

Poetic vocation and the environment: the role of cities and nature in the works of Mirella Bentivoglio.

"It is easy to classify, but to classify well is difficult and perhaps also pointless. It has been authoritatively sustained that to classify works of art is difficult and of no use (...) Yet, if the subject is environmental art, it would seem that there may be reason to attempt to classify, more so that in other artistic fields". By debating the validity of labelling works of art as environmental in his essay in 1997, Paolo D'Angelo brilliantly challenged the theory of grouping works that differed in technique, size, materials, collocation and purpose, under the same heading. He affirmed that possible criteria could involve *"taking into consideration the type of natural experience - and let's say, environment - which the works themselves are inspired by"*.¹ Ever since the essay was written twenty-five years ago, the debate continues to stimulate discussion and speculation, leading to ever more deepening reflections on the idea of nature, urban space and landscape.

There are innumerable threads to this argument, one of which is around the artwork itself. Indeed, some works exemplify their connection to place, and others find it through their unexpected collocation away from the vision. Then there are those that are conceived for a determined space, yet they claim a kind of independence and interchangeability with other spheres such as the substance of symbols, traces of time and the consistence of the materials. The artist and keen critic, Mirella Bentivoglio (Klagenfurt 1922-Rome 2017) was no exception. She was one of the first to explore the creativity of language, morphing it into images, rebuses and semantic messages. Much of her research revolves around using the letters "E", "H" and "O" to identify the principal content of everything and using them to create ever more communicative microcosms, filled with meaning.² When she extends her research area to inserting these signs into public spaces, the meanings also spread out over new sensory trajectories and thoughts.

Mirella Bentivoglio had an erudite relationship with words and the symbolism of signs. Her knowledge was so complex,³ she felt compelled to unveil the signs of the world in her multiform and secret manifestations. She had a singular talent in seeing the link between symbols and words, between shape and space, and was confident that she could express this best by assembling thick and dense material. Thanks to her prolific critical and artistic vitality,⁴ she turned the relationship between words and form, between nature and abstract symbols, into fertile aesthetic short circuits and witty puns. It is not easy to classify her 'environmental' interventions, but what transpires from her work produced in this area stands out for its content and technique. There are works that physically withhold the secret meaning of symbols and other works that have a more extended impact on the territory itself, with references to local identity and respect for its surroundings. 'The Egg of Gubbio' (*L'Ovo di Gubbio*, 1976), 'Poem to a Tree' (*Poesia all'albero*, 1976), 'The Egg and the Tree' (*L'uovo e l'albero*, 1982), the 'E-Conjunction' series (*E-congiunzione*, 1981-1985), 'Operation Orpheus' (*Operazione Orfeo*, 1982), 'Field-book Agri-Culture' (*Libro campo Agri-cultura*, 1998) and 'Walled Faces' (*Facce murate*, 2005), to name but a few of her works that started in the mid 1960s, and exemplify a fascination for a new order, for a real shift into the wider dimension of the environment, for a real chance to create new 'symbolic structures' with connections and references to unusual metaphors.

For Mirella Bentivoglio “*knowing adds nothing new to reality*”⁵, it transforms reality. This is typical of her disconcerting way of finding fluid shifts between different territories of expression and the history of the location or between the archetypes and choral dimensions of rituals. In the ‘Egg of Gubbio’ (*L’Ovo di Gubbio*), made in 1976 for the Gubbio Biennial, Mirella Bentivoglio had a brilliant idea for a new juxtaposition of symbols. She created a monument over two metres high, against a kind of stone backdrop: a symbolic monument to ‘lapidated adultery’,⁶ made of stones⁷, just like the walls of the houses in Gubbio. “*The Egg was made of stones, whole but cracked, big enough to hold a human being*” – she remembered- “*it included all the symbols of my poetic research, the H and the O were in the wooden cage of the frame. In other words I had shifted from the words to a symbol of universal significance, less altered by the trappings of history*”.⁸ In reality, and without little experience in sculptures, the artist had created a “symbolic structure” against the medieval town walls, thereby resolving “*in a positive sense the problem of the contemporary intervention versus historical heritage (...) in such a spontaneous connection with the reality of its surroundings*” – wrote Enrico Crispolti – “*that somehow it even seemed original*”⁹.

By aiming at the symbolic-alchemistic aspects, she differentiated herself. In ‘Operation Orpheus’ (*Operazione Ofeo* 1982), she highlights the Socratic power of symbols depositing a cement egg (the symbol of Origin) in a Cave in Mount Cuccu (not far from Gubbio). It was a kind of magical ritual in which she thanked Mother Earth for saving her sculpture of the Egg in the Umbrian city from an earthquake¹⁰. In ‘Poem to a Tree’ (*Poesia dell’albero*) she uses a traditional local agricultural symbol – the branches of an oppiello tree (a kind of maple) – to interact with the terrain. She found a crown of branches of a local ancestral tree (an oppiello tree, whose branches are typically used to support and train the vines),¹¹ and placed it in the Piazza della Signoria in Gubbio, turning it into a centre for collective poetic activity. “*Each passer-by was invited to write whatever comments the trunk inspired them to say, on a piece of paper. By the evening the tree was covered, not with its leaves, but by small leaves of paper*”, she recalled, “*The fruitful result of collective poetry written by passers-by.*”¹² The imaginative change in location had worked and people had reacted spontaneously. The ancient tree had been brought back to life by the people’s comments,¹³ unleashing collective poetic expression and giving a voice to its surroundings¹⁴. In the years that followed the artist wanted to leave a trail, and used the tree as a lasting symbol of this experience. This led to the decision to transform the tree-fetish into a massive sculpture of an oppiello tree, entitled ‘Logos’ (the meaning of which oscillates between ‘reason’, ‘speech’ or ‘word’). She donated the sculpture to the Maga Museum in Gallarate¹⁵. From there she moved on to the idea of the semantic potential of symbols by putting the egg and the tree together (1982)¹⁶ in public spaces in the city. The installation (made of an egg placed in the trunk of the tree), was her way of representing the anthropological value of the relationship between man and woman, between male and female, history and sexuality.

A further example of this “hyper-symbolism” is the series of the letter “E” collocated in public spaces in 1981 in Gubbio. The performance, developed from an idea which had already been used in the architectural project at the 1978 Venice Biennale¹⁷, when she arranged the initials in groups of three, enabled the artist to use a new way of presenting word forms through an architectural dimension. Instead of being ornamental objects or monuments in a public space, the letters became an alphabet to communicate with¹⁸. A physical symbol to use and to touch, three-dimensional wooden figures, that took on meaning through the actions of the passers-by, creating a new interpretation of the relationship between the artist, the spectator and the territory in “*between sign and nature*”.¹⁹ To re-enforce this symbolic conjunction, the artist resorted to several different

strategies. One of these was to prop the letters up against the wall. Another was to replicate the same letter several times so as to encourage a variation on a theme, and suggesting on a practical level “*other possible conjunctions between collective signs, playful moments and nature*”²⁰.

Undoubtedly all the artist’s projects were carefully considered: “the city, the chosen venue, the material, the form, everything was woven into a network of communications.”²¹ However, in order to evaluate how Mirella Bentivoglio’s experience shifted to ‘completed constructions’, one has to look at her de-constructed and more ‘ephemeral’ works, such as ‘Field-book Agri-culture’ (*Libro campo Agri-cultura*)²², which is a masterpiece of conceptual wisdom. In summer 1998 for the Stelle Cadenti (Falling Stars) Contemporary Art show in Bassano in Teverina (Viterbo), she chose an opening surrounded by trees for an installation with a natural short-circuit: heavy mounds of earth were heaped together to look like an open book, its pages engraved with lines, but no writing. The work was soon returned to the soil it was made from, when a storm dissolved the lines on its pages and nature wrote new words with the windswept falling leaves.²³

In addition to this work, there are her performances that are like theatrical appearances that run for a brief period and then disappear, such as ‘Walled Faces’ (*Facce Murate*), in Prague in 2005. Here the extent of Mirella Bentivoglio’s conceptual gravitation reaches new heights, not only for its historical and artistic references but also for the strength of its impact. Massively enlarged photographs of faces from imperial Rome (fluvial deities and matrons), designed by Francesco Borromini for the turrets of Palazzo Falconieri in Rome, were inserted into niches along the wall running alongside the Moldava river.²⁴ The rectangular shape of the reproductions significantly cut out the oval shape of their faces, which was once the key to their identity. The temporal synchronicity was in the iconic relationship between ancient and modern, between myth and language. These were evoked with simple communicative tactics: a large picture and a short caption, with a strategic plan for the spatial context: to use the city to host the work and its walls as a gallery.²⁵ “*Now, more than ever,*” explained the artist, “*language misses the images it grew up with. The sphere of our brain that deals with language is too full; it needs to offload into the other sphere, where perception is. This also explains why there are so many urban graffiti, this general sense of anxiety and need amongst the young to express themselves everywhere with words that look like images.*”²⁶

The projects that followed, some of which came to fruition and others remained on paper, merely confirm the poetic potential of her artistic work on environmental terrain. After completing her work on water, *Writ in water*, dedicated to John Keats at the Villa Schiarra lake in Rome (2005),²⁷ she moved on to corrugating material on land, often involving an asperity that could be upsetting. She imagines putting the letters of her name within the folds of a hill ‘Three-dimensional Graffiti. Name survival: written characters as open tombs’, (*Graffiti tridimensionali. Sopravvivenza del nome: i segni della scrittura come piccole tombe aperte*, 2007)²⁸ and an egg the colour of basalt lava, inside a volcano: ‘Concept of Zero’, (*Concetto di zero*, 2009)²⁹, a way of bringing back the wonder of the forgotten, imagined or familiar.

The sense of representation in strict relationship with outside spaces, the attention to the anthropological value of the relationship between man and nature, were all aspects widely researched in the 1970s. In Europe and in Italy, there were artists and collectives researching social and territorial realms³⁰, and spaces in nature.³¹ They made up an active and vital network, that Mirella Bentivoglio responded to, with her proposals of complex and singular poetry. Without succumbing to convention, she elaborated her own personal style,

that corresponded to her complex view of the world, where everything was connected and could condition others, while being conditioned itself. Thus, even the choice of the city destined to host her work, became an opportunity to reiterate the speculative and multiple potential hidden within everything. *"The western monument is a fetish of power and the occult emblem of fear: it celebrates death, and has unambiguous meaning", she wrote in 1983, "instead I try to create public structures that establish a relationship with their ethnic and spatial context, and release open metaphors".*³²

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¹ P. D'Angelo, *Come classificare le opere d'arte ambientale? (How can environmental art be classified?)*, in *"Arte critica"*, 14 November 1997- January 1998, p.6.

² *"Among the reasons that brought her to simultaneously investigate language, it is worth noting her awareness of moving away from the determined perception of the use of the alphabet. She felt the need to return to direct perception, in verbal communication, because the alphabet had distanced itself from form and thought, alienating us in a linguistic world which is totally instrumental"* R.Ruscio, *Che bello vedere nelle parole. Conversazione libera con Mirella Bentivoglio*, in *"Nuova Meta. Parole & immagini"*, 1-2, 2008, p.17.

³ She herself remembers her multilingual upbringing, in German-speaking Switzerland, in England, and in Milan where she lived until the 1950s and where she began to write poetry. Her interest in the figurative aspect of writing grew gradually. Mirella Bentivoglio spoke of her artistic visits to the Santo Spirito gallery in Milan where she worked as a secretary at the end of the 1940s (1947-49), and how she met Ben Shahn, a Russian-American artist, whose anthology she had seen at the 1956 Venice Biennial and who not long after had also used the alphabet in his painting. R.Ruscio, *ibidem*, pp.16-17.

⁴ The inseparability of the two sides of Mirella Bentivoglio, an artist and a critic, is illustrated by her equal success in her writing in which she explores the journeys of other artists. First and foremost Ben Shahn, a Russian-American artist who inspired her artistic vocation and about whom she wrote an important text (M.Bentivoglio, *Ben Shahn*, Ed. De Luca, Rome 1963) and her subsequent support for research by female artists working on the manipulation of the written word. *"When Giulio Carlo Argan asked me to express a voice for art"* she wrote *"for me it was a chance to explore the sources that had determined this creative process"*. R.Ruscio, *ibidem*, pp.19-20. After this, in 1978, she curated 'Materialization of Language' (*Materializzazione del linguaggio*) for the Venice Biennial (Magazzini del Sale alle Zattere, 20 September to 15 October) and in 2008, together with Franca Zoccoli she wrote a detailed volume dedicated to the Futurists: *Futuriste italiane nelle arti visive*, Ed.De Luca, Rome 2008.

⁵ I. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium. (Lezioni americane)*, Mondadori, Milan 2011, p.118.

⁶ *"It is likely that the stoning happened at the walls of the city, in small squares (...) -the artist recalls- this is why we chose a small triangular piazza outside the Gate of St.Ubaldo, with gradients that formed natural slopes"*. M.Bentivoglio, *Stralci di dichiarazione poetica*, in Mirella Bentivoglio. *La poesia fatta pietra (Poetry made of stone)*, Coopedit, Macerata 1984, p.10.

⁷ The work, made with a wooden and cement frame, survived several earthquakes, but was smashed in a collision with a truck. Restoration work has recently begun.

⁸ *"L'Ovo (as the inhabitants of Gubbio called it, as though they recognized the alphabetic matrix of the structure) was collocated on a pre-existing, natural pedestal, at the crossroads between two roads and seen from afar it looked like the join between two tree trunks"*. R.Ruscio, *ibidem*, p.20.

⁹ E.Crispoliti, *Poesia-azione, spazio alternativo*, catalogue, Rome 1978, In M. Bentivoglio, *La poesia fatta pietra*, Coopedit, Macerata 1984, p.36.

¹⁰ In a spoken interview, the artist remembers returning to the grotto a while later and the egg, no bigger than 60 cm, was no longer there. There are photographic records published in 1984, *Mirella Bentivoglio a Gubbio*, cat. mostra Arte Fiera91, Bologna 1991, pp.14-15.

¹¹ *"The tree is called "Tree" and sometimes "oppio" or "oppiello". As it is pruned, the branches of the tree begin to resemble a candelabrum or the veins of an upturned gothic vault. It is a typical Umbrian plant, grown to allow the vines to climb its trunk and wrap around its branches in a garland, turning the plant into a basket. Each tree costs decades of hard farm work, but now they line the vineyards, uprooted by the tractors, with the dead vines still clinging to their dry waists"*. M. Bentivoglio, *Stralci di dichiarazione poetica*, in *Mirella Bentivoglio. La poesia fatta pietra*, Coopedit, Macerata 1984, p.7.

¹² B. Munari, in *Mirella Bentivoglio a Gubbio*, cat., Centro d'Arte e Cultura Il Brandale, 25-28 gennaio 1991, Bologna, p.10.

¹³ *"Poetry made by the inhabitants of the city, helped me understand that the autonomous power of the symbol overthrew the "scriptural" motivations of the poetic action*. R.Ruscio, *ibidem*, p.20.

¹⁴ *"It was not that we brought the poet or poetry to the public space, to invite people to participate as a chorus" writes Crispolti, "instead it was a collective act of creating poetry, breaking down the unilateral cultural barriers, in a moment of real collective growth, where the cultural operator herself merely initiates a moment of structural encouragement and somehow leads, and then it all takes place in the multiple, yet casual contest that has started."*. E. Crispolti, *op.cit*, p.37.

¹⁵ The original tree was put on show in the church of San Paolo in Macerata (an egg, in memory of Piero della Francesca was suspended inside the centre of the tree, on a transparent line). In 1993 the tree was cast in bronze and exhibited in the Stabat Mater room in Palazzo dell'Archiginnasio in Bologna (1993-1994), and later in Modern Art Gallery in Bologna (1994) and in the church of San Leonardo in Venice. In 2013, it was donated by the artist to the Maga Museum in Gallarate.

¹⁶ The 'Egg and the Tree' (*L'uovo e l'albero*) project in Piazzale del Verano in Rome, was short-lived. When the artist went back to see it, she found the trunk sawn off at the base and so she had the idea of resting an egg on it like 'The seed of time' (*Il seme del tempo*) according to Chiara Diamantini, artist and assistant to Mirella Bentivoglio. The same subject appears in a collage (photo cut and pasted on wood) entitled 'Mother Tree' (*Albero madre*) 1982.

¹⁷ The artist used the letter «E» as serigraphic sign since 1973. She subsequently made a series of attempts to make three dimensional texts, ultimately ending up with the architectural version in Gubbio. M.Bentivoglio, *E=Congiunzione*, *op.cit*. p.13.

¹⁸ M. Venturoli, *Un itinerario sul filo della scultura*, Fabbri, Milan 1990

¹⁹ In 1981 the structures of the letter «E» were part of a performance in Campo Santo Spirito in Gubbio. *"The passers-by collaborated by positioning the structures where they pleased, thus transforming it while it was being created into a work of conjunctions between the artist and the spectator, between the spectator and the territory, its language married the public space and the symbol of nature"*, F. K. Pohl, *Histoire d'E*, Ed. Writers Forum, London 1988.

²⁰ From the document on show at the 1978 Venice Biennial, in *"Utopia e crisi dell'antinatura"* section, Parisi group, Venice 1978, in M.Bentivoglio, *op.cit*, p.13. letter «E» was also used in the project (composed together with the architect Maurizio Pietrangeli) to restore Piazza Augusto Imperatore in Rome (2002).

²¹ A.Denes, *Mirella Bentivoglio*, Catalogue. Galleria Duchamp, Cagliari, 1982, in *Mirella Bentivoglio. La poesia fatta pietra*, *op.cit*. p.45.

²² 'Field-book' (*Libro campo*) was created with the practical collaboration of the artist Mario Palmieri

²³ *"The grooves carved between the lumps of earth (that corresponded metaphorically to the lines on a printed page)" – wrote G.Dorfles – "were covered in windswept yellow robinia leaves, creating new 'words' this time written by nature"*. A 'Field Book' by Mirella Bentivoglio, letter signed by Gillo Dorfles, sd. Lettera_E Archive, Rome. The field-book was short-lived, due to a sudden storm that drenched the soil and covered up the lines of windswept leaves. Just like the Art in Nature artists, Mirella Bentivoglio privileged primary techniques and procedures, giving importance to the anthropological work of the relationship between man and nature.

²⁴ "Those images," Mirella Bentivoglio recalled later, "have crossed the millennium: from the anonymous Imperial Roman sculptor, who molded them, to Borromini who chose them, to the artisan who replaced them in stones and soil to make alchemical turrets, to the present technology which enabled me to reproduce them and reprint them on stone." Photographed by Alessandro Alimonti in maxi reproductions, they were sent to the Czech Republic to be pinned on seventy metres of wall; "thus by respecting their implicit refusal to fade away, they are outlawed by a declaration that I hold to with worldly responsibility". M. Bentivoglio, *Pagine/ immagine, Mirella Bentivoglio, Bruno Conte, Emilio Villa*, cat., Cortese&Lisanti Gallery, Rome, 3 October -18 November 2007, p.5.

²⁵ At the same time as this installation, Mirella Bentivoglio set up an exhibition at the Italian Institute of Culture in Prague: a revisitation of Borromini with sixteenth century verbal puns, to which she added her own captions to explain the various linguistic relationships.

²⁶ R.Ruscio, op.cit, p.21.

²⁷ The intervention documented by Paola Bitante consisted in a series of actions, including floating flowers on water, to upturn Keat's epitaph. "Here lies a man whose name is written on water". M.Bentivoglio, *Writ in Water*, Il Bulino, Rome 2005

²⁸ This project was defined by the artist herself as utopian and "to be kept secret", she wrote in a letter "because everybody copies ideas". Letter signed by Mirella Bentivoglio, dated 18/11/2011. Lettera_E Archive, Rome.

²⁹ The project, designed for Mount Etna, involved an egg of rough cement, painted black and placed on the slopes of the volcano. According to the artist's notes, the work was dedicated to Marinetti who wrote the poem '1+1=0' while on a trip to Etna. Mirella Bentivoglio Archive, Rome

³⁰ We are referring to the jointly-made art present in Italy towards the end of the 1960s, and the establishment of the counterculture and the idea of social space in the 1970s. Experiences that set off reflection on the relation between art and environment and the artist's social potential. See: E.Crispoli (Edited by) *Volterra 1973. Sculpture. Environment. Visualization. Projects for Alabaster. Historical Centre problems*, Centro Di, Florence 1973

³¹ The European phenomenon of Art in Nature born in the 1970s in opposition to American Land Art, founded its principles on the basis of respect for nature and the conviction that man is obliged to form an alliance with his habitat. In Italy, many artists worked with minimal and ephemeral interventions in nature. See: V. Fagone, *Art in nature*, Mazzotta, Milan 1996.

³² M.Bentivoglio, *Livres d'artiste-livres-objet-Shakespeare International N.R.A*, Paris 1983, translated into Italian in *Mirella Bentivoglio. La poesia fatta pietra*, op.cit. p.17.