from the surrounding traces, a clarification of its graphic boarders. The formal structure of "The Hand & The Mouth" is based on such evolutionary process of the sign. The concept is to show an unfolding process of self-discovery conducted by the voice by exploring the possibilities and articulations of the tongue, the throat and the oral and nasal cavities. The materials of such processes, conceived as some sort of improvisation on a given theme, are small phonetic fragments containing both vowels

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[9] Giovanni Maria Accame, *Scanavino: disegni e scritti inediti*, Pierluigi Lubrina ed., 1990

and consonants. The latter — given their nature of noisy trains of impulses - are the representation of "surface noise", meaning those inscriptions made by the hand at a primal state of low self-awareness, while as the piece progresses the vowels fight their way into the foreground and unshackle themselves from uncontrolled noise in similar fashion to graphical signs attaining an alphabetical nature; they stabilise in pitch and through sustained vocalisations become conscious of the mouth as the organ and tool from which they originate. Looking for paradigms that have pioneered this kind of practice, it was impossible to miss the critical importance of a milestone such as Kurt Schwitters' "Ursonate" (1922-32), his landmark work for solo voice that pushes the boundaries of vocal expression to paroxysm though always eluding conventional linguistic territories. Analysing the score, the use of obsessive iterations applied to small phonetic clusters stands out on multiple occasions. It is through recombination and progressive variations on, and additions to, such clusters that the voice dwells on its articulation processes. These compositional strategies allow for a great degree of complexity with little sonic material to begin with. It is no wonder that such an attitude would later become a trademark of minimalist composers such as Philip Glass decades later. Though no performance instructions are present on the score of Ursonate aside from the movement indications, the way it is arranged and the concatenation of letters already provide a strong linguistic connotation to the vocal material, that becomes, as is the case for Scanavino's alphabets, a speech before language. The last part of Ursonate also celebrates the return of the voice to the vowel A, first alphabetical unit that sets the beginning of the linguistic practice. The very same vowel is heard at the end of "The Hand & The Mouth"'s first chapter, as symbol marking the end of the sign's shaping process and the commencement of a new stage in its evolution and its story.

"The act of doing is nothing else than the confirmation of being."[10] This quote by Scanavino resonates with the dense structures built of Vera Buhß's voice in the second chapter of "The Hand & The Mouth". The voice is recorded and immediately played back in the room, the performer engaging it in a back-and-forth dialogue, taking cues from his recent past to re-articulate and differently shape the spelling of the aforementioned quote, being recorded again, then played back, and so on. Layers and layers of the same semantic material overlap to create a dense texture, a sonic fabric based on feedback mechanisms, where the room soon starts to resonate along with the waves of vocal stratifications and recurring patterns soon emerge from the dense soundscape. The performer is put in the double position of producer and receiver; she has to deal with the recognition of patterns and rhythms from the flowing mass of her own speech and react to it, "ride" the wave of intricate vocal articulations while constantly reshaping it. The aim of this practice is to put in primary focus the process of production and self-reflection, the activity of the voice. The sentence is chosen in order to bridge, content-wise, the two stages of the hand's evolution but also for its programmatic declaration of intent. Such a statement is precisely the key of interpretation to the sound piece as much as the performance instructions themselves and, again, it gestures towards the main feature of the practice: that of self-reflective activity. The question is then what the vocal articulation stands for in terms of translation from the graphical dimension, and moreover, which stage is taking place in this practice, a stage where vocal activity is charged with linguistic relevance but one more time escapes and instead shifts into the realm of ambiguity.

For the sign, it is the first stage of outward expansion. Relating to the reality surrounding the I, the sign starts to reconfigure itself into a system of symbols and codes that become collective traces, and as such, depict the passing of historical time, document the life of community outside of the psychological dimension of the producer (the hand). A sign inscribed near another sign is transformed into a linguistic unit, and from the recombination of such units, the variations and modifications of a system are born. But it is still too soon to talk about the rise of alphabet and phonographic language; the element to focus on at this point is the activity of inscribing combinations of signs in repetitive fashion: calligraphy.

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[10] Giovanni Maria Accame, Ibid.

Calligraphy is an outward movement of the hand that establishes its first presence in a different realm, one that has an increasing stronger linguistic framework in which to act. Such framework influences the movement of the hand and its relationship to the mind. The translation between mind and hand, between thought and gesture becomes an increasingly mediated activity, calligraphy being the medium that filters and arranges the outcomes to exist in the world as part of a coded system tending towards acquisition of meaning; towards structuring itself as language. However, at its most profound core, calligraphy is a practice of meditation and self-reflection of the hand, which becomes more and more aware of its creative processes and expressions through witnessing the immediate unfolding in space. The paper becomes a theatre of such meditational practices and its material qualities, such as the blank space that separates graphical signs from each other, concurring in the self-affirmation of calligraphy. Precisely because of this incubation process, the product of calligraphy - the material traces of its doing – remain ambiguous. Clusters of signs don't always become vehicles for lexical meaning but also for optical, phonetic or gestural ones, oscillating between the signifier and the signified.

Ambiguity plays a key role in the work of Vincenzo Accame (Loano 1932 – Milan 1999). Central member of the Genoese – and later on Milanese – poetry scene, Accame has been associated with a conspicuous number of magazines and artistic factions and has been both protagonist and anthologist of the movement, through works as "Il segno poetico" (The poetical sign) - a lucid and sharp testimony about an art form divided and spread across different continents, eras and which encompasses a multitude of styles and approaches. This dualistic working methodology fits well with the topic that is addressed throughout Accame's opus, one that again makes self-reflection a central point around which the artwork revolves. His poetry is one of research, the goal being to set the sign free from its semantic, syntactical and pragmatic automatisms which common linguistic use constantly pushes it. A poetry that consequently becomes, in Emilio Isgrò's words, "not only art of words but general art of sign."[11] A poetry that ceases to be a closed category and instead embraces a wide number of creative operations that involve the use of sign. A poetry where the aesthetical component of calligraphy penetrates the communicative dimension and results in abundant expressive ambiguity that aims to awaken interpretational skills in the receiver not yet conditioned

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[11] Roberto Sanesi, *Accame: il senso della scrittura*, Severgnini ed., 1990

by obvious linguistic schemes. The fact that most of Accame's work is carried out through handwriting techniques imprints the psychological dimension onto the support, which becomes an extension of mnemonic and perception space; another factor that complicates the question of communication and shifts the balance in favour of the generative process that slowly raises the hand's self-consciousness. It is, nonetheless, not only an issue of space, but of time as well. Meaning the distinction between "inner" mental time and "real" time and the relationship between thought and gesture that is instituted and develops on such axis, or in Accame's own words, "the inconscious aspetcs of writing, starting from the consideration of the temporal gap between the rapidity of thinking and the necessary slowness of writing."[12] Once again, the physical product of calligraphy testifies and measures such a gap, and in turn becomes the graphical representation of it. In some ways it is the attempt of an inter-dimensional translation, between psychological and real dimension, as much as between time and space. The element of repetition therefore acquires a double value: as operative method to develop the skill of calligraphy itself and as interpretational aid to realise the unfolding of aforementioned translation processes between dimensions.

Such mechanisms have strong roots in auditory practices as well, for instance the critical importance of Steve Reich's early tape pieces "Come Out" and "It's Gonna Rain". The self-determined definition of his early compositional techniques was "process music", a music that is only about the unfolding of a certain process, while at the same time exposing the process itself – again, presence and absence. Brian Eno has described the two pieces in question as acoustical moiré patterns. A moiré pattern is a visually evident superimposed pattern created, for example, when two identical patterns on a flat or curved surface are overlaid while displaced or rotated a small amount from one another. In order to develop such characteristics in the sound domain, iteration becomes a key element: it becomes the point of contact between space and time dimensions. This aspect is even more stressed in the landmark work of Alvin Lucier's "I'm sitting in a room". Here, repetition is the mechanism that slowly unveils the resonant characteristics of the room, opening up the poetics of space inside the unfolding of a time structure. It also demonstrates how through superimposition speech reverts to being vehicle of pure oral articulation, beyond meaning, just as is the case in Accame's work, where handwritten lines repeat, cross

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[12] Roberto Sanesi, Ibid.

and overlap themselves to the point where all that is left is graphical vocalisation on a surface – the self-reflective moment of the hand.

The time dimension, however, or at least a concept of time is present throughout the body of Accame's work. It is connected to the fact that calligraphy evokes trajectories in reading it, trajectories that shape a certain kind of "path" in the eyes of the receiver, trajectories that most of the time are organised into different fragments or structures that are arranged following non-traditional page configurations, and with blank spaces becoming, in the tradition of Mallarmè, poetical signs themselves. The interaction between blocks of high graphic density and empty gaps not only point to a certain degree of musicality in the spatial arrangement (it could resemble some kind of graphical score), but form a narrative arrangement not based on content but on visual layout: a narration of the signifier. A slightly different approach but still pointing in the same direction is Bernard Heidsieck's sound poetry piece "Vaduz". Content wise, the piece is a long demographic list of different types of citizens that are to be found in Liechtenstein's capital city, with the word "Vaduz" repeating for each element of the list. Soon, this word becomes the only point of interest for the listener, since every time it is repeated it seems to provide more insight into its phonetical qualities; its common features as "word" are slowly alienated and the linguistic content of the piece becomes the formal framework in which to carry out an investigation about qualities of speech articulation. Furthermore, the shifting position of the word "Vaduz" in the structure of the single sentences – first at the beginning, then at the end, then again at the beginning – results in a clear visualisation while listening to the piece. The physicality of the list configuration, probably in form of a column begins to take shape in the mind of the receiver while he focuses on the onomatopoeic characteristics of the voice.

The process of self-discovery is a critical stage for the hand's activity. The practice of calligraphy walks on the edge of language and oscillates in between the pure expression and the chance of entering linguistic territories. It is exactly this oscillation, the blur between borders, the dimension of ambiguity, which enriches and enlarges the potential of sign and crafts it into a tool that operates free and across dimensions. It will be through phonographic writing that this empowering rise of the hand will come to a sudden standstill.

Towards a total poetry: this was the motto of Adriano Spatola (Sappiane, 1941 – Sant'Ilario d'Enza, 1988) who made interdisciplinary artistic practice and mixed expressive languages his trademark. The generations that followed in the wake of the historical vanguards looked back at their predecessors with renewed interest but a more focused critical balance and willingness to open a discourse, to shape and rearrange the artistic landscape rather than to leave scorched earth behind them. At the beginning of the Sixties the new generations of artists had more adequate and effective tools to engage in interdisciplinary experimentations. Early Fluxus artist Dick Higgins introduced during those years, still at a very young age, the concept of *intermedia*. "Towards the total poetry" is also the title of Spatola's groundbreaking essay, published in 1969, which opens with the following statement: "Theatre melts with sculpture, poetry becomes action, music turns into gesture and at the same time develops painting approaches in notation: terms like 'happening', 'environment', 'mixed media', 'assemblage' are indicators of such cultural condition." [13] The phenomena of confusion between art practices does not represent the mere addiction, the static superimposition, but instead results in dynamic and highly unpredictable events and simultaneous productivity. The scientific element of artistic research, which results in a thorough examination of the tools at hand, becomes more and more central to the new wave of artists; research and evaluation of such tools and their potentials are not necessarily restricted to their context of inception. It is no wonder, then, that the musical and poetic practices from the 1950s had several points of connection, starting from the definition of "concrete poetry" and "concrete music." Both stood in opposition to the traditional concept of abstraction and deemed every sound source worthy of "musical" material, as much as every linguistic unit, starting from the letters and the in-between spaces which become poetic material. These practices were guided by a logic of inclusion, of constant expansion; no wonder, once again, that graphical notation becomes more and more central in the practice of contemporary composers that benefit from knowledge in the field of visual arts. Cornelius Cardew, composer, improviser and graphic designer provides the most revealing example on this matter with his work *Treatise* (1963-1967). Conversely, tools such as the magnetophone and later, the tape recorder, will become essential for poets, as much as the microphone, a tool that Spatola himself will demonstrate his affinity to in his homages to Edgard

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[13] Adriano Spatola, *Verso la poesia totale*, Rumma ed., Napoli, 1969

Varese, most prominently his reinterpretation of "*Ionistation*", piece for 13 percussion composed by Varese in 1931. In Spatola's version the body becomes the resonator against which the microphone is struck like a mallet. Aside from the sound production method, the concept of a total poetry in which the body has to engage completely, turning the performer himself into the poem that is offered, as some kind of sacrifice to the public, is the vital core around which Spatola's various practices revolve. Different codes interact, different meanings oscillate between their singifiers, from voice to gesture, from word to rhythm. In this logic, the body, as a "linguistic machine", is not only the locus where the interaction and exchange between codes and their symbolic correspondences takes place; it transforms the signifiers into a stream of energy, into a generative act. In the performative act, the poet becomes shaman and takes up the role of leading the audience between the transitions of codes and symbolic systems, showing the frame of possible oscillations between signifiers in an interplay of references and allusions that exist in between linguistic worlds. Spatola's approach is one of ritualistic nature, one that has its roots in the realm of magic, not too different from Artaud's concept of theatrical performance. "The seed of the verse matures in chaos"[14] stated Spatola, who thrived on the concept of energetic dissipation as a means to destabilise linguistic codes and systems and free them from entropic states. This conception of artistic performance is based significantly on the relationship with the public that actively partakes in the energetic exchanges and subsequently reflects it onto the body of the performer, creating a recursive system. The receiver takes up an active role of participation, of involvement in the performative character of the art practice, and such a role is by no means restricted to a concert or any kind of "live" performance. In fact, Spatola's *Puzzle Poems* are combinatory games where the reader directly interacts with the graphic materials and arranges them to create and "read" shapes. "The call for a 'simple' and 'entertaining' art is born out of an anti-intellectual pull that we could define, together with Tzara, 'spontaneous'. It is also the necessity of cutting the umbilical chord that connects the 'rare', 'seriously', 'precious' artwork to a more and more specialised and sectorial discourse."[15]

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[14] Giovanni Fontana, "Adriano Spatola: il corpo, la voce: la parola totale" in *Adriano Spatola poeta totale*, Costa & Nolan ed., 1992

[15] Giovanni Fontana, Ibid.

Spatola's artistic credo and methods sit at the exact crossroads between outrage with the artistic status quo and keen, precise attention, curiosity and involvement with the practices of the post-WW2 experimental years. Such an approach is best exemplified in his series, *Zeroglifici* (Zeroglyphics), first published in 1966, the year following *Puzzle Poems*. From the latin hieroglyphicum, from the greek hieroglyphicos, relating to the sacred (hieros) engravings (from the verb gpyphein, to engrave, to sculpt) the 'zero' replacing 'hiero' to depict the annulment of the semantic message in spite of the iconic message. In this work, the influence of concrete poetry by artists such as Eugen Gomringer and Franz Mon is the starting point for a critical discourse that works on alphabetical units as producers of other symbolic meanings than merely lexical, and beyond their arrangement in classical word and sentence structures. The process put in action by Spatola aims not only for the isolation of such units but their destabilisation through an extreme fragmentation of the alphabetical system. It is the symptom of a resentment towards the world of standardised linguistic production, a critique of visual writing, an attempt to "mute" the word. Inside of the alphabetical system there is no way to escape the supremacy of the voice: the letter becomes signifier of a signifier, it stands as a representation of a sound, not as a graphic entity in itself. Achille Bonito Oliva talks about "process that atomises institutional language, erasing all its obliged meanings, and through orientation of the sign on the aesthetic space, constitutes a new language from the gaps between shattered linguistic particles."[16] It is the diary of a struggle, of a tension, of longing for a forgotten dimension. The irreversibility of the condition of phonographic writing is clear, just as much as it had been clear in the mind of *musique concrete* pioneer Pierre Schaeffer when he stated that no matter all the attempts to "break the barriers of tonal harmony and find a way through [...] There is no way through. We still have our sensibilities, our ears, the old harmonic structures in our heads – we're still born in DoReMi."[17]

The question about the hierarchical relationship between speech and writing has been previously addressed but is better further pursued. When analysing surviving Palaeolithic art, there is one particular element that stands out, namely the graphical placement of the figures on the caves' walls, a placement that has clearly a symbolical

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[16] Achille Bonito Oliva, "Zeroglifico metonimico", in *Geiger*, n.3, 1969

[17] Tim Hodgkinson, "Interview with Pierre Schaeffer", from *Recommended Records Quarterly Magazine*, vol.2, n.1, 1987

value and is more than just the representation of an oral tale about a hunting scene. It must have been however connected to an oral context of which it reproduced values spatially. This example underscores once again the value of multidimensional writing and its independence, or at least concurrent relationship to the voice and its "limited" linear expression. It is with the reduction of graphic symbols to lines, with the introduction of linear writing, that the seeds of the phonographic dimension are laid and begin their growth. From symbols, figures estranged from the concept of "oral notation" to signs arranged in horizontal or vertical lines that are connected to the activity of reading out loud. There is a shift: from a balance between the hand, with its language related to vision and mouth, related to hearing, where the gesture interprets the word and the word comments on graphic expression, to the phonetisation and linear rearrangement of graphical language which is therefore completely subordinated to verbal, linear, phonetic language. The linguistic apparatus unites.

To the question if this was a necessary stage in the evolution of mankind and whether it was inconceivable preserving the independence of the two dimensions, one could seek response by entering the field of comparative linguistics and confront different writing systems. For example, a brief examination of the Chinese writing system demonstrates that a preservation of graphic signs with different values is possible, since it unites more or less "linear" phonetic elements with their iconographic nature. Leroi-Gourhan states that "Chinese writing is considered as a language of words, every sign representing not a letter but the sound of a word. Ambiguity arises, because the Chinese word has, across the centuries, turned from polysyllabic to monosyllabic. As a result, 1) linear writing is basically a series of words-syllabi of difficult understanding without the help of the visual or mental image of the correspondent signs; 2) spoken language has reconstructed numerous polysyllabic units by combining monosyllabic words ; the written notation of spoken language is then a syllabic writing. [...] However, ancient Chinese inscriptions as combinations of figures characterise the object or the action with an aura that greatly surpasses the restrictive meaning of words in linear writing systems. To give the idea of 'peace' by depicting a woman under a roof opens up a "mytographic" perspective, since it doesn't correspond neither to the transcription of a sound nor to the graphic representation of an act or attribute, but to the pairing of two images that come into play with all their profound ethnical

context."[18] Chinese writing is an unprecedented state of balance in human history, and shows that such an equilibrium is not achieved easily, probably also not befitting every kind of society. One has to acknowledge the limitation of its own linguistic system of provenience in order to bend its rules, as did Schöneberg through the twelve-tone music that relied on the same elements but rejected every kind of previously established set of relationships. Spatola, in a similar way, attempts to push the system of connections between letters further apart and jeopardise the production of standardised meaning. His approach intends to highlight the "negatives" of phonographic writing and create a language of the void, a system where the absence of traditional connections between letters create new visual, poetic and linguistic tropes in the eyes and mind of the receiver. Visual and sound poet Arrigo Lora-Totino stated in 1967 that "Spatola's articulations are born as microadventures of fragmented signs; a broken language then reconstructed which becomes pre-language, visual event of blacks and whites that could paradoxically be read in phonetic fashion, as trace, as shadow of alphabetical letters or shards of sentence."[19] Lora-Totino's opinion was the one of a true researcher in the same field, both in visual and sound practices. His collection of sound pieces "Phonemes", recorded in Turin's experimental music studio in 1965, is the attempt to establish a sonic equivalent of silence/words symmetrical to that of blank spaces and printed words. This was an investigation into the ambiguous differences existing between the minimal vocal units, which are not yet interpretable, and the articulations, which are already significant, linguistically speaking. Lora-Totino segmented the spoken event, previously recorded on tape, into more or less brief fragments by means of electronic filters. The language was almost completely destroyed, only here and there emerged shattered significant moments. This approach was the direct inspiration for the auditory translation of Spatola's concepts in "The Hand & The Mouth". The speaking voice reads a text which tackles with poetic and evocative formulations the issue of a hierarchical relationship between hand and mouth in the era of phonographic writing - a manifesto of sorts. Meanwhile, little fragments of the vocal discourse are separated and put on a second channel, and while the text progresses, the channels drift slowly apart in the stereo image, up to the point where the left side becomes the "negative" of the right side and shards of words travel back

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[18] Andrè Leroi-Gourhan, Ibid.

[19] Giovanni Fontana, Ibid.

and forth between the two extremes. The intelligibility of the discourse is still not completely lost, one is able to understand, as the piece progresses, that the content is directly related to the process which unfolds throughout the composition, using it as experimental material. Meaning is not completely banished, but it becomes a background element while the phonetic and onomatopoeic qualities of speech are highlighted.

When discussing experiments in onomatopoeic features of language, one has to mention, as we did previously, L. Berio and C. Berberian's "Thema: Omaggio a Joyce", composed between 1958 and 1959 at the Studio di Fonologia in Milan. *Thema* is a sound piece where voice and electronics interact to emphasise the vocal palette of timbres and noises in spite of the text, an extract from Joyce's Ulysses. The piece is part of a longer radio feature in collaboration with Umberto Eco that dwells on the same thematics through comparative audio examples from different cultures and linguistic traditions. This project reflects perfectly the interdisciplinary studies carried out at the Studio di Fonologia, where the goal was the construction of a new musical form based on the oscillation between music, literature and multimedia. In the extended version of Omaggio a Joyce as part of the radio feature, a small segment of Berberian reciting Joyce's text without any electronic intervention stands out. The text is read out twice, the first time in ordinary fashion, while the second time another take of the same material is superimposed on Berberian's voice, but in slight delay to each other. This very basic technique has however a surprisingly effective outcome in emphasising the phonetic and expressive features of the vocal articulation to the disadvantage of the text itself, which loses its intelligibility. Nevertheless, one could argue that such shift in perceptual perspective was first and foremost the goal of Joyce himself and it only serves to enhance rather than damage the underlying purpose of such a text.

The delay technique is applied in "The Hand & The Mouth" as well, and one of the two channels slowly drifts ahead by about 300 milliseconds. Slowly, the interplay between fragments turns from a scenario of concurrence to creation of meaning and then to one of battle and antagonism; letters overlapping each other, escaping proper syntactical arrangement. Ultimately, phonographic language is not eliminated, but its identity is put into question, a question left open to further approaches, developments and practices.
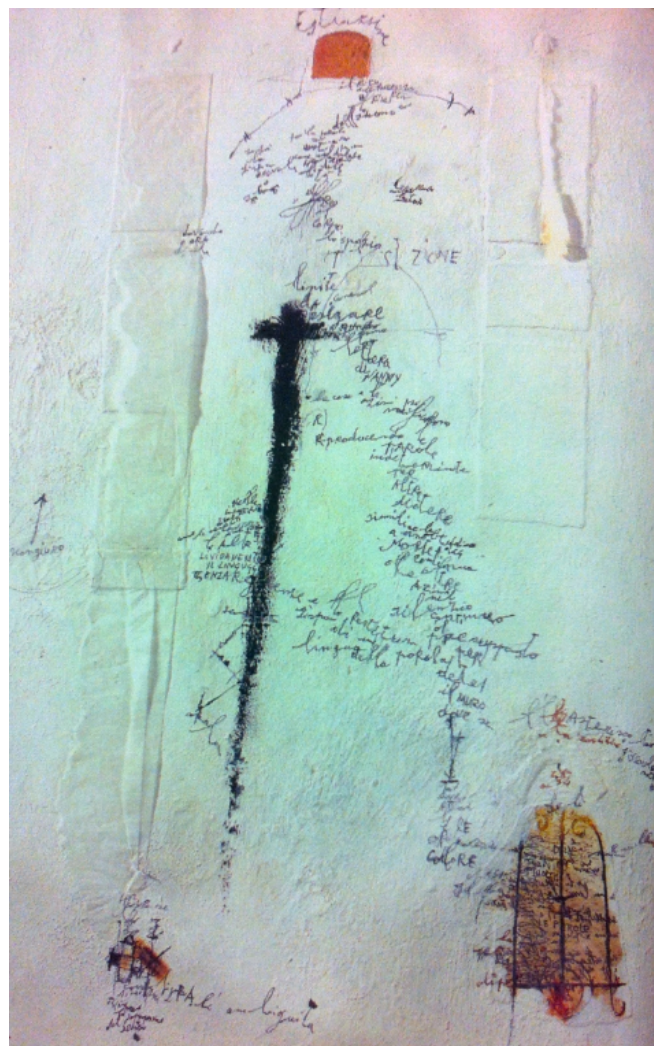
The first thing that strikes the eye looking at a work by Magdalo Mussio (Volterra, 1925 – 2006) is the emptiness. The term emptiness would usually indicate scarceness of elements, which is not the case with Mussio. In fact, his visual compositions are a rather comprehensive mixture of different elements: written alphabet, functional signs, obscure symbols that could belong to an unknown iconography, violent traces that impose themselves in the visual field, mixtures of colours and dense clusters of handwritten material where different meanings have been superimposed too many times to still be graspable. This whole complex imaginary dominates the visual field, but seems to lack of presence compared to the depth of the background, the "page": it is not really one page, but many. Layers of materials are overlaid and elude the bi-dimensionality of the page to create a canvas that appears to be stronger in connotation than the elements that are organised onto it. It is a question of sediment, of showing the inevitable presence of the support on which forms and signs are inscribed. The complexity of the medium is immediately addressed and becomes an organic, living background, and the eye cannot avoid the confrontation with it, nor can the visual elements that take up the role of figures against such a background. In a monographic publication, Mussio is referred to as the "pilgrim of signs." [20] Such a characterisation well suits the style in which the components of his works are arranged in space; there is no apparent logic, no clear structure, but neither is it uncontrolled chaos. A creative process, an operating procedure, a symbolic pilgrimage through the signs is present, but veiled.

Another fact that stands out in reading literature about the work of Magdalo Mussio, is how most of the authors tend to use writing styles that differ from the one of classic academic essays but instead focus on associative and imaginative paradigms, confusing the personal dimension of the author with their own, the dimension of the work with more general social, cultural and philosophical agendas. This might be a personal misinterpretation of who's writing, but to a certain degree the poetics of Mussio's work force the receiver into a state of psychological disarray and engage him on a rather individual level, left alone with signs of unclear meaning, where the message, if present, is even more vague. A theme often associated with Mussio is that of memory. This theme manifests itself in a number of ways in his works. Firstly, there is memory as an operational method, where single elements are connected but avoid any rational

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[20] V.A., *Magdalo Mussio: Il pellegrino dei segni*, Le stanze dell'otium ed., 2005

logic and are evanescent products of a phantasmagoria that open up relationships to the magical, the oneiric, the mysterious. Memory also as the activator of the creative process (both in production and reception) and as bridge between the different languages that concur in Mussio's style. In his essay "Quale Segno" (Which Sign), V. Accame claims that "in Mussio's work, the word dematerialises itself, becomes almost ghost of its own presence. While still retaining intelligibility on the verbal stage, it dissolves in a climate of enumeration, deprived of tangible meaning. It is a case of visual writing that tends to painting [...] or, concretely, it is one of those cases in which the distances between poetry and painting are suspended while still retaining all the 'poetical' sense of the word."[21] There is, according to Accame, a fundamental trait of the poetic practice (or, broadly, the literary area of artistic production) that is missing in painting; it is the ambiguity of the word. Poetry is the realm of ambiguity par excellence and uses its full potential to realise its impalpable nature. Such feature is lacking − or not sought after − in prose or painting, where a certain word is chosen precisely because of its "concrete" character, to define something that would otherwise remain in the domain of vagueness or the abstract. The most telling example of this approach has to do with the role of the word as caption for a visual artwork where it becomes the conceptual frame in which the oeuvre resides. In some cases the header does not only provide context, but is the defining sector of the artwork itself, as in the series of photographs *Norden Süden Osten Westen* (1979) by Heinz Gappmayr where four similar photos of a clear sky acquire meaning as geographical directions − south, north, east and west − only thanks to the caption itself and allows the receiver to descend one level further into the artwork's consumption. This is not the case with Mussio, as his approach might be described, as L. Pignotti states, more as "verbal painting than visual poetry"[22]. It is a dimension where boarders are blurred, following in the footsteps of the interdisciplinary research that defined such a great deal of the experiences between 1960s and 1970s. However, the blur appears to be not the consequence of an institutionalised thought, an act of adherence to an artistic trend, but much more the natural outcome of a personal sensibility that has always been transiting on the fringes of visual art, poetry and graphic design (in the latter field, Mussio contributed as designer and editor of the cult publication Marcatrè), and mixes

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[21] Vincenzo Accame, *Quale Segno,* ANS ed., 1993

[22] Lamberto Pignotti, *Ricordo di Magdalo Mussio*, 2006

practices to craft a direct insight into the psychological dimension of the author. In his works, chromatic forms and written and verbal signs painted, and the constellation of symbols — linguistic, graphical, abstract — travels in unknown territories and mutates shape and direction; it is an organism with a life rhythm of its own. The written language is far beyond communication purposes, but through its unsettling presence, its oblique articulations and abstruse syntactical structure, it transmits linguistic value to the abstract shapes that appear in its vicinity. What the fragmentation of phonographic language could not accomplish in matters of reaffirming the independence of the sign from speech and shifting the balance of the written discourse towards the ideographic or symbolic dimension is here achieved with what appears to be the simple juxtaposition of symbolic, graphical and linguistic, while in reality is a complex system of cross-references, filtered through one of the most extraordinary personas of the Italian artistic panorama.

It appears therefore quite complicated to tackle the artwork of Mussio without an insight into his personality; even without relying on a great deal of information he seems to leak through his works and imprint onto the mind of the receiver. Nor is there an appropriate equivalent in the parallel dimension of the auditory among the sound poetry experiences of the same period. The methodology for the vocal translation in "The Hand & The Mouth" is different from the ones used in precedence and afterwards; it is the attempt at a direct translation of the elements in one of Mussio's artworks. In a certain way, his visual piece was considered a graphical score.

The first step was to categorise the different elements present in his artwork, where three distinct entities stand out: background, alphabetical signs and graphical symbols. The subsequent step was then to recreate the interactions and connections between layers to recreate the narrative character present in Mussio's work. As already stated, the background fulfils a role that is way more central than just a support on which to inscribe; it is "empty" but already filled by its own language in the same way as a section of a tree trunk shows its aging. The practice chosen to re-interpret this feature involved as starting material text by Mussio himself, *Monodico,* a long poem in prose without any kind of punctuation, where the linearity of the storyline is broken from constant shifts in narrative perspectives. The performer, Camilla Vatne Barrat-Due read out a section of it. Since the poem is in Italian, Camilla was not able to grasp the meaning of her own words; she therefore proposed to structure the reading as a learning task, that is, spelling the text out loud while copying it on paper. This idea

perfectly reflects, in the broader structure, the point of coincidence between speech and writing at the very centre of "The Hand & The Mouth", as if in this brief moment the two dimensions would come in contact, only to drift apart soon after. Moreover, the accent of Camilla's mother tongue, Norwegian, applied to Italian words results in a linguistic rupture, a cultural gap between different alphabetical systems that reaffirm the power of ambiguity, even in a self-referential structure like phonographical language.

The following step is the translation of alphabetical signs, signs that even if intelligible are the expression of a psychological dimension more than of an attempt at communicating. In this sense, the approach was directly connected to the background, and structured as some sort of spontaneous reaction, a train of thoughts triggered by shards of background words to imitate the sound and articulation of the voice spelling out those alien words, relating them to intelligible words from the cultural baggage of the voice/the actor herself. Between the first two layers a reaction is therefore immediately established. A further response involves the subsequent layers, the graphical symbols, strictly non formalised linguistic entities that still retain a strong degree of intentionality and communicate it through the shape, the thickness, the trait. A fitting parallel would be a vocal sound not articulated into speech but having nonetheless a clear and universally accepted meaning; the choice falls in this case on the sound of laughter. It is, however, not only laughter which provides a strong, immediate connotation for the whole piece. It is also connected to other layers and reacts not with them as singular entities but to their intermingling. Through the nonsensical association that occasionally come into being laughter fulfils therefore a second role, the one of guide through the internal dynamics of the "interpretational pilgrimage" between different graphical/vocal components. The fact that irony becomes the central key around which the sound piece revolves, strongly dissociating itself from the uncanny, unsettling themes and aesthetics of Mussio's work is not a structural decision but the natural outcome of the practice, one that in both cases strongly relies on the personality of the practitioner: it appears therefore to be absolutely consequent to this kind of approach and shows how the dualism between alphabetical and iconographical language regains a balance through the personal dimension, unbound by the standards of collective communication.

The next stage is directly connected to the dichotomy individual/collective and reflects a different way of engaging the interaction between word and image. To describe such way, Carrega employs in his "Scrittura Attiva" the term *pragmatic writing*, meaning, with that, a method that strongly relies on the tools of irony and de-contextualisation to instil new, highly critical and "ideologically charged" meaning into the poetic discourse. Its key feature is the direct relation to the present tense and the social body, since its purpose is to analyse and comment on the behaviour of such a body: the mass and its collective consciousness opposed to the individual instances that inhabit it and the discrepancies that arise from such contradiction, alongside the need for attuning art practice to the new dimensions of a consumerist civilisation. An attempted confrontation with this new reality and its products is the topic that characterises the whole work of Corrado D'Ottavi (Rome, 1934 – Genoa,1984). The political dimension is a key feature of D'Ottavi's work and artistic identity in a very personal way, however. As a member of the Communist Party for the major part of his life, the Genoese artist tried to keep the dimensions of artistic production and political involvement separated. In spite of this, the always-recurring delusions from his activity in the party kept bleeding into his poetic practice as a means to express the discomfort of a highly idealistic man that is constantly confronted with the mechanisms of flawed politics and bureaucratic conservation of the status quo. A very interesting and unique consequence of this cross-influence - aside from the keen social and political criticism that is the main thematic feature of D'Ottavi's work - is the way such elements influenced his research in new forms of poetical practice. The investigation of inter-linguistic instances that systematically explore the relationship between different linguistic materials, starting from their context of provenience, as well as the in-depth analysis and renovation of communication tools, beginning with the study and critic of the mass media, is what ties together formal experiments in visual poetry with ideological commitment, a pairing that otherwise produced many inconclusive results. The theft of linguistic tools and techniques between mass communication and experimental verbovisual practices goes both ways. Commercials and journalism have immediately adopted the registers of irony, contradiction and decontextualisation, transforming them in to some kind of studied auto-criticism to offer a more up to date and fresh vision of the message. They later on incorporated the formal aspects and tools of artistic research, tools that D'Ottavi pioneered in his practice. The most

prominent is the one of montage technique, mostly related to linear verbal fragments and pictures. The collage method has been employed extensively and with various outcomes throughout the history of Italian visual poetry, its most recognised proponents being the aforementioned Florentine Gruppo 63, with the likes of Lamberto Pignotti, Eugenio Miccini as well as by key personalities as Nanni Balestrini and Stelio Maria Martini. D'Ottavi's work anticipated those operators' experiences and reached surprising levels of interaction and organic relationship between visual and verbal materials, thoroughly incorporating the experiences of historical vanguards (Futurism, Dadaism as well as Constructivism and Surrealism) on the text/image connections, while adventurously incorporating the approaches of advertisement mechanisms and tabloid press. The result is a lucid criticism of the mystifying procedures employed by mass media, while the goal is to avoid arid criticism and exposure of the flaws in present day communication dynamics, as much as the destructive, self-isolating approach of movements at the beginning of the century. Instead, it is a constructive, positive approach to develop new linguistic frames for ideological criticism, a task that has in artistic practice its main champion.

Through his work, D'Ottavi exposes the instrumentalisation the dichotomy verbal/visual has undergone; the newspaper page is the primary example in this regard and the resulting dissociation of signifier and signified. The newspaper page is not constructed following a logic of correspondence between two such elements, instead it takes into account the visual aspect of reading a text, the required time for reading and the associative possibilities, all of which are superimposed on the linguistic content and alter it radically. The newspaper page then is not a neutral support for the written language but becomes, similarly to a painting, a visual field, where grey lines of characters are juxtaposed with elements of immediate readability (images, comic strips) and titles that immediately grasp the eye's attention. The reading mechanism diverts from a linear logic and enters the visual domain where bigger shapes are prominent and information is scattered in a network of associations and the constant back and forth movement of the reader's eye.

Decontextualisation is the key for the appropriation of the tools of mass communication. However, it does not suffice to carry out the socio-political criticism on a formal level, exposing the exploitation of such tools through inversion of meaning and irony. Therefore, and this is where the montage technique in D'Ottavi's work stands out from the other artists engaged with collage work, re-contextualisation is the

next step which provides a frame for the abrasive criticism and becomes the canvas in which the fragments of material are put together to sustain a meaningful statement, where all formal aspects concur to a common assertion. His works are thoroughly assembled mosaics where different types of fonts, character dimensions, images, common and abstruse symbols (road signs as much as handwritten hieroglyphics) and colours come together in a surprisingly tight and organic fashion and result thus in the creation of clear and straightforward poetical content. The ambiguity is absent from the message itself, but is present as the unifying factor, the "glue" that sticks all shards of meaning together on the page. D'Ottavi's pragmatic writing is charged with political denunciation in all its facets, but even when doing so the intent of the artist was not to "use" poetry as a means of political action but rather as research for new paradigms, and to a certain extent as an outlet for the personal frustration in the field of activism. As it is with Mussio, there is a great deal of the artist's personality as primary filter that directs and contextualises his poetic output. It is perfectly in line with the context of a practice which is ultimately describing the alienated condition of the individual, lost inside the mechanism of standardised communication; it appears that D'Ottavi regards himself as the "test subject" to fully engage the arid dynamics of mass media and move through its chain links by means of his practice which becomes both tool and testimony – of and against the struggle.

Aside from his verbovisual work, he applies the same methodology and esthetical approach to classic, linear poetry. One of the most intense results in this field is called "What is Poetry", a poem that narrates the experience of a highway trip. The highway and its dynamics, the way automobiles react to each other, the no man's land of the pit stop become incidences in a metaphoric, dark tale about alienation, loss of identity and the hopelessness of belonging to an indifferent collective mechanism which rules are obscure to the single individual. In "The Hand & The Mouth" Giacomo Gianetta reads out an English translation of D'Ottavi's poem. Its straightforward and simple structure leaves room enough for the performer to experiment with speech rhythm, intonation and dynamic and therefore charge it with strong, critical connotations. Giacomo's reading rhythm is relentless, without pauses and consciously limits the opportunities he has to take breaths. These factors result in a crescendo throughout the piece, both in pitch and volume, and leaves at the conclusion an exhausted, powerless voice that has given away all its energy during the metaphorical highway

trip, the image of slowly grinding the kilometres well represented by the restless speech.

Reading poetry is a performance practice in itself and has countless ramifications concerning the methods and practical approaches of carrying out the practice. Exemplary in this respect, is African-American political poetry of the 1960s, connected to the so-called Black Nationalist civil rights movement and the group, the Last Poets. The group featured an ever-changing assemblage of poets and musicians, and anticipated greatly the rise of hip-hop music as means to discuss matters of social inequality. Their style, especially in the material of the 1960s, is stripped down to the bare essentials, voices and percussions. This percussive element has the critical task to create a rhythmic structure that not only works as a grid for the articulation of the *rap* to fit it, but also to set the tempo of speech, giving it a strong connotation of urgency and need for resolution. This kind of approach to poetical material had all the necessary traits to formulate a vocal translation of pragmatic writing.

The following stage dealt with the issue of montage technique in the auditory dimension, and particularly with speech. One figure stands out as representative of such approaches and is impossible to avoid. Brion Gysin (Bucks, 1916 – Paris, 1986) was a surrealist painter, poet, novelist and audio experimenter, a stunningly creative mind that pioneered the technique of cut-up together with William Burroughs and translated it into vocal practice through means of tape recording. His audio cut-ups presented the startling impact of linking words, sounds and time through juxtaposition. The development of the audio permutation poem, another characterising technique of Gysin, added variability through spacing and inflection, lending it characteristics that impossible to mimic on the printed page. "IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD THE BEGINNING WAS IN THE WORD THE WAS IN THE BEGINNING WORD THE WORD WAS IN THE BEGINNING BEGINNING THE WAS THE IN WORD WORD WAS IN THE BEGINNING". This fragment of Gysin's poem "In the beginning was the word", recorded in the mid-sixties, displays the permutation technique which brings the cut-up further into the realm of semantics and working with recombination and repetition to show the transitions and modifications in meaning and context without experiencing the technical "gaps" of the collage. Such gaps, however, are critical in D'Ottavi's work, because it's in there, as mentioned before, that the poetic ambiguity resides in his work. Therefore, the cut-up experiments are more fitting to this method. In Gysin the fragments are considered for their different semantic content; the question was how to reproduce a differentiation

not in content but form. Once again the answer was related to the process of de- and re-contextualisation. The choice was made not to utilise different materials for words, images and symbols but to concentrate on one single element, since the final output in D'Ottavi's work is indeed a unified one. The readout of the poem had therefore to remain intelligible in its message but shift between different contexts of provenience. The solution was then to playback the speech recording in different rooms with different acoustical characteristics and paste them together. The result achieves to stress the importance of the different contextual sources, since abrupt changes in the room's reflections modes create clear divisions in the material, even more so in case of vocal material where the listener's ear is concentrated on understanding the speech content-wise.

At this stage, the voice and the sign are deep into linguistic territories and don't question their role as vehicles of "standardised" meaning — exactly out of this reason the focus of the ear and the eye concentrate on other factors, on the mediums that surround both vehicles and are never a completely neutral environment but always bring along a degree of meaningful connotation. Language cannot escape context.
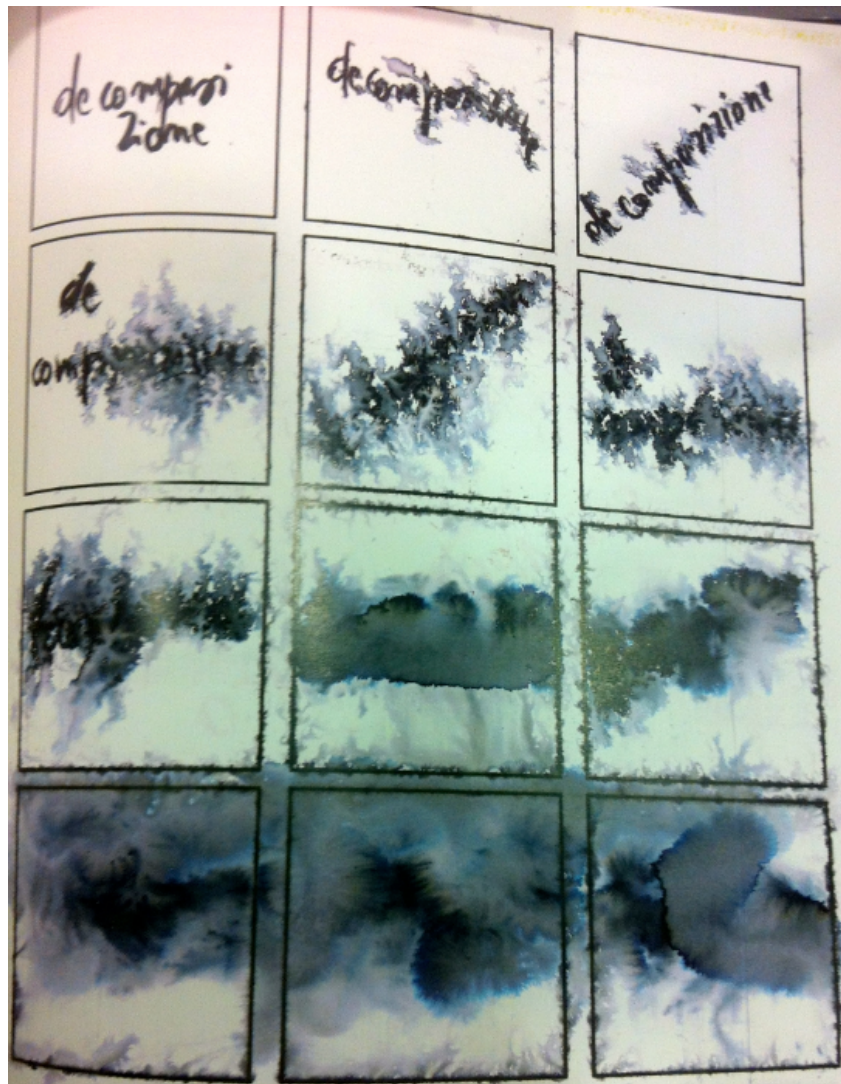
The body of writing, just as the body of life, is flux. This statement is found in the last chapter of "The Hand & The Mouth", but could easily be ascribed as the working ethos of Ugo Carrega (Genoa, 1936 – Milan, 2014). The choice to put the chapter dedicated to him at the end of "The Hand & The Mouth" is not only a tribute to his book "Scrittura Attiva" as first catalyst to this project, nor is it because of his direct or indirect connection to every other author dealt with in previous chapters. It is mainly because of the attitude he held towards his own artistic practice, one that strongly relies on the concept of a "work in progress". It is a particular feature of some artists to remain coherent throughout their activity, neither in content nor in the aesthetic prepositions, not even in the methodology, but in the firm belief that each product was nothing but the expression of a certain stage in their artistic and biological life. One might object that such a condition is part of every creative experience, and indeed it is, but the fact of acknowledging such about one's practice does change the way the practice itself is carried out. When confronted with such artists, one has to take into account the totality of artworks and read the network of connections that are built between the single instances to fully realise the creative process as frame and container for the whole body of work that becomes a tracing, divided into more or less seamless stages, of the creative activity itself. This is not to suggest that Carrega was employing all the methods previously discussed in this paper, but nevertheless, as a cultural operator, essayist, philosopher as well as poet, he was aware of each one of them and, if not by directly promoting the artists himself, had confronted his practice with theirs. Carrega is the finest example of the Italian visual poet as one who never adheres to a movement but crafts their approach through constant engagement with the artworks of others and his own. As a result, Carrega's poetical style, credo and effort respond to a logic of inclusion, not exclusion. "What I write must present how I write it", stated Carrega in 1968, and again, "I always keep in mind that the poet's activity (today more than ever) comes down not only to doing poetry but to clarifying rules and propagating them."[23] The focus of his practice is on the technical procedures of writing not only as forms of expression to fix a certain meaning, but also as skill for conceptual elaboration, where the results identify themselves with their creative acts. From this perspective, the mind, the hand and its trace are all placed on the same

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[23] Ilaria Bignotti, "Ugo Carrega: Dal segno-immagine alla parola-forma", from *La mente in mano*, Fondazione Berardelli ed., 2007

level. In line with the thesis of Leroi-Gourhan that the technological evolution of society has put an end to multidimensional writing and confined it into linear alphabetical representation for the sake of utilitarianism, Carrega sets out to invert the very same path and reacquire the "lost dimensions" of writing. The object of such poetical and linguistic research focuses first and foremost on such "shadow zones" that are not exemplified and fully grasped by conventional written language, but are vital to the artist, since imperfections and inexplicable factors open up the realm of polysemy, indeterminacy and ambiguity to forge a new writing.

"Symbiotic writing deals with the connotative values of language, those content and formal values that need a great deal of words to be described, that symbiotic writing proposes to retrieve synthetically (in typical fashion of poetic practice). To write the same word in a hundred different ways is to provide a hundred different modes of the same concept to affirm a linguistic process, the flux."[24] The idea of the new writing is then to craft a language that does not preoccupy itself with describing the other-than-self but instead shifts the focus on its internal creative processes, its self-making, its becoming. It is not about reaffirming form over content, signifier over signified, "two faces of the same coin. If we would toss that coin, we would have equal odds at getting the one or the other outcome. But what are the odds the coin lands on its narrow side? The new writing deals with those odds."[25] It is therefore a practice based on the synthesis of both, seeking a balance between both. It is a practice that sees in culture the body of codes and signs that represent the activity of mankind towards nature, with the purpose of effecting nature, and considers writing the attempt to reach, through language, a deeper knowledge of reality.

Symbiotic writing is a system where everything converges on a return to the unified, original body of writing, where every element on the page (including the page, or generally speaking, the support itself) "makes sense" as itself and becomes integrated part of a linguistic system in which every element becomes vehicle of meaning, not only the word. It is then a language of writing, of inscription that Carrega is talking about. A language of writing where symbol and representation interact with physical substance, the support upon which to inscribe meaning and describe the act itself. A writing that always writes about itself even when writing about other than the self.

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[24] Ilaria Bignotti, Ibid.

[25] Giorgio Zanichetti, *Emorragia dell'io: l'esperimento di poesia di Ugo Carrega*, ANS ed., 1995

The key feature of such practice, the one that had to be translated into the auditory dimension above all other (or maybe the only one which could), is the dynamic character, the ever-evolving nature of such a practice and its ways of incorporating common language, sentences and words into a wider dimension. As much as Carrega's approach is not the sum of the previous ones, nor could the sound piece in "The Hand & The Mouth" echo each one of the voices that had preceded the voice of who's writing now. The piece was built around the idea of a list configuration (once again the aforementioned work of Heidsieck comes to mind), the enunciation of different contexts in which to observe the body of writing and its evolution. The list was then translated into Italian and German, so you would have the same content said three times simultaneously in different languages, with different intonation that related to the peculiarities in accent and pronunciation of the different languages. The stress of the piece is put on the first word of each sentence, "through" ("durch", "attraverso"); conceptually it is a fitting indicator of the movement that underlines the new writing's activity, quasi navigation through society and cultural patterns. The word "through" is not repeated for every element of the list, instead after the first time it is looped with a pause afterwards, a pause long enough to finish the different sentence each time. Since the length of the pause is fixed, it creates some unnatural changes in the speech rhythm to make sure every time that the sentence finishes before the loop is reiterated; the rhythmical contrast between a fixed pulsation given by the word "through" and the uneven, oddly artificial articulation of each new sentence is brought to a greater level of complexity through the two additional languages that rely on different sentence structures and rhythms as a result of the translation practice and the natural distinctive traits of each language. The fact that the same word has a different length leads to three individual pulses that play in unison at the beginning of the piece but slowly drift off in a phasing process akin to the techniques employed by Steve Reich in his aforementioned early tape pieces; the phasing here, since it is between three acoustically different materials, is transported onto the semantic level instead of the one of articulation. The goal is, through the density of the three simultaneous linguistic layers and the contrast between rhythmically fixed and uneven structures to draw the listener into a state of confusion and detachment from the single signified, to "access" that dimension of polysemy and ambiguity that once again appears to be the ultimate way to escape the linearity of speech and recover the lost

multidimensionality of language, to grant the sign/ the voice its irrational, symbolic and magic values.
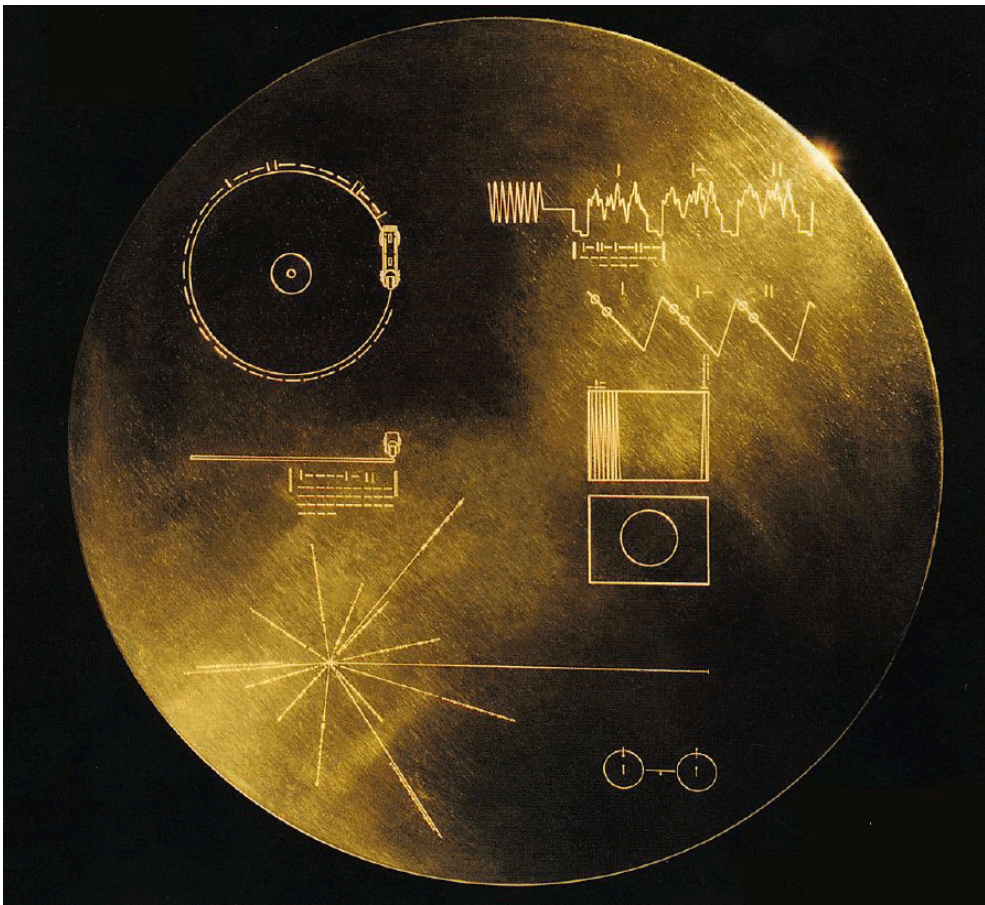
"The Hand & The Mouth" terminates with the chapter on symbiotic writing. Obviously, further developments exist beyond Carrega's approach and already in the Italian scene many more practices could be discussed. The impression is, however, that beyond the different stages in the sign's evolutionary history discussed in this essay lies an artistic landscape that keeps expanding, as does the universe from the Big Bang. This expanding multiplicity of the poetic act encompasses traits nurtured in previous moments, some of which have been covered in this exposition, most of which date back to historical moments and settings that have only been briefly mentioned, others eluded our attention completely. The constant evolution of practices related to writing is not anymore the exclusive topic of one artistic stream but has spread and contaminated itself to better fit the zeitgeist of our era. The achievement of visual poetry has been to tackle a major theme, which is the use of sign in multiple and different linguistic dimensions, a theme quintessentially intertwined with our cultural and artistic past and attempted to revitalise the methodologies through which it is taken into consideration, adapt it to the increasing blur of the borders between artistic genres and acknowledge the need for a certain degree of scientific rigour in verbovisual research, while retaining the playfulness, the instinctive character and the scope of emotionality that is customary of poetry. Today's experiments in the field still rely upon that conception and have given birth to the most varied outcomes given the changes that the written medium has undergone in the western world. The very conclusion of "The Hand & The Mouth" deals in part with these adjustments and broadly with the issue of differentiation between technical supports for the written and the spoken. Writing is always mediated through its support – the page, the substance in which gesture and meaning are inscribed. Sound vibrations are also carried through a medium, most commonly air, but no traces of it were left on the medium until the advent of recording technology, when a sound could be carved into the grooves of a material and played back through loudspeakers. However, the act of playback – as the name itself indicates – suggests the nature of activity that is connected to the possibility of accessing and re-accessing the medium, an activity that cannot escape its linear temporality, without which a record loses its nature of medium and becomes nothing more than an obsolete piece of material. What would happen if the listener would be missing the knowledge to retrieve information on the medium? In 1977, NASA launched two space exploration missions, the Voyagers, that each contained a golden record compiling tracks which were to exemplify the achievements of mankind in the

field of music. On the cover of the album, symbolic guidelines are written addressing imaginary alien species to instruct them on how to play back the record. Interestingly enough, one language's medium holds the key to its fruition by becoming the support of another language, one that, if maybe not universally understandable is at least considered universally accessible. Multidimensional symbolic writing has survived not only in the realm of irrational, ritual and magical thought but also in the scientific one. The last sound heard on "The Hand & The Mouth" is the background noise of microphone pre-amplifiers. It is the sonic equivalent of the paper's grain and the listener is invited to confront the dimension that precedes the gesture of the hand and the mouth, the empty space before the act. It is, somehow, a deception: it conveys materiality to a support that is ultimately a string of digital audio samples, intangible and virtual. But so is, metaphorically, every inch of empty surface around us, until the trace is imprinted on it and its function as support is brought into existence. Once again, the trace as link between the I and the world.

The concept of the whole project as an investigation does not imply necessarily a formal closure, or a defining statement about sign and speech. The question if the written is a self-sufficient language is left open to those who build the language through its everyday use. It might be for a certain period in history, and then again it might not. It might in a certain art practice and not in ordinary communication. It might in Oriental and not Western culture, in the symbolic dimension and not in the "concrete", alphabetical one. The written has undoubtedly the potential and the characteristics of being a self-sufficient language, therefore the investigation has to be carried on and the analysis through poetic tools appears to be in retrospect among the best fitted for this purpose since poetic tools don't restrict a word to a static meaning but handle it as an organic being: reactive, flexible, emanating presence and movement altogether.

Through visual poetry and verbovisual experimental practices, the sign is more alive than ever and mutates everyday in its nature, in its context of use, in its relation to ourselves.

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