

VOICES ON THE RADIO, LANGUAGE ON MY MIND: POETRY'S RESURGENCE IN CONTEMPORARY ART

by Allison Grimaldi Donahue

In the past couple of years, the art world has seen a lot more poetry. Or that seems true in Italy, where I'm living. I don't mean poetry as a metaphor, but actual poems, written and spoken. Despite my lifelong love of poetry, I find myself somewhat baffled by the current excitement around it, having spent years working with a form that was often considered stodgy or difficult or inaccessible. But really, what is it about this current moment that's bringing unexpected hordes (okay, maybe not *hordes*) to poetry readings, workshops, open mics, and so on? In thinking through this question, my position wavers and changes and constantly risks falling into the typical reasons for poetry's resilience: poetry brings people together; poetry builds empathy; poetry shows us the wonder of the universe; poetry offers solace in dark times. Not to mention it's a low-cost art form, and portable. But I'm not completely convinced of these reasons. If anything, poetry—reading it or writing it—can be divisive, angry, and solitary, and it shows the universe as it is, wholly, which is often not very wonderful at all. Rather than offering solace, I believe that poetry offers revolution, hope, rebellion.

When Caterina Molteni and I created "Poets in the Museum," a series of encounters with Italian poets at MAMbo, Bologna,¹ as pandemic restrictions began to lift in 2021, we noticed a public hunger for a deeper connection not only with the art the poets were engaging with, but with the notion of art making itself. Such a simple idea excited audiences seeking something social but also mystical. Poetry might offer different answers. Poets roamed the gallery space and the public had questions, were open about their curiosities, and were given the chance to interact with the museum's collection via an alternative method: poetry.

The more I ruminate on it, the more I think we need poetry now because it provides a method—a method for granting more attention to the present, for escaping consumable forms of art, for engaging with other cultures and other times. Poetry, thanks to its slowness and reproducibility, as well as its reuse of common materials (language), is decidedly anti-market and will never stray far from its ancient beginnings. With its oblong gaze and slippery grasp, poetry has always been a technology, a way of doing things, a tool for understanding even when the understanding is partial and opaque.

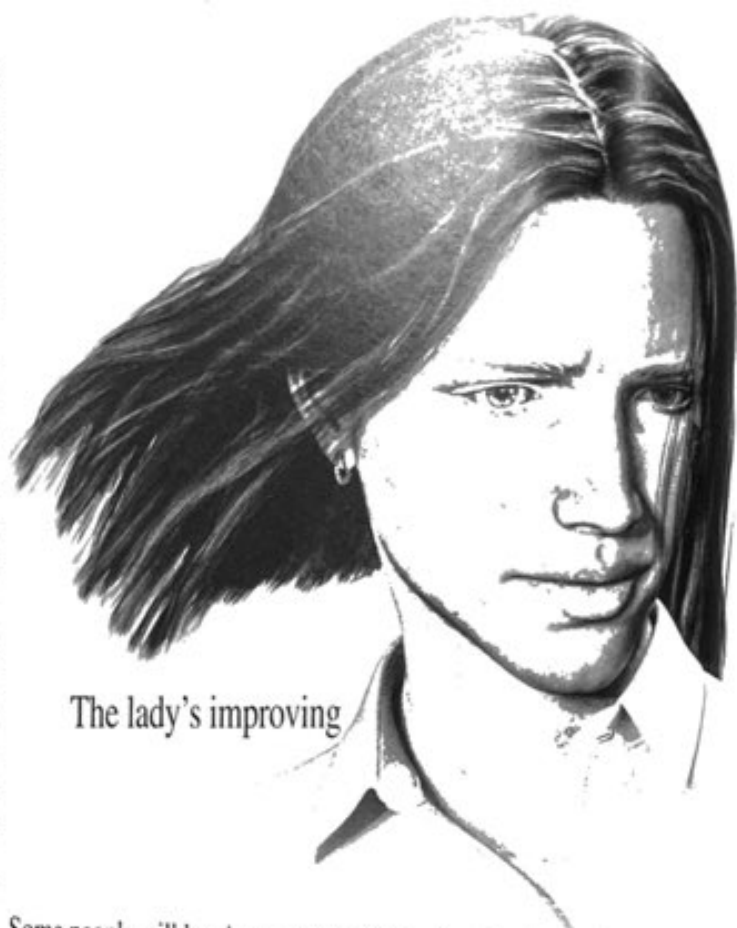
The notion of collage, or pastiche in writing has taken on a much greater importance. The found poem, the poem that exists out there to be framed by the poet, collected and made into a work, becomes more and more intriguing. In a culture flooded with language and text, a poet need not look far to find leftover materials to glean. One of the great Italian practitioners of this cut-up form was Patrizia Vicinelli. In 2021, *Chi ha paura di Patrizia Vicinelli* (Who's afraid of Patrizia Vicinelli) at MACRO, Rome, was dedicated to this poet who was difficult, complex, and eschewed any traditional ideas around the "female poet." Vicinelli's *A. A. A.* (1967) collects letters and phonemes of languages she spoke and languages she heard; handwriting and type are placed side by side, indicating different modes of possible communication, and there is no implication that these words come from some deep place within the author. She is simply an attuned listener, a clear voice pronouncing what others may miss. In her short text "Ideological Declaration," she writes on this idea of communal or shared language:

"To learn something and keep it for yourself is part of the ethics of possession and of private conservation that belongs to the ideology of the bourgeoisie. . . . Today I realize that persisting in a behavior of non-communicative isolation coincides with a solipsistic and individualist position in the negative sense of bourgeois existentialism. You need to therefore scream about what you believe in, let it be known how it came to be, even more so if the message has something to do with individual and collective social reality. . . . We use words, even if this method of communication is worn out and abused, to try and make concrete our thoughts, which are in the end our way of life."²

This is an ethos for poetry that takes into account the simple fact that language is a plain and common material. The language we speak belongs to each one of us in its singularity as much as it belongs to the whole of a given community. The aura of "authenticity" in language is impossible to defend. Any speech, any poem, is the result of unconscious absorption, thievery, translation, and intertextuality. Through reading and listening to poems, one finds and loses the self over and over again. In language, meanings change and are fleeting.

The protagonist of Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (Orpheus, 1950) sits in his car scribbling messages coming in through the radio, hoping for clues about life, about poetry. Jack Spicer said something similar to this notion of transcription in an interview in 1965:

"I think poems are delivered very much like a message that's delivered over a radio and the poet is the radio. I don't think poems come from the inside at all. Or at least the good ones don't. You get all sorts of static from the radio, bad transistors



The lady's improving

Some people will last / among other things / restless / us, with no sisters / helping to make the right decision / when mom's the manager, or when dad's the manager / the fast learner in me / is happy either way / by the way / the lady's improving / woman is a control freak / but I win her over / using just my hands, systems / pointers, cleaners / man is a control freak / but I win him over / using just my hands, systems / pointers, cleaners.

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Eleonora Luccarini, *The Lady's Improving* (Portrait of Léonard Sauté), 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Baleno International, Rome. Collezione ALT. Photo: Luana Rigolli

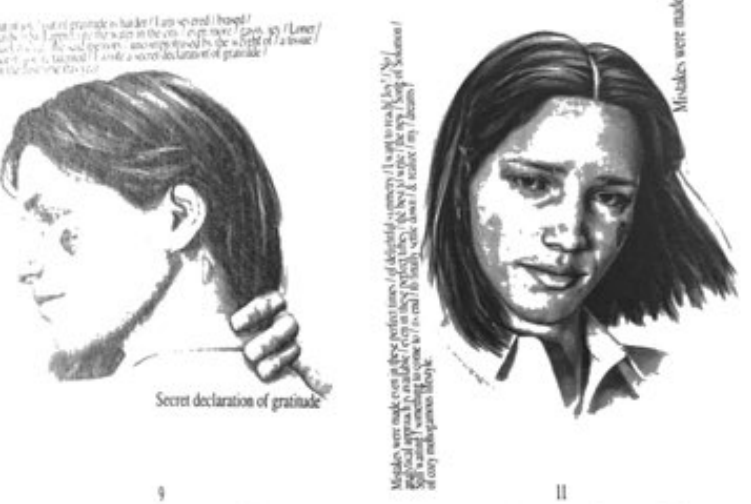
and all of that. But I think fundamentally a poem comes from the Outside. I have no idea where, I have no theological or any other kind of notion of it.”³

The poet is a medium, a scribe. The poet is controlled by language, not the other way around.

Poetry is out there (not in here), and in many ways new technology can help poets recognize this. Poets have always used technology to inflect, influence, and shape their writing. This is as true of the first printing press, as it is of cassettes of readings by Fluxus members, as it is of ChatGPT. Poetry’s technologies change, but the raw materials do not. The human poet must first hear and feel the language to be inserted into the machine. What then happens to the language is unpredictable, but this too is nothing new. Intentionality only goes so far, and the poet always hopes that the poem is smarter, more expansive, more meaningful than the singular self. In his essay “A View from the Factory Floor” (2013), Jaswinder Bolina writes about formal experimentation in poetry. Asking what qualifies as true radicality, he claims: “The pursuit of the new eventually necessitates apes and algorithms at the keyboard because there’s no formal subversion greater than the one that brings down the entire self-important edifice of the human intellect.”⁴ Maybe AI will help us humans remember that we do not own language, that it is something beyond us. It is a mystery that exists in the provinces of animals, trees, all matter, as well as in the technology we create. In a sense, writing with AI is similar to translating; the material is there but it needs to be destroyed and remade. As Donna Haraway writes in “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1985), “Writing is preeminently the technology of cyborgs, etched surfaces of the late twentieth century. . . . Cyborg politics are the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism.”⁵ Poetry is filled with noise. It causes confusion, makes space for boredom, allows for change and error, revels in the glitch. Perhaps we subconsciously long for this move in art making as a means of fending off the self-obsessive, the branded.

In the final one of his fifteen theses on contemporary art, Alain Badiou notes, “It is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already

From left to right:
Eleonora Luccarini, *Secret Declaration of Gratitude (Portrait of Léonard Sante)*, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Baleno International, Rome. Private Collection. Photo: Luana Rigolli
Eleonora Luccarini, *Mistakes Were Made (Portrait of Léonard Sante)*, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Baleno International, Rome. Photo: Luana Rigolli



recognizes as existent.”⁶ Poetry has the potential to render visible new aspects of society, to make the most complex ideas translucent, even for a brief moment. I say “potential” because like all art, it is not monolithic. There can be poetry for or against the empire, or poetry that is complicit with the empire without even recognizing its own position. But poetry can also be the mysterious and sideways thorn in the side of cultural hegemony, as it exists far outside any market or seat of power.

Of course, this isn’t the first time poetry has been pulled out of its dark caverns and into the spotlight. My affections have always leaned toward the first-generation New York School poets who were interwoven into their own contemporary art scene. And it is important to note that in some places, like New York, this convergence has been happening since the mid-twentieth century. Frank O’Hara was a curator at the Museum of Modern Art and wrote poems for and with his painter friends. Cecilia Vicuña made a film called *What Is Poetry to You?* in 1980. The Poetry Project in New York just celebrated its fiftieth New Year’s Day Marathon. Since I grew up in the suburbs of New York City my idea of poetry has a specific past, but I’ve lived in Italy now for fifteen years, and despite my best efforts it’s impossible not to compare and contrast my two realities. In Italy this attention to poetry in the wider art scene feels quite recent. Many projects and collectives have emerged over the past two years. I’m thinking of Murmur in Milan, the Ethereal Society of Poetry in Turin, Lo Spazio Letterario in Bologna, Vieni Fortuna in Rome, and recent readings organized at La Pulce, also in Rome, to consider just a few that I am personally aware of. Maria Luce Cacciaguerra and Greta Sugar of Murmur invite writers new to poetry to participate in workshops and share via open mic

nights in a bar, making space for voices ranging from the deeply confessional to the pastiche to translations into invented dialects. Davide La Montagna and Deborah Martino of the Ethereal Society of Poetry ask poets to make mini-collections on a given theme, print booklets, and guide collective readings. The crowd in attendance at the event I participated in this February included students and lawyers, designers and retirees, all sharing their diverse readings of a given poem over a glass of wine. And with passion. People want to come together, they want to be carried away into something different than what is typically on offer, and they want a renewed sense of what their own language can do. At a Murmur workshop earlier this spring, one participant shared his poems for the first time to a roomful of fellow poets. Everyone gave him real critical feedback and also encouragement—he teared up. Before that day, he'd never been able to reach that level of vulnerability and openness around his work.

Poetry—of course I am a poet, and so I believe this—does things other forms cannot. By transforming our used-up, spit-out daily language into something fresh and refreshing, poetry directs attention to details, to what may otherwise go unnoticed. Poetry is taking the time to pay attention to the magical and the ineffable in the everyday world. As Paul Celan said when defining poetry, quoting the seventeenth-century French philosopher Nicolas Malebranche, "Attention is the natural prayer of the soul."⁷ Unlike other forms of writing, poetry lives in a continuous present. Even when one reads poetry later (and one always reads later), poetry captures a kind of contemporaneity, a shift in voice, a nod to the day's troubles. I am with Gertrude Stein on this one: no one is ahead of their time.⁸ Whatever poetry we write today is fully of this moment, bearing with it everything that has come before it.

In her extended prose poem *Lawn of the Excluded Middle* (1993), Rosmarie Waldrop writes:

"But the four points of the compass are equal on the lawn of the excluded middle where full maturity of meaning takes time the way you eat a fish, morsel by morsel, off the bone. Something that can be held in the mouth, deeply, like darkness by someone blind or the empty space I place at the center of each poem to allow penetration."⁹



From left to right:
Costanza Candeloro, *Marx The Girl 4*, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Martina Simeri, Milan
Costanza Candeloro, *Marx The Girl 8*, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Martina Simeri, Milan

In this world of information and definition overload, perhaps poets and readers seek that empty space that allows not only for play or invention, but also for a shifting and more open sense of self. The more one delves into poetry, the more one sees that the self, the personality, all of it changes constantly and is formed only relationally. Dialing into the world around you means relating to that world, reacting and absorbing rather than remaining fixed and immobile—strength in poetry written in multiple selves. Poetry is a space of the unknown that makes for a space of contemplation. Taking this unknown even further, Farid Matuk makes a revision to John Keats's negative capabilities, making the leap from when "a [hu]man is capable of being in uncertainties" to "being uncertainties."¹⁰ The mind and the human prepared to be other at any time—willing to change.

Learning to be and withstand uncertainties seems like a good practice for our times. Maybe it just comes down to being tired of false promises and information, of exhaustion over a world that gives more and more and more but never as much as it takes. In 1955, Williams published the poem "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," and it ends like this:

"It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
of what is found there."¹¹ for lack



Costanza Candeloro, *Marx The Girl 5*, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Martina Simeti, Milan

For my whole life, I've believed that poetry can offer answers, answers that keep changing, that challenge me to stay alive and open when it might be more comfortable to remain stagnant or rigid. I also believe that poetry can continue to offer something profound to contemporary art—something that can't be captured, commodified, pinned down, or even possessed. Last September I had the pleasure of conducting a workshop at Fondazione ICA Milano for their Books & Others art book fair. I invited six New York-based poets to be translated into Italian by a working group in Milan. One of the poems we worked on is "Grant Application" (2023) by Kyle Dacuyan. It resonated with the translators, who were mostly practicing artists. It decried the struggles of trying to get funding to make work, always having to prove oneself. We ended up producing multiple translations for the final publication; there are so many ways to express frustration as an artist. But we did find one point that we could all agree upon, the poem's last line: "I believe in language."¹²

In a world that is less and less explicable, poetry doesn't seek to explain, because explanations are poor excuses. Poetry is a messy, bodily, animal, cyborg art form. It offers a space for uncertainty and doubt and misunderstanding and even failure. Mistakes can be made, remade, undone, and one survives. Poetry is always something different to each age, but it perennially reminds us that art is a process, a method, a way of life.

- 1 See <http://www.mambo-bologna.org/eventi/evento-3187/>.
- 2 Patrizia Vicinelli, in an undated handwritten manuscript later published in *Non sempre ricordano*, ed. Cecilia Bello Minciocchi (Florence: Le Lettere, 2009), 336, author's translation.
- 3 Jack Spicer, "Poetry and Politics," in *The House That Jack Built* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 168.
- 4 Jaswinder Bolina, "A View from the Factory Floor," in *The Force of What's Possible: Writers on Accessibility and the Avant-Garde*, ed. Lily Hoang and Joshua Marie Wilkinson (New York: Nightboat Books, 2015), 12.
- 5 Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 57.
- 6 Alain Badiou, "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art," Drawing Center, New York, December 4, 2003, <https://www.lacan.com/issue22.php>.
- 7 Paul Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Persea Books, 2002), xxxiii.
- 8 Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation" (1926), https://writing.upenn.edu/library/Stein_Composition-as-Explanation.html.
- 9 Rosmarie Waldro, *Lawn of the Excluded Middle* (New York: Tender Buttons Press, 1993), available at: <https://writing.upenn.edu/epe/authors/waldropr/lawnofexcludedmiddle.pdf>.
- 10 Farid Matuk, "Poems of the Near Mind," in *The Force of What's Possible*, 199.
- 11 William Carlos Williams, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" (1955), available at: <https://poets.org/poem/asphodel-greeny-flower-excerpt>.
- 12 Kyle Dacuyan, "Grant Application," in *INCITEMENTS* (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2023), accessed via PDF sent from author.

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