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**Mirella
Bentivoglio**

Selected Works
1966—2012

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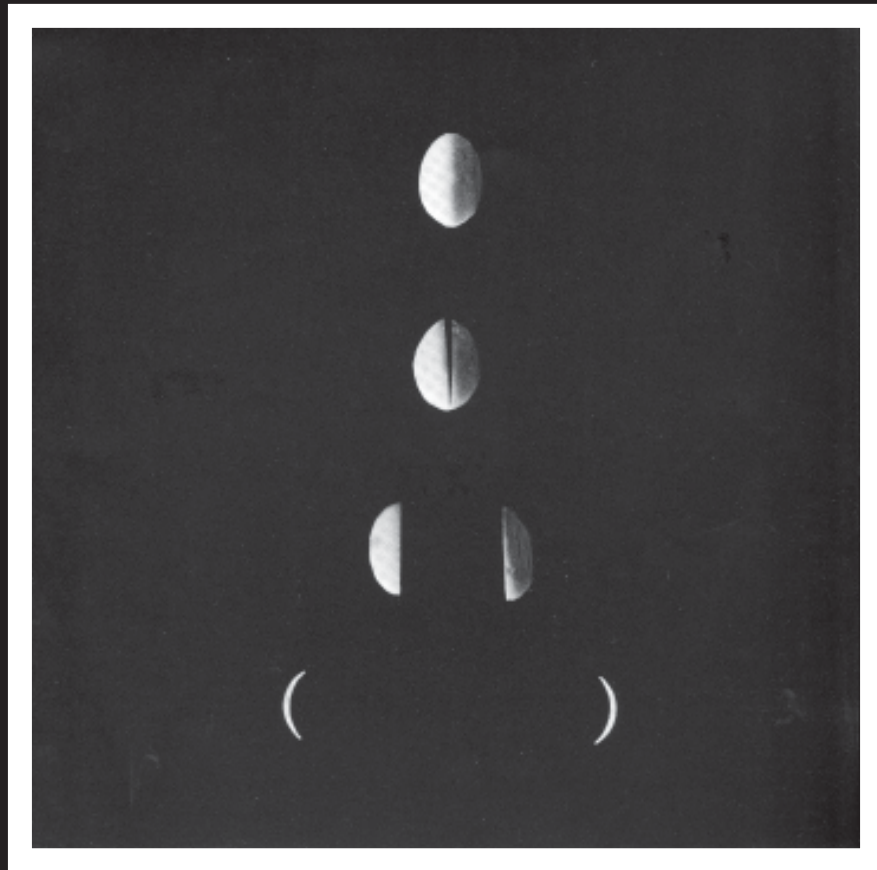


FIGURE 16 —
Eclissi (da simbolo a segno) (Eclipse
[from Symbol to Sign]), 1981. Photograph, 8% × 8% in. (21.91 × 21.91 cm).

**INTERVIEW
WITH MIRELLA
BENTIVOGLIO**

Benjamin Kersten

INTERVIEW WITH MIRELLA BENTIVOGLIO

Benjamin Kersten

The following interview took place in Rome at the home of Mirella Bentivoglio on June 3 and June 8, 2013.

——BEN KERSTEN——

You are an artist who works in many genres—as a poet, sculptor, performance artist, concrete poet and visual poet. Do people who write about your work tend to emphasize one part of your artistic practice over another? How would you describe the relationship between your various bodies of work?

——MIRELLA BENTIVOGLIO——

Art critics who write about my work generally consider it Visual Poetry, in spite of its having resemblance to sculpture. There is a continuous back and forth in my work from meaning to form. For instance, my large wooden *Hyper Ovum* (1987) (Figure 17) is a sort of sculptural version of my graphic work *Eclissi (Eclipse)* (1981) (Figure 16), where the disappearance of the egg creates the parentheses. In the three-dimensional version, this idea has become an egg of air, whose contours are a number of parentheses. If I have to sum up my various bodies of work in one word, I will choose the word “poetry.”



——BK——

Have you found any one particular medium (e.g. stone, metal, paper) more suitable for conveying the relationship between image and word? Is there a medium you have yet to experiment with that you would like to try?

——MB——

Yes, I have found a particular medium that I consider very suitable to my poetic world. It is stone, the crust of our planet. The veins of the stone are the writings of earth. And there are no media with which I did not try to work if I was interested in them.

——BK——

You often use found objects or materials from the world of consumer culture in your work. When did you start to do this, and why?

——MB——

I started at once, in the middle of the sixties, when I left painting and verse poetry. The withdrawal of objects or materials from the world of consumer culture allows me to turn upside down the given meanings in a concentrated way. What I am looking for is always “coincidence.”

——BK——

You deal with the world of consumer culture when it comes to products like Coca-Cola (Plate 24). Do you deal with the consumption of art as well?

——MB——

Yes, I did some ironic works that contained criticisms about considering art on the basis of its financial value within the art market, considering it just as a good investment, in some cases even condemning it to silence inside the obscurity of a safe-deposit box. But I did not mean to criticize the existence of an art system itself. Without a free market, art would be controlled by political powers, as happened in the Soviet Union, with the awful results that we all know.

——BK——

Your work does raise questions about systems of authority (e.g. religious, political, economic). Do you think it is possible for artists to alter these systems through their work?

——MB——

I hope so. It takes a great deal of time, but using this new kind of poetry to stimulate people's sense of criticism of such established structures may be productive.

——BK——

In particular, much of your work deals with legal, religious, medical, and social challenges faced by women in a patriarchal culture. Is this work informed by any particular feminist writers or artists, by your own personal experiences, or both?

——MB——

Feminist writers have influenced my work, but I have learned a lot from my personal experiences. I had to give up many opportunities for communication with a large audience because of my role as a mother and wife. In the seventies, I could not accept a grant from the Harkness Foundation, which would have allowed me to visit American museums. That grant would have placed a car and a secretary at my disposal for a whole academic year. But I had three children and all of

the corresponding domestic duties, so I could not accept the grant.

——BK——

You have created works for public spaces that do reach large audiences. What is important, for you, about the public nature of these spaces? What do you think are the key differences between viewing a work in a public space as opposed to a private space (a gallery or home)?

——MB——

The works I made for public spaces are strictly bound to the character of those spaces. For small works, the context is not important. It may be private or public, with no influence on their various levels of meaning.

——BK——

Have you explored in your art or your writing the role that language plays in the distribution and reception of art?

——MB——

Certainly, language always has been the way to explore art. It plays a big role in our reception of art, but the works have to be experienced by feeling. Afterwards, rationality and knowledge may explain how that feeling was reached.

——BK——

You are also an art historian and an art critic. How has this work influenced your artistic practice?

——MB——

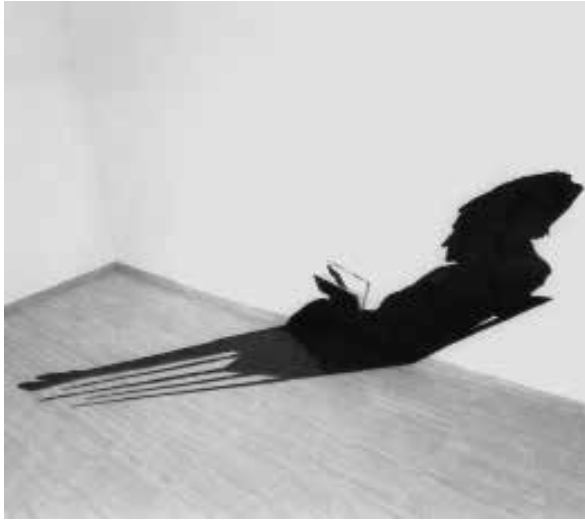
As a poet, I have a critical approach to the society we have built, so I do not distinguish between my so-called creative work and my critical thought.

——BK——

Your art is very open and rich in meaning. Do you often begin with one idea and change your mind in the process of making a work? Also, have you found that the meaning of a work, for you, has changed over time?

——MB——

Yes, I often start with one idea and then change my mind in the process of making a work. The process shows me where that first seed of an idea wanted to take me. Some American conceptual



artists declared that the work is all in its plan. This is absolutely wrong. Only the meeting with reality, with physicality, permits the project to reach a poetic result. And I have often found that my work contained a deeper meaning of which I had not been conscious when it started.

—BK—

Transitorio/Durevole (Transitory/Durable) (2002) (Figure 18) uses the book to capture history. Do you see books and records of performances as answers to the transient nature of time?

—MB—

All art and poetry is an answer to the fleeting nature of time, particularly the installation *Transitorio/Durevole*, which is about survival. We are transitory shadows, but our transitoriness becomes durable when it is expressed on the pages of a book, as happens here.

—BK—

As you said, the book is important for preservation, but it has also been a powerful tool for shaping the world in which we live. Many people accept what they read in non-fiction books as objective facts, rather than as information

shaped by the views of the author. Can you talk about how your work challenges our understanding of the book?

—MB—

The book is an object deeply imprinted in our psyche. It is a symbol. We swear on closed books, not on open pages. Additionally, the book is a tangible object. We have to experience it physically if we read it. We touch its pages, we hear the sound of turning them. I often realized poetic metaphors of the book. My *Libro campo (Field Book)* (1998) (Figure 1) is made of earth. It tries to express jointly the creativity of nature and of the human mind.

—BK—

Your art often includes monuments or other works of art from the past. Do you think your art is able to influence the way we view the past?

—MB—

I hope so. Many artists of the near or far past seem to me to be more “modern” than the art historians who write about them today.

—BK—

Are there any particular artists, either working today or in the past, who have inspired you?

—MB—

Certainly, many artists of the near and far past have influenced me. When I painted and wrote verse poetry, I encountered the work of the Russian-American artist Ben Shahn, who often utilized words in his paintings. I started to feel that I had to overcome the arbitrary subdivisions of codes. Not through addition, combining distinct images and words, as was done by Shahn, but through coincidence. Shahn was not a poet. He was a painter, still operating in a “undisciplinary” way, but his work gave me the first push towards a new way to consider expression. Then I contacted the Brazilian founders of the so-called Concrete Poetry movement, and gave up both painting and verse poetry. I started experimenting in Concrete Poetry, and then in other currents of verbo-visuality, particularly with Visual Poetry,

FIGURE 18 —

Transitorio/durevole (Transitory/Durable), with Regina Silveira, 2002. Installation, heavy plastic and wood; 65 × 168 × 80 in. (165.1 × 426.72 × 203.2 cm).

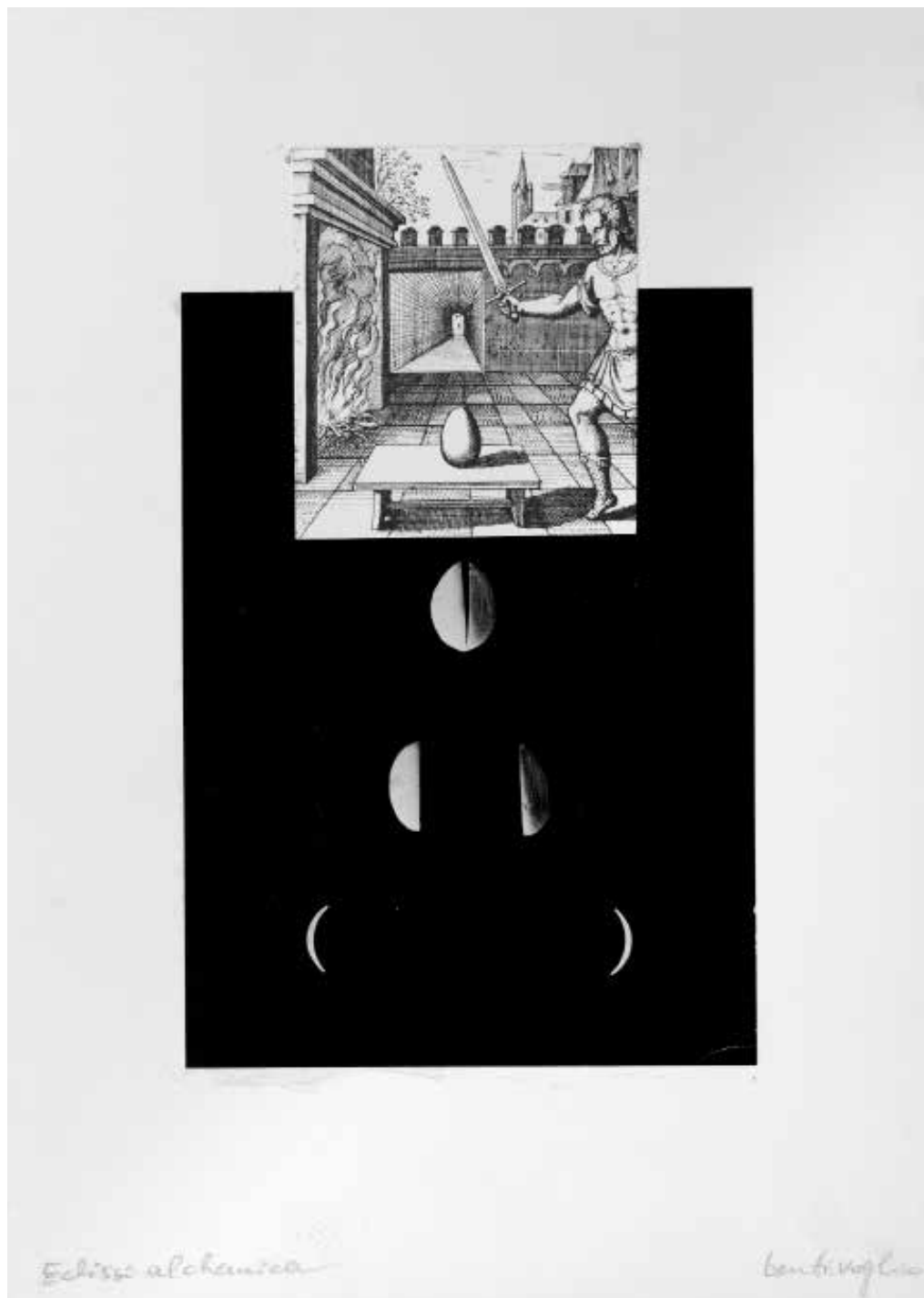


FIGURE 19—
Eclissi alchemica (Alchemic Eclipse), 1995.
Photomechanical print on paper, 14 $\frac{1}{8}$ ×
10 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (37.78 × 26.04 cm).

which was thriving in Italy in the 1970s. So, indirectly, all twentieth-century international avant-gardism that nourished the research of those Brazilians and that inspired Italian *poesia visiva* [Visual Poetry] have influenced me, like Futurism and Dadaism. I was especially interested in the study of the Futurist concept of words-in-freedom. It captured the visual value of letters in part by overcoming all mechanisms of syntax and grammar. I also discovered some relationship between my work and the seventeenth-century alchemists (Figure 19), the first visual poets, who stated that art had to be transformation and not creation.

——BK——

What made you start exploring East and West in works such as *I muri di Singapore* (*Walls of Singapore*) (1978) (Plate 11) and *Rima: oriente e occidente* (*Rhyme: East and West*) (2003) (Plate 28)?

——MB——

Rima: oriente e occidente is a work I did with Chima Sunada, a Japanese calligrapher and poet. She communicates in Japanese, and I in Italian, so our bridge is English. The work focuses on the letters “h” and “y,” which rhyme visually, just as the Italian words *oriente* and *occidente* (East and West) rhyme phonetically. I am not only enchanted by the mystery of the cosmos, but also by the complementarity, with one another, of all the different human cultures that have so richly developed on the surface of earth.

——BK——

You want to close the show with *Moon/ument* (2011) (Plate 19). How does this relate to your interest in cosmic problems?

——MB——

I am not an astrophysicist, nor a biologist, nor a prophet. I am a visual poet. *Moon/ument* is in some way the spatial counterpart of my *Operation Orpheus* (1982–85) (Figure 32). With *Operation Orpheus* I had concealed the symbol of life in the depth of an underground cavern, where not even an H-bomb could have reached and destroyed it. With *Moon/ument*, I wanted to export poetry into space, out of our planet, to imaginatively sow the symbol of life where there is no life. And with that image, I meant to celebrate the unity of the cosmos in the most primary reachable context, where there are no nations.

——BK——

You have been a practicing artist for over fifty years. What do you think are the biggest changes that have taken place in your work over this time? Have there been any key discoveries or turning points in your career?

——MB——

The biggest changes in my work? From painting to poetry. From play of words to sculpture. My work has not become deeper, weaker, or more detached from reality. There has only been a kind of enlargement, not of the work itself but of the source of inspiration. To illustrate this, I am now most interested in “cosmic” problems. I think that achieving the means to explore cosmic space may open a new era, if our planet will not be destroyed by our own foolishness.

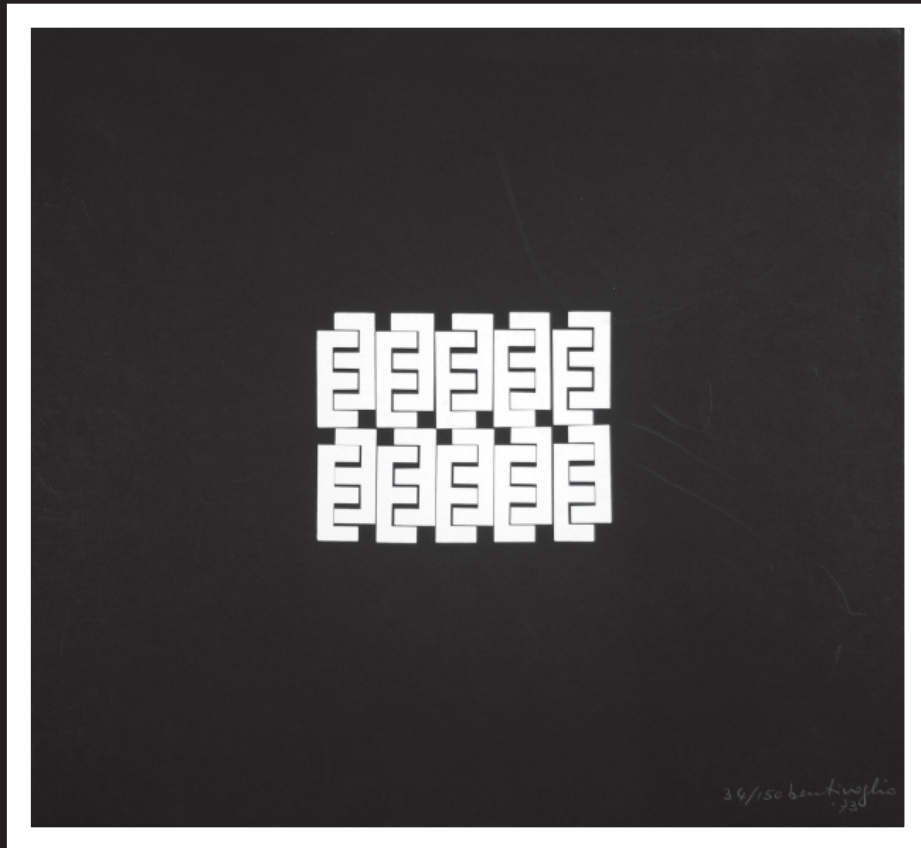


FIGURE 20 —
E = congiunzione (And = Conjunction),
1973. Serigraph on paper, 16½ × 18¼ in.
(20.96 × 29.85 cm).

**BACK TO THE
PICTOGRAM: AN
INQUIRY INTO
THE NATURE OF
COMMUNICATION**

Franca Zoccoli

BACK TO THE PICTOGRAM: AN INQUIRY INTO THE NATURE OF COMMUNICATION

Franca Zoccoli

When one grows old, ancient memories flash back with unwonted clarity. Mirella Bentivoglio remembers a seemingly insignificant episode from her early childhood. Once—she must have been three or four years old—she ran away. Not because she was angry or as a protest of any kind, but simply for the pleasure of walking in the streets unaccompanied, of looking at people, choosing her way. It was an omen of what her life as an artist was going to be: a long journey away from the secluded domestic sphere and even the quiet realm of libraries, into public space, trying to give such space fresh meaning by discovering new metaphors and overthrowing outdated symbols.

In all the stages of her career, from the initial Concrete to Visual Poetry, from the object-books and the sculptural letters to the works in sequential pages, Bentivoglio never wanted to belong to a group in a formal sense, since she wished to be free from all rules, to take from here and not there, to mix codes to her own liking. One of her early works, *Gabbia (Ho) (Cage [I Have])* (1966/1969) (Plate 7), is in many ways a summation of this position, a refusal of limitations: even a label identifying you with a particular art movement is something you possess and that may hamper the freedom of creativity.

The street is always, for Bentivoglio, a source of inspiration and a destination—real or ideal. The works made with crushed cans (Plate 13), pieces of asphalt, or traffic signs (Plate 21) answer the same compulsion. “It is like the drive,” says the artist, “which pushes graffitists to write on public walls their words, even the most intimate. Mine is an orderly graffiti, which does not do damage.”¹ The artist was also struck by the rhetorical bombast of monuments located along the streets or in the middle of squares celebrating men (not women) who were often responsible for the death or ruin of multitudes: generals who had won great battles, statesmen and politicians who had learned “to quench the blushes of ingenious shame” (as Thomas Gray already complained in the middle of the eighteenth century). Throughout her career, Bentivoglio has expressed her dissent with such monuments and has suggested instead more vital symbols: the early portfolio *Monumento (Monument)* (1968) (Figure 6), in which the monument is deconstructed and crumbles, to

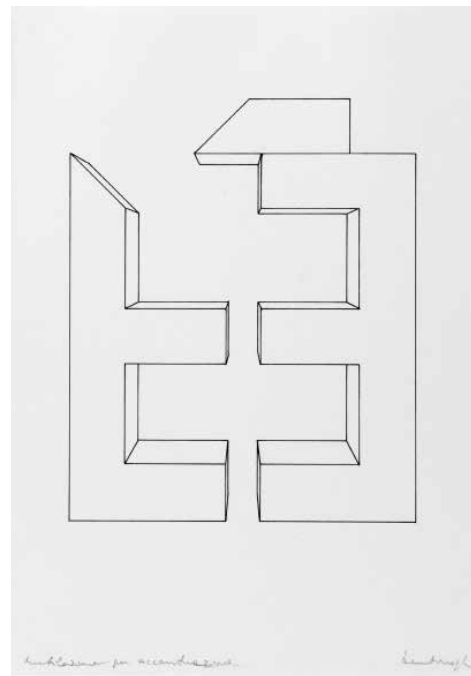
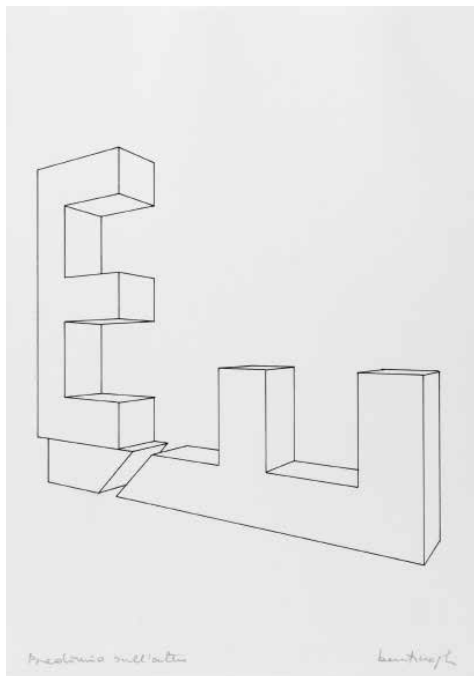
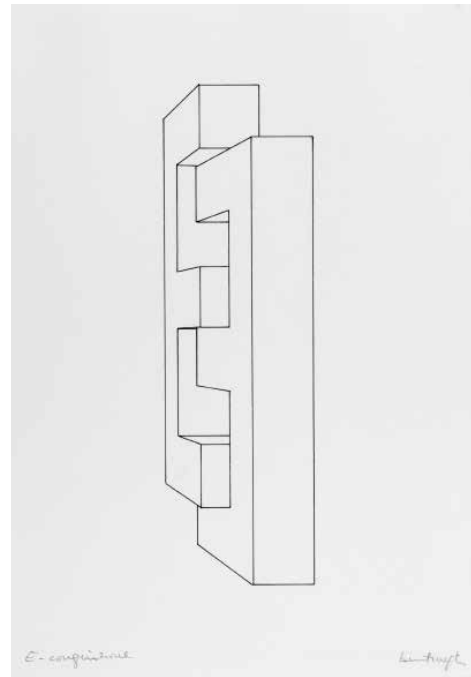
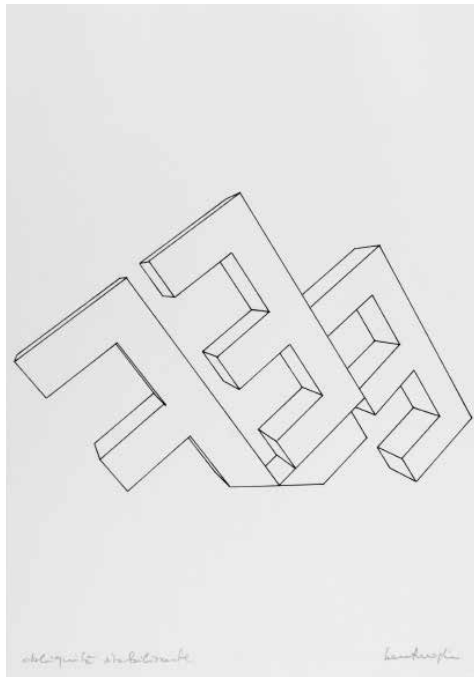


FIGURE 21—
Moduli a E (E Combinations), 1980. Ink on paper
 drawings after 1977 wooden constructions,
 11% × 8¼ in. (29.53 × 20.96 cm).

Clockwise, from top left: *Obliquità stabilizzate (Stabilized Obliquities)*; *E = congiunzione (And = conjunction)*; *Mutilazione per accentuazione (la porta dell'essere) (Mutilation for Accentuation [The Door of Being])*; *Predominio sull'altro (Predominance Over the Other)*

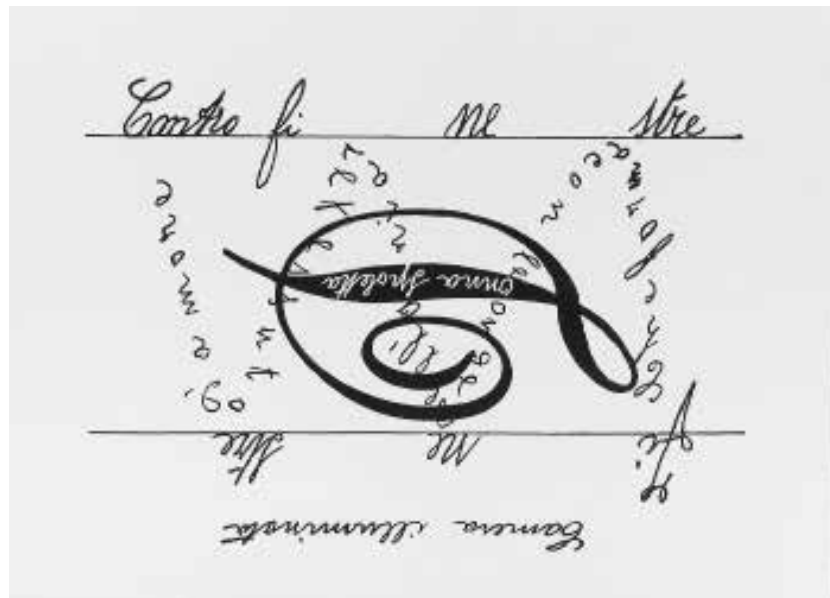


FIGURE 22—
Futurismo ex novo (*Futurism Anew*) (frontispiece
 and interior page), 2008–10. Offset lithography
 on paper, 13¼ × 9½ in. (33.66 × 24.13 cm).

be born again as something different; *JeruSalem* (2012) (Figure 24), the *monument trouvé* for the witches of Salem, a huge water-tank right on the top of the hill, the site of their martyrdom; and finally, the *Moon/ument* (2011) (Plate 19), a symbol of life, brought to that celestial body. As Martin Heidegger emphasized, a work of art is always an allegory, a key to interpreting the surrounding reality.

When Bentivoglio felt the need to conquer the third dimension and passed “from page to space,” she seldom used words but, rather, single letters. Most of the time they are vowels, and among the five vowels, her favorites are “o” and “e,” which in Italian are complete words (conjunctions), while “u” has no autonomous value and “a” and “i” are respectively a preposition and an article and therefore need the support of a noun. The artist eradicates the letter she has selected, so as to extract its hidden essence. “O” (“or” in Italian), the initial of “origin,” becomes an egg or a womb, in straightforward metaphors legible to all (Figure 12). “E” (“and” in Italian), set in various combinations, investigates the dynamics of relationships, as in her series *Moduli a E (E Combinations)* (Figure 21). In her voyage to the root of things, Bentivoglio went from words to letters and then back to the pictogram, a move that parallels the appearance of contemporary icons within our computerized world. In this way, the Stone Age and the digital era combine in her work: the heaviness of materials—marble, bronze—and the ethereal substance of the web.

“The society of the image” was an expression commonly employed in the 1970s. Sight had become the privileged sense, continuously stimulated by advertising and other kinds of visual messages; the prevalence of the identification of a word with an image, however, where an icon takes the place of a word or a short sentence, is a much more recent phenomenon. An example is the widely used “emoticon,” which finds an old precedent in the universal symbol of a heart meaning “I love.” When Pope Benedict XVI resigned at the end of February 2013, several banners were seen showing “the sad face,” with the lips turned downward, among the crowd that filled St. Peter’s Square to express their sorrow. This might at first have appeared disrespectful, but it was simply the language of our global, multiethnic world: whatever the country from which they came, everyone could understand it. Bentivoglio foresaw this need to overcome the impending disasters brought about by the new Tower of Babel (Plate 32), and sought a remedy by studying the tools and devices of communication and going deep into their super-imposed layers to find their innermost secrets and meanings.

There are also several works in which Bentivoglio sets aside altogether both words and individual letters, but maintains her ever-present playfulness.

Her book-objects are among the most notable in this category. Made of marble or other natural materials, they are open as if ready to be read yet dried-up like fossils, thus allowing no consultation (Plate 15). Here, it is the shape itself that speaks, being automatically associated with learning. But writing slips in here too, unobtrusively: veins, string-like drawings, patches, and rounded bulges suggest mysterious texts from time immemorial.

The artist alternates her work as a visual poet and as a critic, which reciprocally feed each other. In the latter field, the contributions of women to art have always been her central concern. Over the span of three decades, Bentivoglio has worked strenuously to expand our knowledge of women artists working in the area between language and image; she has organized hundreds of exhibitions in almost every country in Europe, as well as throughout the world, from North to South America and from Asia to Australia. The purpose of this engagement was not primarily to document gender-specific features within women's art but rather to correct the imbalance between the two sexes in public exhibitions and museum collections. Bentivoglio's attitude toward feminism is the same as that toward any organized group or movement: she rejects strict militancy, even as she acknowledges that the movement has nourished her work.

The discovery that a written word, besides being a container of meaning and sound, has a shape, and therefore constitutes an image, has a long history, dating back to the early Middle Ages. The real forerunners of Visual Poetry, however, were the Futurists of the early twentieth century, with their free-word compositions and other graphic and typographic experiments. One can therefore understand Bentivoglio's great interest in the women artists of that movement, who ventured into the area "between word and image." She examined each of them in two books, rediscovering or reassessing artists who often were almost unknown.² Even though Futurism had a misogynistic bias (often contradicted, however, by its founder Filippo Tommaso Marinetti), it advocated change and dismantled, among others, the stereotypes of womanhood. Bentivoglio wanted to pay special homage to Futurist women by compiling a portfolio, *Futurismo ex novo (Futurism Anew)* (2008–10) (Figure 22), using typefaces of that time period to reproduce some of their preliminary projects and including a commentary in which she attempts to interpret and revive interest in their work.

More recently, Bentivoglio has favored sequential works. We no longer find individual monuments but rather ongoing stories that proceed through what Gilles Deleuze called *la répétition différente*.³ Rather than book-objects, upturned trees, or huge eggs of stone, in these works, sheets follow one

another, such as the series dedicated to Lina Cavalieri (*Lina e il cavaliere* [*Lina and the Knight*], 2012 [1978]) (Figure 23) and *Facce Murate* (*Walled Faces*) (2005) (Plates 22 and 23), in which Borrominian faces are lined up along a street in Prague, inside niches normally used for advertising. These “wrathful countenances of rock”⁴ (the gigantic posters frame only the central portion of the face) stand motionless above the incessant flow of traffic. It is as if Bentivoglio felt the need to recover the page that she once had abandoned, and close the circle of her long journey with works open to interpretation, seasoned with the salt of irony, and in tune with our time of frantic evolution, whose outcomes can hardly be foreseen.

ENDNOTES—

1. Mirella Bentivoglio, conversation with author.

2. See Mirella Bentivoglio and Franca Zoccoli, *The Women Artists of Italian Futurism—Almost Lost to History* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1997); and Mirella Bentivoglio and Franca Zoccoli, *Le futuriste italiane nelle arti visive* (*The Women Artists of Italian*

Futurism in the Visual Arts) (Rome: De Luca Editori d’Arte, 2008). The Italian publication was an expanded version of the earlier English language version. Bentivoglio wrote the first section in both books (“*Da pagina a spazio*” [From Page to Space]), while Zoccoli wrote the second (“The Shape of Speed,” in the 1997 version, and “*I colori e le forme dalla pittura*

alle arti applicate” [*Colors and Forms from Painting to the Applied Arts*], in the 2008 publication).

3. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995 [1968]).

4. Mirella Bentivoglio, conversation with author.



FIGURE 23 (facing page and following spread)—
Lina e il cavaliere (Lina and the Knight), 2012
 (1978). Eight photomechanical prints on
 paper, 15½ × 11½ in. (39.37 × 29.53 cm) each.



The cloth suggests the guitar's curves. Music is an abstraction, an idea created by man. This is where the protagonist is woman.



If Lisa is only a cited image, the cloth really covers the person Lisa. A gradual presence appears through it.



forced meaning of the cloth. A sheet. Like it already looked by the light.



like a sheet, only a sheet. A sheet. Or not. An object, a body, and
the state of the mind of the captivation of time.



Today, the white is the white flag of the weight study. It outstretches to the reality of Line. Or is it the black page on which Line is going to write her own script?



No, the page on which Line will write herself can only be held by Line. But will the risk also mean people not from her page?

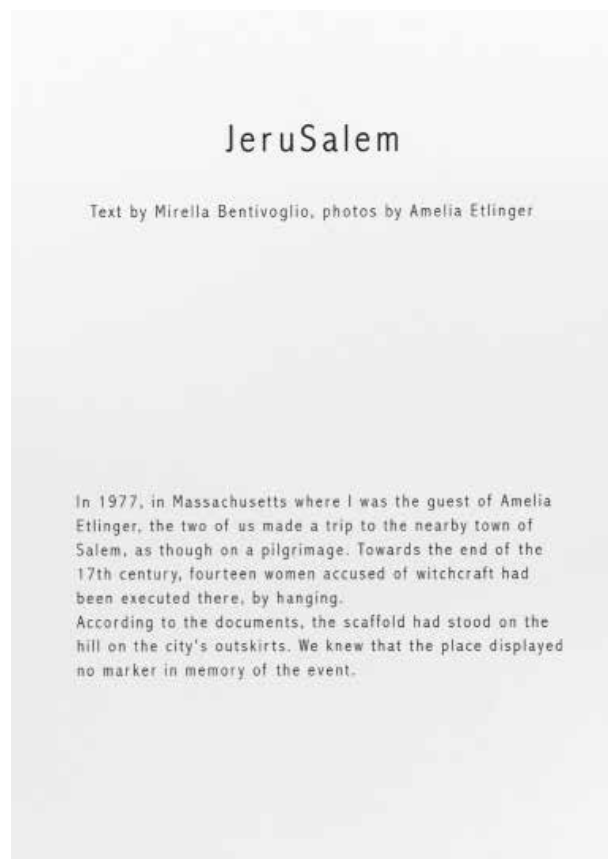


FIGURE 24 (facing page and following page)—*JeruSalem*, 2012. Five photomechanical prints, 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 7 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (27.31 × 19.53 cm) each.



We could find no easy path uphill. In the midst of the thicket at its base, no trail could be discerned. We walked to a rise that faced the hill, and noticed a strange bench, with no backrest and no seat: a bench for ghosts, half-sunk into the soil of the underbrush.



I managed somehow to sit there, while Amelia took photographs. I looked off into the distance before me. From exactly that point, something on the hill in front of me seemed to come into view behind a dense group of trees.



This felt to us like an invitation. We made our difficult way up the ravine that divided the rise from the hill, and at its summit we saw a gigantic cylindrical container which from no point before had been visible.



Woman and water: primary elements. That, precisely, must have been the site of the execution! Placed by chance, and ready for us to recognize it, stood that crypto-monument with its inscription "Salem, Mass". Water, with which, as well, to put out the fires of all witches' pyres. Water, for the washing of history.

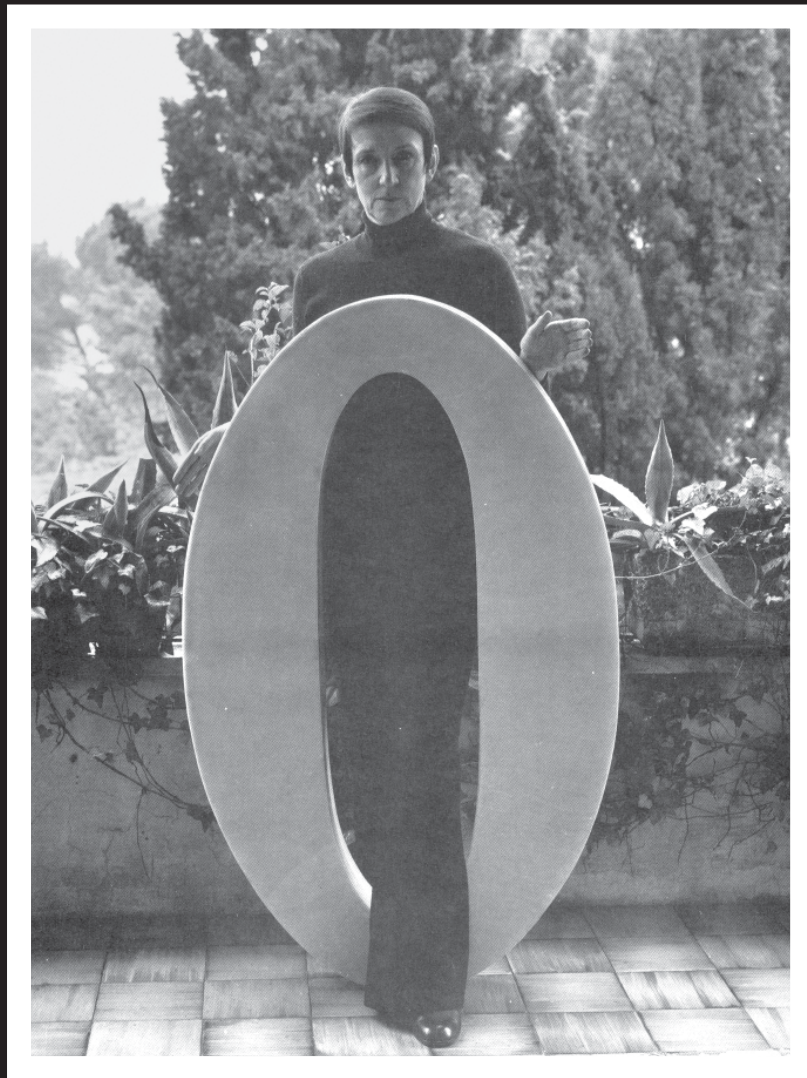


FIGURE 25 —
Io (Me), Mirella Bentivoglio in the 1970s.

**CURATORIAL PRACTICE
AND THE LANGUAGE
OF ITALIAN FEMINISM
IN THE WORK OF
MIRELLA BENTIVOGLIO**

Leslie Cozzi

CURATORIAL PRACTICE AND THE LANGUAGE OF ITALIAN FEMINISM IN THE WORK OF MIRELLA BENTIVOGLIO

Leslie Cozzi

In the late 1970s, Mirella Bentivoglio produced a strikingly idiosyncratic photograph of herself standing within a chest-height letter “o” (Figure 25). The resulting image compressed the figure of the artist and her work into a single word: “*io*”—the first person pronoun and a noun meaning ego or self in Italian. Bentivoglio’s image is more than a witty pun on the tautological nature of self-portraiture. Rather, it is a demonstration of the centrality of language to her practice and a confident declaration of her prominence and visibility as an artist at a time when the very possibility of female artistic accomplishment was hotly debated.

Bentivoglio’s self-recognition was a matter of practical, and not merely theoretical, concern, as her multifaceted practice as an artist, curator, critic, and historian was deeply tied to the changing status of women. Since the 1970s, Bentivoglio has organized over two dozen exhibitions that explored the connection between image and text in work by both male and female artists. Of particular significance for this essay are her women-only exhibitions of the 1970s that engaged with contemporary feminist concerns and presented works by women artists to a broad audience. Between 1971 and 1981 alone, Bentivoglio curated fourteen different installations that spanned four countries and three continents.¹ Thanks in large part to her efforts as a curator, a sizeable number of women began to be taken seriously within the Italian art world and continue to enjoy international recognition.

Dovetailing with her larger curatorial program, Bentivoglio’s own work challenged both gender norms and disciplinary boundaries. Her early work was characterized by an interest in language as a malleable, material substance. She began her career as a poet, but by the late 1960s abandoned traditional linear verse poetry for the relatively young and experimental fields of Visual and Concrete Poetry—interrelated hybrid art forms employing both text and image, often in the form of collage. Derived from earlier forms

of experimental, imagistic poetry, Visual and Concrete Poetry freed words from the traditional formal requirements of structure and syntax in order to gain expressive freedom, disrupt normative modes of communication, and render language more corporeal. Though they differed in their approach to language—Visual Poetry generally combined word and image, whereas Concrete Poetry treated words *as* images—they shared an iconoclastic spirit and an emphasis on the formal components of language.²

Many of Bentivoglio's early works deconstruct and reassemble a single word or phrase in order to illuminate meanings buried within the text. In the 1966 silkscreen *Gabbia (Ho) (Cage [I Have])* (Plate 7), for instance, Bentivoglio rearranges the letters in the Italian word *ho* to resemble a prison. The stark black vertical and horizontal lines of the capital "H's" appear as bars, while a single letter "o" at the bottom right, in a rich red, forms a trap door that both punctures and punctuates the structure. Along the bottom margin of the work, Bentivoglio provides the viewer with a miniscule line of text: "*gabbia(:HO).*" This phrase functions not only as a title, but also as a key to deciphering the work.

"*Ho*" translates as "I have," and thus the arrangement of the letters implies that people are imprisoned by their own desire to possess. Yet the word "*ho*" is also often employed in idiomatic expressions that use the equivalent of the English verb "to be." "*Ho fame,*" "*Ho sete,*" and "*Ho sonno,*" for example, mean "I am hungry" or thirsty, or sleepy, respectively. "*Ho*" is not an incidental word, but rather a common way to capture an individual's subjectivity by describing one's physical state. Deconstructing the word allows Bentivoglio to release its hidden connotations, which she refers to as "ellipses" or "illuminating contractions."³ By arranging the word "*ho*" in the form of a prison, Bentivoglio acknowledges the limitations of language as a tool for self-expression. At the same time, by imbuing the word's physical arrangement with significance, she seeks to transgress those boundaries. Bentivoglio's project can be compared with the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé's search for "a hypothetically or mythically original language, ideally and miraculously expressive, such that everyday language *is not.*"⁴ Refuting the arbitrariness of signs, Bentivoglio instead suggests an intimate, physical link between the formal substance of language and the thoughts it is capable of expressing.

In several early works, Bentivoglio used language as a vehicle through which to illuminate the idiosyncrasies of human relationships. The silkscreen *L'(assente), positivo/negativo, segno/figura (The Absent One, Positive/Negative, Sign/Figure)* (1971) (Figure 26), for example, depicts the Italian definite article "the" in stark white on a black background. This version of

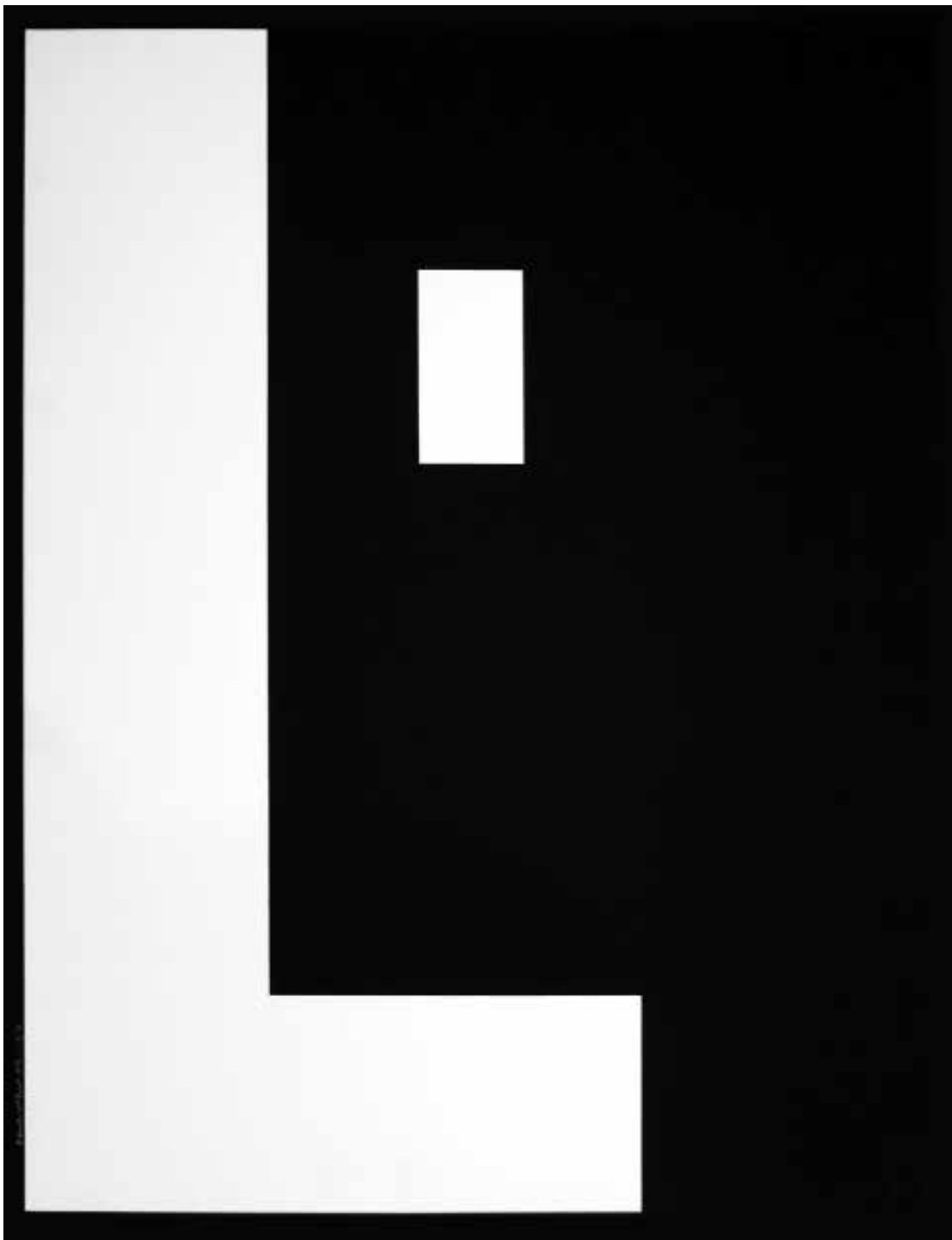


FIGURE 26—
*L'(assente), positivo/negativo, segno/figura (The
Absent One, Positive/Negative, Sign/Figure), 1971.*
Serigraph on paper, 24% × 19 in. (62.55 × 48.26 cm).

the definite article is always used in cases where the noun begins with a vowel, such that the article attaches to the word itself (for example, *l'automobile* [the car] as opposed to *la donna* [the woman]) and is incomplete without it. But Bentivoglio has left the corresponding noun out of the image. Here she again uses the title of the work as a key to its interpretation, since “*assente*” in Italian refers to someone or something that is missing. The white letter and apostrophe on black ground reverse the color scheme of traditional printed text, allowing the black ground to stand in for the absence to which the title of the work refers. And the black absence that functions as the painting’s parenthetical subject resembles the abstracted profile of a human face.

Bentivoglio, who recognized that absence implied a departed human presence, called *L'(assente)* an “ideogram of suspension. The current human situation.”⁵ *L'(assente)* plays with the notion of absence not just as a formal principle of composition—that is, by suggesting emptiness as an inevitable precondition of any figure/ground relationship—but as a metaphor for human coupling. The work epitomizes two persistent and interrelated tendencies in Bentivoglio’s work—on the one hand, treating words as compositional elements whose form is central to their meaning and, on the other hand, imbuing language with personal and political significance. As her engagement with feminist concerns grew, Bentivoglio united these two impulses through a diverse spate of exhibitions in order to promote women’s capacity for self-expression.

At issue within Bentivoglio’s ongoing curatorial project was the relationship between men and women in the institutionalized art world—a subject that prompted various, and occasionally opposing, responses.⁶ In 1970, the art critic Carla Lonzi and the artist Carla Accardi founded *Rivolta femminile*, a consciousness-raising group that produced some of Italy’s most influential feminist theory. *Rivolta femminile* advocated for a separatist model of creative production, attempting to positively define and explore female difference through women-only cultural formations.⁷ Others rejected separatism as an economically damaging and politically naïve response to the problem of women’s marginalization. Writing in the introduction to Simona Weller’s 1976 census of women in the Italian art world, the poet Cesare Vivaldi assessed the barriers to women’s advancement in terms of career success. For Vivaldi, participation was a prerequisite for professionalism, which was the true litmus test of artistic achievement:

The dilettante whose works do not induce anyone to buy them or listen to them or to see them or to read them earns neither real social prestige nor a true personal identity. Such things are reserved for whoever makes the effort, to whoever acquires the competence and the experience to become a professional.⁸

Vivaldi suggests that women who were not respected by the mainstream art establishment were not only relegated to second-rate status as artists, but also limited as human beings. Arguing for integration, he rejects the self-imposed division advocated by separatist theorists.

It would fall to Bentivoglio to bridge these opposing strategies regarding women's cultural importance through her curatorial practice. Over the course of the 1970s and throughout the next several decades, she organized a number of landmark touring exhibitions of women working with text and image in a variety of formats. Fulfilling the goals expressed by both separatists and those who favored participation in the mainstream art world, Bentivoglio exploited the logic of what she dubbed the "ghetto show" to establish art world parity while exploring the unique nature of women's creativity.⁹ Bentivoglio organized her first exhibition of all-women artists in 1971, the same year she held her first solo show. One year later, she curated an exhibition at fellow visual poet Ugo Carrega's alternative art space Centro Tool. The idea for the exhibition rested on the premise that, due to the scarcity of women artists, such a show would fit the small space comfortably. Indeed, in Italy in 1972, it appeared that there were few women artists to be seen.¹⁰

Bentivoglio's early curatorial program propelled female visual poets into mainstream recognition. She was, in fact, part of a growing contingent of artists who were, as Gabriele Schor has explained, "conscious of the fact that women had to claim their terrain, to self-consciously live their lives as artists."¹¹ In self-consciously living her life as an artist, however, Bentivoglio simultaneously critiqued the very terrain she was claiming. In *La firma (The Signature)* (Figure 27), for example, a collage she created in 1973, she furnishes a wry exploration of the way artistic gestures are imbued with financial value and symbolic importance. In the piece, Bentivoglio cuts her last name out of a 1,000 Lira bill—then the average price for a piece of Concrete Poetry—and places it at the center of the composition against a black ground. However, the artist omits the final two letters from the central design, instead substituting them for the signature at the bottom right of her collage. "Io," as discussed at the beginning of this essay, is the Italian first person pronoun, which exists in the work both alongside and in place of the artist's name. Conflating the work's subject with its author, "io" ceases to function



as a universal part of speech and instead self-reflexively refers to the artist herself. In a sense, “*io*” functions as an artist’s monogram, an early form of establishing artistic copyright. In discussing this work, Bentivoglio insisted:

I am the person who has mutilated my name, substituted my signature for the work, placed the money inside the name, put the pronoun in place of the signature. I am the individual who can express her liberty only through contradiction, and breaks the rules of the game by playing along.¹²

The artist declares her presence through a self-reflexive circuit of fragments. With one deft slice, she implicates the art market as part of the mechanism of exclusion that she must confront in order to subvert.

The annual exhibitions of women visual poets that Bentivoglio oversaw in the early years of the decade were so successful that by 1978 the mere existence of women artists in Italy was no longer in doubt. In the exhibition *Materializzazione del linguaggio* (*Materialization of Language*) (Figures 28 and 29), which Bentivoglio was invited to curate for the Venice Biennial, the roster

FIGURE 27 —
La firma (*The Signature*), 1973. Collage on paper, 19 ¼ × 27 ½ in. (50.16 × 69.85 cm).



had expanded to include over 80 female contributors. *Materializzazione del linguaggio* was the first historical retrospective of women's art ever mounted at the Biennial, and the only exhibition that year to feature Soviet Bloc artists. It would go on to tour New York and the 1981 São Paulo Biennial, among other venues. Bentivoglio's subsequent shows continued to broaden in scope, as her curatorial reach expanded to include more historical as well as contemporary artists and to focus on more discrete subtopics, such as the concept of thread in work by women artists.¹³ Her aims also changed as she began to articulate a more nuanced and complex understanding of female subjectivity in relation to language, which drew heavily on the concepts expressed in her early works. For Bentivoglio, establishing women as artists meant more than just adding their names to the art world rolls. Rather, it entailed recognizing and appreciating the novel and creative ways in which women's work responded to historical, theoretical, and social constraints.

Bentivoglio was not the only artist occupied with the question of how to understand women's relationship to culture once the anonymity to which they had been assigned was lifted. This question was being confronted throughout the 1970s in Italy as well as internationally, and it would become

FIGURE 28—
Opening of *Materializzazione del linguaggio*
(*Materialization of Language*) exhibition, Venice, 1978.
Far left: Futurist artist Maria Ferrero Gussago; center:
Mirella Bentivoglio; right: Mario Rigo, mayor of Venice.

a cardinal concern of Italian feminist theory.¹⁴ In this respect, Bentivoglio's recurring fascination with the term "*io*" was prescient. As subsequent Italian critics would explain, that familiar word "*io*" not only functions as the first person pronoun regardless of the gender of the speaker, but also corresponds to the masculine noun meaning ego or self. Thus a simple, two-letter word contained an example of the mechanisms by which the masculine gender assumes a position of neutrality. Here is Adriana Cavarero, a pivotal Italian gender theorist, confronting this conundrum:

The "I" of discourse, that same discourse that now (I) am thinking and writing in Italian, is unconcerned with its being of the male or female sex. As a noun, I [the word "self"] belongs to the masculine gender but, extraordinarily, a sexuation is not included in it. "I am a woman," "I am male": here the "I" sustains and gathers sexes indifferently, being in itself neutral."¹⁵

Language functions as both a form of alienation (because the female gender is repeatedly subsumed under the fictive objectivity of the male universal) and as a tool for self-expression (since literature allows women a means to represent their alienation from these existing codes). Although Bentivoglio's *La firma* predates Cavarero's text by over a decade, Bentivoglio's contention that she can "express her liberty only through contradiction" acknowledges this paradox. She manipulates the physical appearance of words in order to disrupt the meanings traditionally attached to them and to explore the ramifications of an artistic subject—*io*—no longer defined exclusively as male.

Bentivoglio's "I" did not merely refer to the artist as an individual creator but rather confronted the larger question of one's relationship to language—in other words, the "I" problematized in feminist discourse. In the photograph introduced at the beginning of this essay, Bentivoglio shows herself literally composing the word "*io*" with her body and a sculpted, slightly flattened letter "o." The composition is remarkably self-contained; she forms the letter "I" with her body and lifts her hands in a gesture of self-presentation. Her gaze is direct but does not convey any particular sentiment. The work is a tautology, a visual equivalent of the statement "I am me," rather than a vehicle for expressing psychological interiority. Forcing the word "*io*" (me) to signify a female subject in this particular action is a radical gesture. It challenges the assumed masculinity of the word while reinforcing Bentivoglio's status as an artist.

For a 2010 exhibition of self-portraits by women artists presented at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, the curator Giovanna Giusti featured yet another

FIGURE 29 (facing, right)—
Materializzazione del linguaggio
(Materialization of Language) exhibition,
Venice, 1978. Installation view.



FIGURE 30 —
Io (Me), 1979. Photomechanical print
on paper, 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 15 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (60 × 40 cm).

version of Bentivoglio's "io"-themed works.¹⁶ In this collage from 1979 (Figure 30), she manipulated the photograph discussed above by montaging an image of an egg over her face. The egg had become a central motif in Bentivoglio's work (one of the best-known examples is *L'Ovo di Gubbio* [*The Egg of Gubbio*] of 1976 [Figure 12]), and she identified it with the feminine, corporeal roots of language and with origins. Thus "io" also signifies a broader concept of artistic agency, of new beginnings in a world transformed by feminist theory and the work of women artists.

Bentivoglio was a driving force in changing the Italian art world of the 1970s. For the first time in the century, not only were large numbers of women recognized as artists, but their participation in the mainstream art world would also remain consistent over the following decades.¹⁷ Surveying her activity twenty years later, Bentivoglio recognized the importance of her own contributions, remarking, "The ghetto-shows of the seventies bore fruit. They allowed for close study of the quality of women's work and began an exchange of information."¹⁸ The continued interest in artists that she championed over forty years ago is one index of her lasting success; the international prominence of many Italian women artists who came after her is another.¹⁹ Bentivoglio's recent donation to the MART (Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto), Italy's premier modern and contemporary art museum, and the exhibition and catalog that accompanied the gift represent the capstone of her three decades of achievement as a curator. The collection, which she amassed largely through gifts from artists, comprises over 300 works by 112 women from 22 countries.²⁰

Bentivoglio's curatorial endeavors transformed the art world by making connections among women—what Italian feminists refer to as "*fare cultura fra donne*" or creating culture among women.²¹ Believing that women would achieve uncompromised self-expression in the realm of culture more so than on the battleground of politics, Bentivoglio has explained:

It is customary in Italy to have a political party for protection. ...My connection with other women is my party—just friendship. We give to each other, we analyze each other. ...It's a network.²²

Extending across linguistic and national boundaries, her curatorial network provided a catalyst for profound institutional change. The power and success of this network will remain one of Bentivoglio's most enduring legacies.

1. For a full list of Bentivoglio's curatorial work exclusively featuring women artists, see *Poesia visiva: La donazione di Mirella Bentivoglio al Mart* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2011), pp. 200–201.
2. See Frances Pohl, *Love and Joy About Letters: The Work of Ben Shahn and Mirella Bentivoglio* (Claremont: Pomona College Museum of Art, 2003), pp. 22–30; Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 7; Vittorio Fagone, untitled essay, in Gillo Dorfles, Vittorio Fagone, Filiberto Menna et al., *La Poesia Visiva (1963–1979)* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1979), pp. 17–19; and Achille Bonito Oliva, “La parola totale,” in Gabriella Belli et al., *La parola nell'arte: Ricerche d'avanguardia nel '900. Dal Futurismo a oggi attraverso le collezioni del Mart* (Milan: Skira, 2007), pp. 17–19.
3. Quoted in *Mirella Bentivoglio: La poesia fatta pietra* (Macerata: Coopedit Macerata/Pinacoteca e Musei Comunali, 1984), p. 7.
4. Gérard Genette, “Valéry and the Poetics of Language,” in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structural Criticism*, ed. Josué Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 363.
5. Quoted in *Mirella Bentivoglio: La poesia fatta pietra*, p. 7.
6. In 1971, the year Bentivoglio organized her first all-female exhibition of Visual and Concrete Poetry, Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” was the cover story of the January issue of *ARTNews* (*ARTNews* 69, no. 9, January 1971, pp. 22–39, 70–71). Nochlin contended that for centuries women had been systematically excluded from the professional training necessary to function as an artist of any caliber, let alone a great one. The full essay was translated into Italian in 1976 (Linda Nochlin, “Perché non ci sono mai state grandi artiste donne,” *nuova dwf* 1, no. 4 [1976], pp. 149–57).
7. See Judith Russi Kirshner, “Voices and Images of Italian Feminism,” in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Cornelia Butler (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007) pp. 386, 392; Rivolta femminile, “Manifesto di Rivolta femminile,” in *I movimenti femministi in Italia: La nuova sinistra*, ed. Rosalba Spagnoletti (Rome: Edizioni Samonà e Savelli, 1971), p. 90; Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Liberazione della donna: Feminism in Italy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), pp. 80–87; and Carol Lazzaro-Weiss, *From Margins to Mainstream: Feminism and Fictional Modes in Italian Women's Writing, 1968–1990* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), pp. 33–64.
8. Cesare Vivaldi, introduction to Simona Weller, *Il Complesso di Michelangelo: Ricerca sul contributo dato dalla donna all'arte italiana del novecento* (Pollenza-Macerata: La Nuova Foglio Editrice, 1976), p. 11.
9. Mirella Bentivoglio, “Post-Scriptum,” in Anna Maria Fioravanti Beraldi, *Post-Scriptum: Artiste in Italia tra linguaggio e immagine negli anni '60 e '70* (Cento [FE]: Siaca Arti Grafiche, 1998), p. 4. Bentivoglio's tactic, in its attempt to use sexual difference as a positive tool that would allow women to express their creative and social agency, can be compared to strategic essentialism as articulated by Gayatri Spivak, wherein essentialism is deployed as a self-conscious maneuver in order to address questions of subjectivity and recover a speaking subject that has been written out of conventional historiography. Bentivoglio's conception of female creativity was, after all, provisional—it was articulated largely in response to a social situation she wanted to rectify, thus upholding the distinction Spivak draws between strategy and

- theory. See Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 31; and Gayatri Spivak with Ellen Rooney, "'In a Word': Interview," in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 358.
10. Mirella Bentivoglio, "Una Testimonianza di Mirella Bentivoglio: Dieci Collettive al Femminile," *Informazioni Arti Visive* (December 1980), pp. 20–21.
11. Gabriele Schor, "The Feminist Avant-Garde: A Radical Transformation," in *Donna: Avanguardia femminista negli anni '70 dalla Sammlung Verbund di Vienna* (Verona: Electa, 2010), p. 25.
12. Quoted in *Mirella Bentivoglio: La poesia fatta pietra*, 16.
13. Bentivoglio, "Una Testimonianza di Mirella Bentivoglio," pp. 20–21.
14. See Section 4, "The Aesthetic," in *Feminism—Art—Theory: An Anthology, 1968–2000*, ed. Hilary Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) for an introduction to these debates.
15. Adriana Cavarero, "Per una teoria della differenza sessuale," in Cavarero et al., *Diotima: Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1987), p. 43.
16. Giovanna Giusti, *Autoritratte: Artiste di capriccioso e destrissimo ingegno* (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2010).
17. Maria Antonietta Trasforini, "Ritratti di Signore: Una generazione di artiste in Italia," in *Arte a parte: Donne artiste fra margini e centro*, ed. Maria Antonietta Trasforini (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2000), pp. 145–47.
18. Bentivoglio, "Post-Scriptum," p. 4.
19. Artists that Bentivoglio championed early in their careers are still gaining international notice. Both Irma Blank and Maria Lai were included in the 2009–10 exhibition "elles@centrepompidou," for example, and Ketty La Rocca was recently featured in a 2014 solo exhibition at Wilkinson Gallery in London. Meanwhile, younger practitioners, including Vanessa Beecroft, Monica Bonvicini, Paula Pivi, and Elisabetta Benassi, all have well-established international reputations. See Camille Morineau, *elles@centrepompidou: Women Artists in the Collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre de Création industrielle* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2009).
20. Mirella Bentivoglio, "I segni del femminile," in *Poesia visiva: La donazione di Mirella Bentivoglio al Mart*, p. 15.
21. Wendy Pojmann, "'We're right here!,' The Invisibility of Migrant Women in European Women's Movements: The Case of Italy," in Pojmann, *Migration and Activism in Europe Since 1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 195. For a brief introduction to some distinctive cultural elements of Italian feminism, see Lesley Caldwell, "Italian Feminism: Some Considerations," in *Women and Italy: Essays on Gender, Culture and History*, Zygmunt G. Baranski and Shirley W. Vinall, eds. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), pp. 95–116.
22. Quoted in Judy Rosenberg, "Visual Poetry: The Avant-Garde in Italy," *Women Artists News* 6, nos. 2–3 (Summer 1980), p. 8.

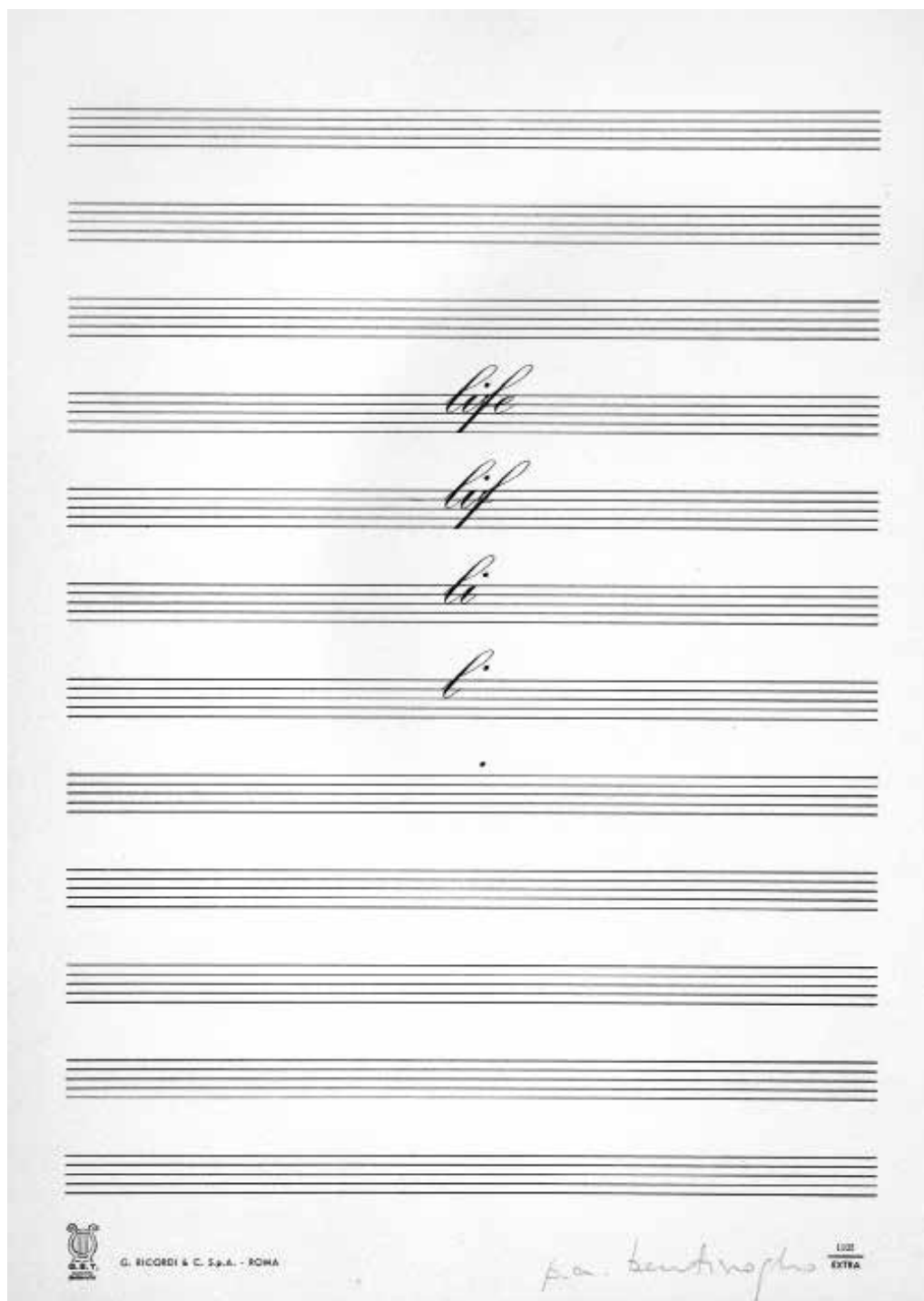


PLATE 20 —

Da punto a nota (diminuendo musicale) (From Point to Note [Musical Diminuendo]), 1971. Lithograph on paper, 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. \times 9 in. (32.07 cm \times 22.86 cm).