

*My works are meeting points, code crossroads: they relate at all levels and I call them symbolic structures*¹

Mirella Bentivoglio

Deconstruction and Reconstruction

The artwork of Mirella Bentivoglio (Klagenfurt, 1922 – Rome, 2017) can be interpreted through the conceptual and materialistic action of 'breaking up', in order to 'rebuild' or 'reconstruct'. This approach is behind all of her poetry and critical thought.² Throughout her long creative journey,³ the artist did indeed 'break up' words, expressions, codes and conceptions, not only with the intent of creating new visions and interpretations but especially to unveil deep meanings in nature and culture. For Bentivoglio, 'breaking' is a metaphor for a fracture which could release unknown meanings, which could go beyond appearances and illustrate the essence of existence.

The origins of her work has often been compared to Marcel Duchamp,⁴ Man Ray, and Dadaism, but in particular to Futurism, she herself confirmed the latter in an interview when she was older.⁵

Her inclination to analyze texts and words started when she was young, when she started out brilliantly as a poet, with a book in Italian and English, edited by Scheiwiller and Vallecchi and reviewed by Giorgio Caproni, Italo Defeo and Mario Praz. In spite of this initial praise, Bentivoglio soon realized that this area did not sufficiently reflect her real vocation, because of, she said, the stubborn need for constraints.⁶

She appeared dissatisfied with the idea of having to accept a pre-defined reality, which pushes her to question the only thing she was sure she possessed: language. So after this brief literary period, she began to get involved with concrete poetry,⁷ and analyzing not only the sounds in language but also the form of its words.

To best frame this movement, it is useful to quote the artist's words to describe the *modus operandi* that she followed in the early 1960s: "I used one or two words at a time. Through splitting and metamorphosis, they would become poetic visions revealing levels and internal messages without the need for any auxiliary support."⁸

While phonic elements, initially predominate in her earlier work (so much so that they can still be recited), with echoes and references to Futurism; it is the image, whether composed or deconstructed, that becomes the subject of her research, as seen in 'History of Monument' (*Storia del Monumento*, made with Annalisa Alloatti in 1968), a six page lithograph playing on one word which de-materializes.⁹

The sense of this operation is driven by the shape of the combinations of letters and words, as in the case of 'Cage I Have' (*Gabbia Ho*, 1966), a cage made with a capital H, and the letter O, which represents the exit, but is still a part of it. Another example is 'Black Icon' (*Icona nera*, 1968-71) which highlights 'io' in the word for God, 'Dio', (with all its conscious and unconscious implications), already exemplified in 'We apologize to thee for thine own duplicity' (*Noi perdono Ti chiediamo della tua duplicità*, 1967).

These works show a marked interest in the wealth of meaning enclosed within letters of the alphabet and the relations established by their shape, which lead to new and different meanings, such as 'Void in the Center' (*Vuoto al centro* 1965), 'The(Absent One)', *Positive/Negative, Sign/Figure*, (*L'(assente), positivo/negativo, segno/figura*, 1967) or 'Success' (*Successo*, 1968).

The starting point for the mechanism behind these works, as Gillo Dorfles maintains in the catalogue of her solo show in 1973 at the Pictogram Gallery in Rome, is to "substitute a meaning with another meaning that adapts either for love or obligation to the earlier meaning, (...) Mirella Bentivoglio activates a kind of subtle malice in her linguistic artefacts, she is continually playing with fire, as she draws in the spectator-reader and, most

importantly, instead of showing them boring and often unpleasant ramblings, common to all in the 'cold' Conceptualism sector, she offers them artworks that are visually pleasing and formally well executed".¹⁰

These aspects are noted by the press at the time, as seen in the review in 'Momento Sera', written by Lorenza Trucchi which says "While Duchamp moved an object out of context to transform its meaning, Bentivoglio decontextualizes words (which she uses ready-made) and embodies them in an object-metaphor. Never arid, always with a vigil sense of criticism and poetic grace, that retains the secret reasons of the subconscious, expressed with peremptory evidence".¹¹

Towards the early 1970s, when she would often use collages, the artist also began to use words and images, working in the predominantly Italian movement of Visual Poetry,¹² characterized by the introduction of slogans and elements of pop culture, such as the famous 'I love You' (*Ti amo* 1970). In this work the stereotypical expression, writes Renato Barilli, "becomes animated, way beyond its meaning, placing the emphasis on the phonic value of 'AM' which corresponds to the sound of a wide open mouth avidly gobbling something, for erotic reasons, or simply out of hunger. The phonemic value of the verbal material is further highlighted by the photographic reproduction of a mouth, posed as if uttering the sound".¹³

Not only seductive and enticing combinations between words and images, but also dramatic news events are revived in her work, as in 'Black Flower' (*Fiore Nero* 1971). The work, a collage of newspaper cuttings, reporting the death of a young Afro-American killed by a white policeman, is shaped in the form of a flower and represents an act of indictment of social discrimination and inequality. The title is borrowed from the caption, which illustrates the funeral march in the photo next to the article, which states: black dresses, black horses, black coffin, even black flowers. The stunning work remains a moving testimony that provokes deep reflection on issues still relevant today.¹⁴

In several works created around the same time, Bentivoglio researches multiple social issues, but she devotes fervent criticism to consumerism, seen in works like 'The Consumed Consumer' (*Il consumatore consumato*, 1974) or 'The Heart of the Obedient Consumer' (*Il cuore della consumatrice ubbidiente*, 1975). This is an clever interpretation of the coca cola logo, where self-awareness and distancing are both coherently present, linked by the thread of ambiguity¹⁵: "I noticed that by placing the two 'C's opposite each other and joining them in the shape of a heart – and they were both shaped ready to form a heart (I didn't have to change anything) –, the 'oca' (goose) appeared by itself" declared Bentivoglio in one of her last interviews,¹⁶ in which she identified the 'female goose' (*donna-oca*) as the principle ally of consumerism.

What is fascinating about these works is not so much their surprise element or the playful wit, but their simplicity (if only superficially) which make them seem so obvious, even though they aren't, because of the meaningfulness of the intuitions and cultural references.¹⁷

The artist herself defines her work as a celebration of culture, via a kind of de-subjectification designed to legitimize signs of communication.

Bentivoglio moves in this direction with her analysis of the expressive potential in her work, when, alongside her experiments in visual poetry, from the early '70s she began to produce a series of 'book-objects', that were to reappear in various shapes and forms, throughout her journey.¹⁸

Gradually she began to realize that even books, which are objects by definition, can speak a universal language.

The simple shape of a book becomes an ambivalent symbiological key that can generate semantic electric shocks between different orders of symbols, be they structural, material or verbal.

It is therefore not a surprise if a detailed re-examination of the book (in the conceptual and the formal sense), began precisely with the rediscovery of the visual value of linguistic signs. This is what happens, for example, in her 'tombstone-books' (*libri-lapidi*), in which Bentivoglio lets the material 'say the words', with its marks and grains, which for her are evidence of original planetary writings.¹⁹

The artist's intent is therefore to focus on the component parts of writing, because words give material a meaning and transform sculptures into metaphors. The 'book-object' is a book that does not serve as a medium or vehicle for information, instead it is an expression of its own physical properties as a three-dimensional object.²⁰ Once a volume is conceived as unusable, it has a merely visual semantic function of referring to the idea of a book. She came up with several different solutions: for example using marble, as in 'Silent writing' (*La scrittura del silenzio*, 1974), 'Total Poem' (*Poema totale*, 1974) or 'Secret Poem', (*Poema segreto* 1975); using the bark from a tree as in 'Etymological Book' *Libro etimologico* ("Liber" = bark, 1985); using transparent sheets of mica for 'Reality and the Book' (*La realtà e il libro* (1986); and even pieces of lava, to bring to life 'The Missals of the Burned Witch', (*I messali della strega bruciata* 1985). All works of leading meaningful potential, that repeatedly break illustrative conventions, and appropriate not only the perception of the work, but also the language that the book itself transmits.

From words to space.

Over time, as the visual possibilities of language became ever more condensed, so the artist, from the early 1970s, began to explore the expressive qualities of the single letters of the alphabet.²¹

Analogously to what happened in one of her first Concrete works, such as 'Cage I Have' (*Gabbia Ho*, 1966), Bentivoglio takes the letters E and O, two vowels that in Italian are also whole words and she uses them to bring to life a series of works, simple, yet full of conceptual meaning.

In 1973, when she first started using E ('and'), she made a serigraph entitled 'And=Conjunction' (*E=congiunzione*) in which four couples of the letter E mirror each other against a black background. The work was shown at the Sao Paulo Biennial,²² and was praised by Walter Zanini, then director of the MAC, one of the most prestigious museums in Brazil. He bought a copy and suggested that she turn it into a white cement structure for the museum's gardens.²³

She then began attempts at transforming the text into three-dimensional form, however her attempts did not work, and no doubt exasperated, she ended up destroying the model.²⁴

Nevertheless, that destructive gesture was precisely what revealed the real significance of the work in all its complexity: "we are surrounded by misplaced conjunctions, unhappy couples: flattened by habit, immobilized by their bond, stretched in search of a delicate equilibrium (...)"²⁵

Thanks to this lucky intuition, from 1977, she began to create numerous symbolic structures, some in reduced dimensions, such as 'Mutilation for Accentuation' (*Mutilazione per accentuazione*, 1978), carved in travertine rock,²⁶ and 'Architecture from E' (*Dalla "E" l'architettura* 1978), made of a gradual mound of wooden logs in six phases of construction. In addition to this, there were several projects to place the structures in public spaces, such as 'And=Conjunction: head-on collision, locked joint' (*E=congiunzione: Scontro frontale, Incastro immobilizzante* 1978-81),²⁷ and 'An E of E's' (*Una "E" di "E"* 1979-1981), temporally installed in the town of Gubbio, where Bentivoglio installed one of her most significant works, 'The Egg of Gubbio' (*L'Ovo di Gubbio* 1976).²⁸ Here too, the creative process started with the letter O, which became a reference to the shape of an egg itself.²⁹ She was invited by Crispolti, the curator of the Gubbio Biennial that year, who encouraged her to materialize her project:³⁰ an egg made of stones, big enough to hold a

human being standing upright, whole but cracked, so it looked as though it was about to hatch. Bentivoglio defined this symbolic message as “a peace agreement between men and women as a sign of equality”.³¹ She was the one who decided to collocate her ‘Egg’ (as the people of Gubbio called it)³² at a junction along the Procession of Candles route,³³ making it “the first insertion of a female symbol in a traditional fertility ritual, which until now were exclusively male”.³⁴ Another significant element is the inscription on one of the fragments of the work: “Adult which holds the inscription ‘to lapidated adultery’, making an explicit link between the egg, a symbol of life, and the stone, a mortal weapon used in the patriarchal practice of lapidation.”³⁵

The creation of this work was a novelty for the Italian urban landscape, characterized for the first time by a strong female symbol and by a narrative strongly influenced by feminism.³⁶

The other side of the moon.

Among the artist’s various themes, that of gender holds an important place. Several of her works from the early 1970s onwards, highlight through witty linguistic puns, the subordination of women in a world, including the art world, made for male use and consumption.

In this context, works such as ‘*Diva/no*’ (1971), featuring a photo of the artist, sitting on a sofa, stuck to a cushion, in an ironic nod to the myth of the ‘diva woman’ and simultaneously distancing herself from it. ‘Tombstone to the Housewife’ (*Lapide alla casalinga*, 1974) is another of these works, where the ‘tombstone’ is none other than the blades of an ordinary washing machine, also the abovementioned ‘The Heart of the Obedient Consumer’ (*Il cuore della consumatrice ubbidiente*, 1975), which she created in several different versions. A notable one of these is: ‘*Mirror of the Heart of the Obedient Consumer*’ (*Lo specchio del cuore della consumatrice ubbidiente*, 1975), whose reflective surface draws the spectator into the work, insinuating her co-involvement, direct or indirect, conscious or unconscious in consumerism.

Bentivoglio thus affirms the possibility, not at all guaranteed, of female emancipation, as she herself remembers: “there was a habit of considering women aesthetically present only as housewives; female scientists were acknowledged, but not female artists”.³⁷

Bentivoglio felt that the collective image at that time, of a woman whose role is to look after the family and be a kind of angel of the hearth, should be overturned, through championing a new role in society. This awareness spurred her to act not only as an artist, but also as a mediator, to promote the work of her female colleagues.

At that time, the art scene was predominately male, while in contrast, female artists were almost nonexistent; in the important international poetry collectives, they made up a mere 2%.³⁸ For this reason Bentivoglio promoted a series of collectives of all-women artists working with ‘language and image’. One of the first shows was commissioned by the Tool Centre in Milan in January 1972 and entitled: “International Exhibition of Female Visual Artists”. It marked the beginning of a new and fascinating area for her, and from that moment she became very involved in promoting an ever more complete and detailed picture of female verbo-visual research. Unsurprisingly, the task was not easy, neither in the practical sense nor at the critical level. The exhibition, by choice of Bentivoglio, was not accompanied by an introductory text, as she was the first to recognize that this kind of initial ‘censure’ would not have given her the satisfactory elements to do justice to the critique of the subject. It is to be noted that the literature on the subject at that time was in very early stages.³⁹ Nevertheless, the area grew, year after year, and after Milan, the international exhibition of Visual Poetry, enriched with new members, toured many private Italian galleries, such as the Brandale Centre for Art and Culture in Savona (1973), the Studio d’Arte Contemporanea Artivisive in Rome (1974), the Tuttagrafica Gallery in Turin

(1975), and the Canale Gallery in Venice (1976). Bentivoglio remembers how “we were treated like a ghetto-show, which was actually a fitting definition. But voluntary ghettoization, far from portraying us as a self-destructive challenge, was a chance to bring together information of otherwise neglected female artists, even though it was more out of habit than out of choice”.⁴⁰ It was not long before the lucky exhibition experience found institutional recognition: in 1977 it was shown at the Art Expo in Bari and in 1978 it was the only all-women exhibition to ever exhibit at the Venice Biennial.⁴¹ This was undoubtedly the most outstanding and famous of Bentivoglio’s work as curator, when she literally made history for Visual Poetry in general and in particular for female poets. It happened, ironically, because the exhibition board had to make up for the scarcity of female presence in that particular edition of the Biennial. Summoned in haste by the director, Carlo Ripa di Meana, she was asked, at the last minute, to put on a show that would avoid the risk of possible controversy and protests by the feminist movement, which was particularly live and active at that time.⁴²

The exhibition, which presented a contingent of eighty artists working on ‘language and image’ and ‘language and object’, was called ‘Materialization of Language’, with the intent of highlighting the significance of ‘femininity’ and ‘matter’ in the root ‘*mater*’.⁴³ It was set up in the Magazzini del Sale and consisted of verbo-visual experiments by protagonists of the historical avant-garde⁴⁴ along with contemporary exponents of concrete and visual poetry and book-objects from all over the world.⁴⁵

The following year, the collectives also began to exhibit abroad, starting with Columbia University in New York; between 1971 and 1981, she curated fourteen shows in four different countries and three continents.⁴⁶ It was to be a commitment she kept up for the following three decades, culminating with the donation, in 2011, to the Mart in Rovereto, of her international collection of works and objects, received from artists involved in the various exhibitions in over forty years of her activity.⁴⁷

This parable of female emancipation is well-illustrated by the work ‘Lina and the Knight’, (*Lina e il Cavaliere*), a picture story, made in 1978 for the Michetti Award. In a sequence of eight shots, she modifies photos taken by Francesco Paolo Michetti of the famous actress and soprano Lina Cavalieri, giving each one a witty caption as a key to the meaning. In the first one there is a ‘cavalier’ holding up a drape behind Lina’s shoulders, as though wanting to mediate the ‘vulgar’ relationship between the photo and the lady. In the following pictures, the same drape becomes the painter’s canvas (the woman as an abstract icon created by man) and then a sheet that covers her (Lina is suggestively put to bed with the knight, and becomes an object, the sheet represents all the erasures she will encounter). Suddenly the drape turns into a white flag, symbolizing the knight’s surrender to Lina and her reality. The artist then wonders if the white flag is perhaps a blank page on which the heroine will be able to write the first chapter of her story. However, this is all impossible because the page that Lina needs to write on, can only be held by her, and thus in the final picture, we see her holding up the cloth that separates her from ‘spatial reality’ from which she reappears and looks out over. Nevertheless, not all women, even today, have been able to benefit from this release. The story of the ‘Cancelled’ woman (*La Cancellata* 1977-1988) represents this particularly emblematically and is sadly relevant today. The sequence of pictures show the process of ‘erasure’ of an Afghan woman, so that in the last picture all that can be seen is the net of her burqa. The artist however points out that the word “cancel” has a double meaning in Italian: ‘cancelled’ but also ‘gate’. And although you cannot bring back that which has been cancelled, a ‘gate’ can always be opened.

Her reflections on women continue over the following decades, with works of great visual impact, such as 'Correction - Linguistic Promotion of Sewing' (*Correzione, Promozione linguistica del cucito*, 1988) which is a T-shirt printed with the words 'do-not/be afraid, I am a woman' (*niente/abbiate paura, sono una donna*). Another example is her book printed in 2013 published by Eos, 'The other side of the Moon' (*L'altra faccia della luna*), in which on one page she imposes the moon's surface on the Earth and on the other is an unpublished poem from 1978. The verses describe a female-moon satellite, initially depicted as a body that obediently orbits the planet before announcing, in rebellious tones, prophetically: 'we are happily being born'.

Mirella Bentivoglio was not only an important, sensitive and visionary artist, who had a leading role in verbo-visual research between the 1960s and 1970s, her story is also of a woman who brilliantly interpreted and gave a voice to hundreds of female artists. Bentivoglio, has given visibility to a product that, if it hadn't been for her dedication and generosity, would still be struggling to be recognized fairly, and if 'the other side' of that satellite is finally starting to appear, it is entirely to her credit.

Davide Mariani

¹ M. Bentivoglio, "Autopresentazione orale", in Club "Il centro", Rome, 1985; now in M. Bentivoglio, "Percorso", in AA.VV., *Mirella Bentivoglio. Dalla parola al simbolo*, cat. Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, 10-28 October 1996, Ed. De Luca, Rome, 1996, p. 51.

² The artist herself declares this: "as a poet, I have a critical approach to society and how we have built it, so I do not distinguish between my so-called creative work and my critical thought." Cfr. B. Kersten, "Interview with Mirella Bentivoglio", in F. K. Pohl, *Pages. Mirella Bentivoglio. Selected Works 1966-2012*, Pomona College Museum of Art, 2015, p.58.

³ See AA.VV., *Mirella Bentivoglio. Dalla parola al simbolo* (cat. Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, 10-28 October 1996), Ed. De Luca, Roma, 1996 and F. K. Pohl, *Pages. Mirella Bentivoglio. Selected Works 1966-2012*, op. cit.

⁴ Cfr. C. A. Quintavalle, *Mirella Bentivoglio: le parole e le cose*, Fratelli Fabbri Editori, Milan, 1987; M. G. Tolomeo, "Il libro della conoscenza", in AA.VV., *Mirella Bentivoglio. Dalla parola al simbolo*, op. cit., p. 9.

⁵ "We are all children of Futurism, even if all for different and sometime completely contradictory reasons." Cfr. "L'Italia unita nell'arte. Interview with Mirella Bentivoglio", dir. F. Cataldi, prod. Va.Le. Cinematografica 78. Cfr. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITYaAgqec5c>

⁶ M. Bentivoglio, "Percorso", in *op. cit.*, p. 49. It is interesting to note that in an interview in 2013, in reply to the question "How would you describe the relationship between the different areas of your work?" she replied "if I have to sum up my various bodies of work in one word, I will chose the word 'poetry'. Cfr. B. Kersten, "Interview with Mirella Bentivoglio", in F. K. Pohl, *Pages. Mirella Bentivoglio. Selected Works 1966-2012*, op. cit., p.58.

⁷ "When I painted and wrote poetry, I discovered the work of a Russian-American artist Ben Shahn, who often used words in his painting. I then felt I needed to go break arbitrary code boundaries. Not by adding them or combining different pictures with words, as Shahn did, but to do it by coincidence. Shahn was not a poet (...) After I contacted the Brazilian founders of the so-called Concrete Poetry movement and I gave up both painting and poetic verse." Cfr. B. Kersten, "Interview with Mirella Bentivoglio", in *op. cit.*, p. 60. In spite of their formal and conceptual differences, Mirella Bentivoglio dedicated, in the early 1960s, a monograph to him. Si veda M. Bentivoglio, *Ben Shahn*, De Luca, Roma, 1963.

⁸ M. Bentivoglio, "Percorso", in *op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁹ From the work, ten years later, Bentivoglio created a series of collages called *Monument memento* (1978), in which an open book, appears on the columns of a fascist bridge in Rome, by the architect Armando Brasini, highlighting its uselessness (columns are of no use as pedestals for statues or as structural supports). Cfr. F. K. Pohl, "Notes on pages", in F. K. Pohl, *Pages. Mirella Bentivoglio. Selected Works 1966-2012*, op. cit., pp.17-24.

¹⁰ G. Dorfles, "Mirella Bentivoglio", *Pictogramma* n. 11, Rome, 1973.

¹¹ L. Trucchi, "Bentivoglio al Pictogramma", in *Momento Sera*, Rome, 22 June 1973.

¹² Gillo Dorfles distinguishes three principle branches of Visual Poetry. The first is "Concrete Poetry", in which he includes among others De Campos (Brasil), Tavares (Portugal) and the Italians Lora-Totino, Carrega, Parmiggiani. The second contingent is the Florentin Group 70 (Miccini, Pignotti, Lucia Marcucci, Ori, ecc.), who initially defined themselves as 'technological poetry' but then flowed into the larger group of 'Visual Poetry' and finally, a third branch, with a more rigorously 'concrete' base but with links to Duchamp including Ugo Carrega, Mirella Bentivoglio and Emilio Isgrò. Cfr. G. Dorfles. *Ultime tendenze nell'arte d'oggi. Dall'informale al concettuale*, ed. Feltrinelli, Milan, 1973, p.143.

¹³ R. Barilli, "Alla ricerca del simbolo perduto" (*In search of lost symbols*), in AA.VV., *Mirella Bentivoglio. Dalla parola al simbolo*, op. cit., p. 12.

¹⁴ Nowadays similar events are still current, such as the killing of George Floyd in 2020, which shocked public opinion in the USA and all over the world. An example of the relevancy of Bentivoglio's research is an event that actually involved the collage 'Black Flower' *Fiore nero*, when it was published on facebook by the Stazione dell'Arte Museum to showcase the imminent opening of an exhibition called 'The other side of the Moon' (*L'altra faccia della luna*), and the Museum's page was blocked for 48 hours for "inciting racial hatred". It is worth noting that the work was also exhibited at the 1978 Venice Biennial as part of the famous exhibition *Materializzazione del linguaggio*. Cfr. L. Luca, "Art: Facebook censures 'Black Flower', Mirella Bentivoglio's most famous work for 'inciting hatred'", in *La Repubblica*, 23 September 2021; L. Bentivoglio, "My mother's works censored because of a ridiculous algorithm", in *La Repubblica*, 23 September 2021; S. Conta, "Mirella Bentivoglio, behind the scenes at the Stazione dell'Arte Museum and Facebook censure", in *Exibart*, n. 114, November 2021 – January 2022, p. 22.

¹⁵ This line of interpretation was suggested by Stelio Rescio for similar works, such as, *La firma* (1973). Cfr. S. Rescio, "Intervento, Capitolo secondo", Ed. Il Brandale, Savona, 1976.

¹⁶ Op. cit "L'Italia unita nell'arte. Interview with Mirella Bentivoglio".

¹⁷ G. Di Genova, introduction to the catalogue "Partitura-figura", April 1982; ora in AA.VV., *Mirella Bentivoglio. Dalla parola al simbolo*, op. cit., p. 119.

¹⁸ Bentivoglio's interest in the 'book-object' and the 'artist's book' accompanied her throughout her career, involving her in curating and exhibiting many shows on the theme in prestigious institutions. Her main exhibitions as artist were at the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris (1978; 1981; 1982), at the MoMa in New York (1992) at the Peggy Guggenheim in Venice (1994) and at the Venice Biennial (2009) while as curator her most significant shows were: 'The Non Book' ('Il non libro') at the Biblioteca Centrale in Palermo (1985, Sicily), "Volùmina" at the Rocca Roveresca in Senigallia (Marche, 1988) and 'Bookism' "Il librismo" at the Fiera di Cagliari (Sardinia, 1990). The title of the latter refers to a neologism coined by Bentivoglio to document the eponymous artistic tendency developed internationally in the last century. Cfr. M. Bentivoglio, *Il librismo. 1896-1990*, Arte Duchamp, Cagliari, 1990. For a complete list of her book-object artist's book exhibitions: See "Selected Exhibition History" in F. K. Pohl, *Pages. Mirella Bentivoglio. Selected Works 1966-2012*, op. cit., pp.136-138.

¹⁹ M. Bentivoglio, "Percorso", in *op. cit.*, p. 49

²⁰ M. Bentivoglio, *Silenziario*, Studio Bocchi, Roma, 1993.

²¹ "I broke away from the national language and began to sense the richness enclosed within the form of the letters of the alphabet, behind which in the long history of language, the pictorial roots of written sign language are hidden". comments Bentivoglio referring to this choice. Cfr. M. Bentivoglio, "Percorso", in *op. cit.*, p. 49.

²² Cfr. "São Paulo Biennial", in *Nuova Antologia*, 109, n. 2077, Rome, January 1974, pp.140-145.

²³ The episode is narrated in the preface to the catalogue of the exhibition "Historie d'E", held at Writers Forum London in 1988. Cfr. F. K. Pohl, *Historie d'E*, ed. Writers Forum, London, 1988.

²⁴ Ibidem

²⁵ Ibidem

²⁶ The letters that make up the installation *Da "H" a "E" (From H to E)* are made of the same material, a mute letter followed by conjunction (1979), temporarily in Gubbio, see photographs in AA.VV., *Mirella Bentivoglio. Dalla parola al simbolo*, op. cit., pp.26-27.

²⁷ Made out of wood but each module is 230cm.

²⁸ "The symbiological destination of each one needs to be compared here," writes Enrico Crispolti, "[Bentivoglio] says the 'Egg' symbolizes the individual destiny of life, alone at birth and in death; the law of nature. The letter E is relationships, multiplicity. O is 'Or'. E is 'And'. The egg is the feminist alternative, the letter E is the result of an open and equal relationship with everything that is complementary". Cfr. E.Crispolti, *Estruturas simbolicas*, catalogue, Centro di Documentazione Arte Attuale (CDAA), Metronom, Barcellona, 1982 now in AA.VV., *Mirella Bentivoglio. La poesia fatta pietra*, catalogue, Pinacoteca e Musei Comunali, Macerata, February 1984, Coopedit, Macerata, 1984.

²⁹ "In retrospect, I realized that each of my eggs, until 1976, was a visual representation of an 'alternative', an 'Or'. It was always split in two by a line (egg and eggcup) or it was duplicate as in "ab ovo". Until this shape chose a larger size to fit into the public space" Cfr. M. Bentivoglio, "Percorso", in op. cit., p. 50.

³⁰ As well as the *L'Ovo di Gubbio (The Egg of Gubbio)*, in the same year, the artist performed a series of collective poetry activities, such as *Poem to a Tree (Poesia all'albero 1976)* and *Arbor inversa* (Gubbio, 1979), *Un albero di pagine* (1992). Cfr. M. Bentivoglio.

³¹Cfr. Mirella Bentivoglio, *All'adultera lapidata*, Roma, Edikon, 1976 citato in F. K. Pohl, "Language/Image/Object: The Work of Mirella Bentivoglio", in *Woman's Art Journal*, vol. 6, n. 1, Spring-Summer 1985, p. 18.

³² According to the artist, they recognized the alphabetic matrix of the structure. Cfr. M. Bentivoglio, "Percorso", in op. cit., p. 50.

³³The Festival of Candles takes place in Gubbio in mid-March and is rooted in pre-Christian fertility rituals. The reference to the phallic shape of the candles symbolizes the predominantly masculine nature of the procession.

³⁴ Cfr. Mirella Bentivoglio, *All'adultera lapidata*, in op. cit.

³⁵ M. Pasinati, "L'uovo universale di Mirella Bentivoglio" (*the Universal Egg of Mirella Bentivoglio*), in *Letterate Magazine*, 26 April 2017.

³⁶ Ibidem

³⁷ "L'Italia unita nell'arte. Intervista a Mirella Bentivoglio" (*Italy united in art. Interview with Mirella Bentivoglio*), op. cit.

³⁸ The data refers to the catalogue of the 1969 retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and Bentivoglio herself points it out. Cfr. M. Bentivoglio, "I segni del femminile", in AA.VV., *Visual Poetry. Donation by Mirella Bentivoglio to Mart*, catalogue, 19 November – 22 January 2012, Silvana editoriale, Milan, 2011, p. 15.

³⁹ "I would like to turn the clock back to November 1970, when *Woman's Studies* didn't exist, *African American Studies*, *Queer Studies*, *Post-colonial Studies* (...) Instead history of art started with the pyramids and arrived at Picasso". Linda Nochlin used these words to illustrate the American cultural panorama when her essay '*Why Have There Been No Great Woman Artists?*' was published. It was to become a fundamental critical point of reference on the presence/absence of women in art. In Italy, the essay was first translated in 1977 and inserted in another collection, edited by Einaudi. Cfr. L. Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Woman Artists?" in V. Gormick, B.K. Moran (Ed.), *Woman in Sexist Society. Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, Basic Book, New York, 1971, pp.344-366. For details of how the essay was reviewed and criticised in Italy, See M. A. Trasforini, "Introduzione" in L. Nochlin, *Perché non ci sono state grandi artiste?* (1971), Castelveccchi, Roma, 2014, pp.7-19. For the author's reflections, thirty years on, See L. Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Woman Artists? Thirty Years After", in C. Armstrong, C. de Zegher (Ed.), *Woman Artists at the Millennium*, The Mit Press, Cambridge Mass, London, 2006.

⁴⁰ M. Bentivoglio, "I segni del femminile", in op. cit., p. 15.

⁴¹ Two years later, in 1980, Lea Vergine curated, this time in Palazzo Reale in Milan, another significant all-women exhibition called *L'altra metà dell'avanguardia (the other half of the avant-garde) 1910-1940*, dedicated exclusively to painters and sculptresses in the historical avant-garde movements. Cfr. L. Vergine, *L'altra metà dell'avanguardia. 1910-1940*, Mazzotta editore, Milan, 1980, republished, with updates, in 2005. Cfr. L. Vergine, *L'altra metà dell'avanguardia. 1910-1940*, Il saggiatore, Milano, 2005. For a retrospective reflection of the exhibition: See A. Maderna, *L'altra metà dell'avanguardia quarant'anni dopo, (the other half of the avant-garde forty years on)* Postmedia, Milano, 2020.

⁴² M. Bentivoglio, "I segni del femminile", in *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁴³ Cfr. M. Bentivoglio (curated by), *Materializzazione del linguaggio, (Materialization of Language)* cat. exhibition, 20 September – 15 October, Magazzini del Sale alle Zattere, Venice Biennial, Visual Art and Architecture, 1978.

⁴⁴ In 2008, together with Franca Zoccoli, she wrote a monograph on the female contribution to Italian Futurism in the sector of Visual Arts. Cfr. M. Bentivoglio, F. Zoccoli, *Le futuriste italiane nelle arti visive, (Italian Futurists in Visual Art)* De Luca, Roma, 2008.

⁴⁵ In contrast with other spaces in that Biennial, where artistic production from Eastern Europe was not represented, the *Materialization of Language exhibition* was the only one to show works from behind the Iron Curtain. They were personally contacted by Bentivoglio, and managed to get round the red tape by sending their work directly to her (books, toys, film to be printed). It was an event that proved "the unifying strength that women share". Cfr. M. Bentivoglio, "I segni del femminile", in *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

⁴⁶ For a complete list of the all-women collectives curated by Mirella Bentivoglio: See *Poesia visiva. La donazione di Mirella Bentivoglio al Mart*, *op. cit.*, pp.200-201. For further details on Bentivoglio as curator: See L. Cozzi, "Curatorial practice and the language of Italian feminism in the work of Mirella Bentivoglio", in F. K. Pohl, *Pages. Mirella Bentivoglio. Selected Works 1966-2012*, *op. cit.*, pp.78-89.

⁴⁷ The event was marked by an important exhibition. The catalogue which was published is still an essential key to research on this theme. Cfr. *Poesia visiva. La donazione di Mirella Bentivoglio al Mart (Visual Poetry. Mirella Bentivoglio's donation to MART)*, Catalogue, 19 November – 22 January 2012, Silvana editoriale, Milan, 2011.