

MATERIALITY AND SONORITY IN THE WORK OF GIULIA NICCOLAI AND PATRIZIA VICINELLI

ABSTRACT — This paper examines the interplay between materiality and sonority in the neo-avant-garde work of Italian artists Giulia Niccolai (1934–2021) and Patrizia Vicinelli (1943–1991). Focusing on Niccolai's plaquettes *Humpty Dumpty* and *Poema & Oggetto* (Poem & Object), and Vicinelli's performances and video works at the 1978 Venice Biennale's *Materializzazione del linguaggio* (Materialization of Language), it highlights how both artists foreground the phonetic and performative dimensions of concrete and visual poetry. By exploring the fusion of visual form, objects, and sound, the study argues that their work challenges conventional literary and curatorial hierarchies, emphasizing the essential role of voice, gesture, and auditory experience in the reception of poetic material. This analysis contributes to the reassessment of women's contributions to (Italian) experimental poetry between 1960 and 1980, revealing the performative, multisensory nature of their art.

— This paper investigates the interrelationship between materiality and sonority in the neo-avant-garde experimental work of artists Giulia Niccolai (Milan, 1934–2021) and Patrizia Vicinelli (Bologna, 1943–1991).

— To begin, I will introduce Giulia Niccolai's *Weltanschauung*, intertwining her life with her work and stressing the relationship between word and sound in her oeuvre. To do so, I will mainly focus on her plaquettes *Humpty Dumpty* and *Poema & Oggetto* (Poem & Object), two examples of her concrete and visual compositions of the years 1969–1980.¹⁾ Linger on a few considerations on *Materializzazione del linguaggio* (Materialization of Language), the all-women exhibition which took place at the 1978 Venice Biennale in which Niccolai and Vicinelli both participated, exhibiting and performing their work, allows me to introduce and expand on Vicinelli's practice. I will concentrate on the artworks that she presented in Venice, stressing the magnetic energy she was able to create through her voice (and physical presence).

— The visual dimension of concrete (and visual) poetry has been preponderant within the art historical debate on the subject.²⁾ This paper aims at highlighting the often-neglected role of sound and voice in the appreciation and reception of concrete poetry. It thus contributes to the recent renewed scholarly interest in these two

1)

Plaquette is a French editorial term for a small-format poetry booklet, typically comprising a modest number of pages; in concrete/visual poetry it became especially common, as this format suited graphic experimentation and independent publishing.

2)

See, e.g., Gazzotti 2009; Zanchetti and Ferrari 2010; Ferrari 2011; Gazzotti 2013; Scotini and Perna 2019.

artists and, more broadly, in women's contributions to the field between 1960 and 1980.³⁾ By underscoring the importance of the interrelation of materiality and sonority in the work of Niccolai and Vicinelli, I emphasize the performative nature of concrete and visual poetry. Unlike linear poetry, which organizes text in traditional lines to emphasize rhythm, syntax, and narrative flow, concrete poetry foregrounds the typographical arrangement of words or letters. Visual poetry combines layout with imagery, blurring the boundary between text and visual arts.

— A precocious frequenter of the Milanese bohemian scene, Giulia Niccolai came to art through photography. Having spent her childhood in Italy during fascism,⁴⁾ the daughter of a Bostonian Anglo-Saxon Protestant mother and an Italian engineer, she was a cosmopolitan high school student fluent in Italian, English, German, and French when, in the early 1950s, she began frequenting Bar Jamaica, a well-known gathering place for artists, intellectuals, and photographers near the city's fine arts academy. Bar Jamaica was the eccentric, visionary, and open-to-novelty world where she met a number of artists (e.g., Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni) but above all many young photographers (Jacqueline Vodoz, Alfa Castaldi, Mario Dondero, Carlo Bavagnoli, Ugo Mulas, to name but a few): photojournalism was booming in post-fascism Italy and they all wanted to contribute to a new way of seeing.

— From 1953 onward, Niccolai worked intensely as a photographer, traveling around the world to produce reportages for national and international magazines such as *Life*, *Paris Match*, and *Der Spiegel*. Behind the camera, she also attended the first congresses of *Gruppo 63*, where she met the writer Giorgio Manganelli, who would later become a fervent supporter of her work (see, e.g., Manganelli 1981). *Gruppo 63*—also known as the Neoavanguardia—was an Italian avant-garde literary movement founded in Palermo in 1963, dedicated to radical experimentation with language and the arts. Among its members were Nanni Balestrini, Amelia Rosselli, Edoardo Sanguineti, Patrizia Vicinelli, and Umberto Eco.⁵⁾

— Dissatisfied with the tendency of the magazines for which she worked to use her photographs in ways that distorted the reality they documented, Niccolai left photography and turned to narrative writing.⁶⁾ *Il grande angolo* (Wide Angle), her first and only novel—a novel very much in line with the French *école du regard*—was published in 1966 (Niccolai 1966; Niccolai 2014a).⁷⁾ *Il grande angolo* was written in Rome, on the terrace of the apartment she shared with her friend, the painter Giosetta Fioroni. Rome was the city where Niccolai had moved to start working as the editorial secretary of *Quindici*,

3)

See, e.g., Scotini and Perna 2019; Balgiu and de la Torre 2020; Giammei et al. 2023; Perrella et al. 2024; Vicinelli 2024. See also the exhibitions: *Patrizia Vicinelli. Who Is Afraid of Patrizia Vicinelli?* curated by Luca Lo Pinto with Lisa Andreani (Rome, MACRO, November 11, 2021 – March 16, 2022); *Because I Do It Because. The Poetic Life of Giulia Niccolai*, curated by Allison Grimaldi Donahue and Caterina Molteni (Bologna, Padiglione de l'Esprit Nouveau, May 7 – June 5, 2022).

4)

Until June 2, 1946, Italy was a constitutional monarchy and from 1922 to 1943 it was governed by the National Fascist Party.

5)

Composer Luigi Nono suggested the group name inspired by the German Gruppe 47, a collective formed to rebuild literary traditions destroyed by Nazism and war. The members of Gruppo 63 admired the German model, as it mirrored their need for renewal, constant dialogue, and self-reflection. Having emerged from fascism and the war into a booming post-war democracy, they were confronting a cultural system in Italy that was outdated and resistant to change.

6)

See Niccolai 2023.

7)

This descriptive tendency within the *Nouveau Roman*—often referred to as the *école du regard*—emerged in France in the 1960s with authors such as Alain Robbe-Grillet. It is characterized by the focus on the meticulous description of objects, spaces, and perceptions.

the monthly magazine of the Gruppo 63.⁸⁾ At *Quindici*, Niccolai met the total poet Adriano Spatola and began an intellectual and loving partnership with him that would last throughout the next decade (see Spatola 1969; Rossi 2010). Spatola had just founded Geiger, at that time a Turin-based experimental publishing house which he animated with his brothers. Niccolai's first plaque, *Humpty Dumpty*, was published by Geiger in December 1969. The book was printed by a small Roman printing press in pocket format (11 × 15 cm, 40 pages). All the poems—29, one per page—were composed with Letraset on paper with a sans serif typography and then photo-reproduced for publication. The plaque is a mix of linear and concrete poetry in which the latter prevails.

— In line with what would become one of the most ingenious features of much of her future production, Niccolai selected passages and words from a source text, in this case Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll 1856) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (Carroll 1871),⁹⁾ rearranging them on the page in different constellations and thus materializing their enigmatic and apparently nonsensical semantic potential. The plaque takes its title from Humpty Dumpty, the character of a traditional English nursery rhyme, whom Lewis Carroll reimagines in *Through the Looking-Glass*. In the text, Humpty Dumpty engages Alice in a discussion of language, famously asserting that “when I use a word [. . .] it means just what I choose it to mean [. . .]” (Carroll 1871/1902:117).

— *Humpty Dumpty* begins on page seven with an epigraph drawn from the explanatory notes of the 1961 edition of Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary: “A term whose meaning is recorded under the entry of some other term is (if it seems to require separate entry at its own alphabetical place) entered thus: Desdemona, n. See Othello” (Niccolai 1967: 7). The following page presents a quote by the Red Queen, a character in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* who embodies the logic and rules of the fantastical world Alice navigates, rearranged by Niccolai to form a poem “The Red Queen shook her head. / ‘You may call it nonsense / if you like,’ she said / ‘but I’ve heard nonsense, / compared with which / that would be as sensible / as a dictionary!’”¹⁰⁾ (Niccolai 1969: 8) [Fig. 1].

— The word *dictionary* is deconstructed in a concrete composition on the opposite page [Fig. 1]. Here, only the four final letters of the word dictionary find their place again on the bottom of this composition, and they do so near the term “a word” (Niccolai

8)

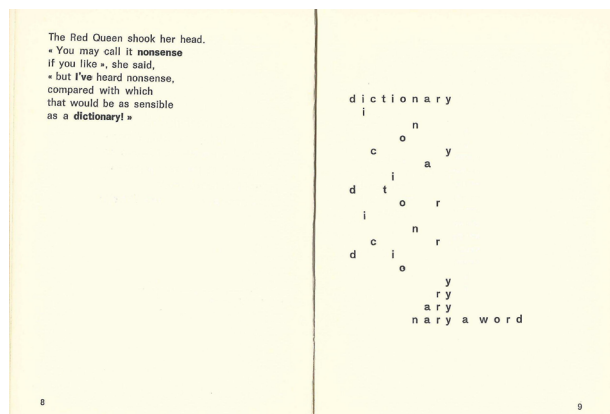
Quindici was a very successful monthly magazine (it reached a print run of 25,000) published between June 1967 and August 1969. Within its *pages* cultural discourse and current political affairs were closely discussed. The first 12 issues of the magazine were printed on a single large, folded sheet; then the format changed due to the increased number of pages.

9)

Niccolai read and worked with the 1965 edition of the book (see Carroll 1965).

10)

Bold in the original.



// Figure 1

Giulia Niccolai, *Humpty Dumpty*, 1969, 11 × 15 cm

1969: 9). In formulating the equation “dictionary” equals “nary a word,” i.e., never a word, Niccolai warns us about the arbitrary and therefore possibly nonsensical quality of any textual object, even of the dictionary which is consensually considered the most wise and reasonable text of all (Niccolai 1969: 9; see Graffi 2012: 16; Giammei 2017).¹¹⁾ This conclusion is poetically reiterated on the following double spread [Fig. 2]. On the left page, Niccolai visually plays with the word “nonsense” to suggest that when there is *no sense*, the sense(s) should be switched on. On the right page, a quote by another character, the Duchess, is transformed into a linear poem to warn the readers: “The Duchess: ‘Take care of the sense / and the words / will take care / of themselves.’” (Niccolai 1969: 11). Here (and only here!) does Niccolai slightly modify Carroll’s text, replacing the word “sounds” in the original with “words”.¹²⁾ The meaning of this literary freedom can be found on the following page, where we meet the cross message “senses do sound!” (Niccolai 1969: 12) [Fig. 3].

— This sequence exemplifies Niccolai’s remarkable ability to juggle the ambivalences between sound and sense in language. The phonetic aspect of a word is never entirely divorced from its meaning; rather, it maintains a relation to it, even when such a relation is ambiguous. Carroll’s *Alice* vividly illustrates this principle in its nonsensical passages, whether employing extreme literalism or instances of homophony, which reveal the phonetic variability of language. The union of sound and meaning within a word allows for slippages of either sense or sound. If one focuses solely on meanings while neglecting sounds, puns will remain unintelligible. Only by reading aloud, attending to the materiality of the word—oscillating between the plasticity of the graphic sign, which embodies sonorous shifts, and the conceptual cues embedded in the linear verses—can one apprehend the equivalences Niccolai proposes throughout the sequence and fully appreciate the role of sonority in the enjoyment of her poetic and concrete work.

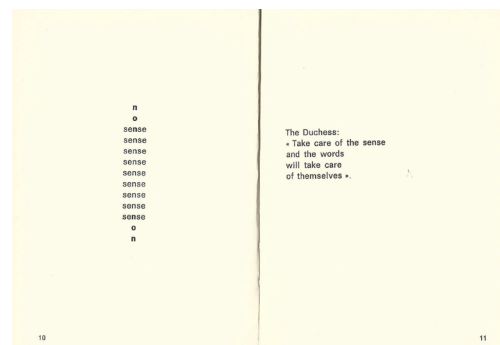
— Reading *Humpty Dumpty*, one can retrace the influence of what Niccolai herself called the “new music (from [John] Cage to [Giuseppe] Chiari)” and the artistic work around “unconventional scores that can or should be interpreted in a graphic sense” (Niccolai 1975: n.p.), which enjoyed wide circulation in Italy—and beyond—during the 1960s. The material- and sound-based poetic operations in the work, in many ways the matrix of her later production, succeed because Niccolai lets the word go, allowing the word *sense(s)* to refer not only to meanings but also to the five (or

11)

This interpretation is phonetically reinforced by the words in bold in the aforementioned quote from the Red Queen.

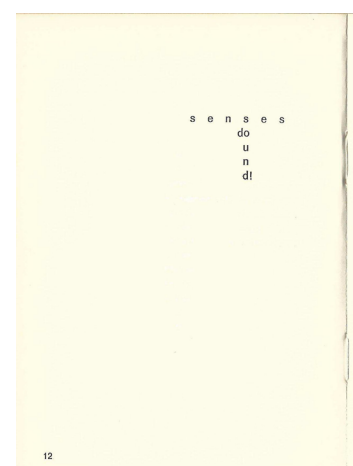
12)

Note that Carroll’s sentence is already a pun on the British proverb *take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves*. In his analysis of Niccolai’s *Humpty Dumpty*, literary historian Alessandro Giammei refers to a text by Americanist Marisa Bulgheroni to underline the consonance between the Victorian nonsense, based on the undermining of literary formulas learned blindly by heart and repeated without really questioning their meaning, and the wear and tear on the eye in the society of images and consumption (see Giammei 2017).



// Figure 2

Giulia Niccolai, *Humpty Dumpty*, 1969, 11 × 15 cm



// Figure 3

Giulia Niccolai, *Humpty Dumpty*, 1969, 11 × 15 cm

perhaps six?!) senses through which we experience the world, with the ear taking the lead in a full appreciation of her poetry and of the bodily sensations elicited by sound, as exemplified by the visual and haptic breadth in *Poema & Oggetto* (Niccolai 1974/2014b) [Fig. 4].

— *Poema & Oggetto* gathers 37 concrete and visual poems, 14 of which contain a real object (a button, a sheet, a pin) to show tautologically that “every single, small, everyday object has within itself the aspiration and the will to transform itself into a poem: the alphabet, a phone book, a battered typewriter, a light bulb, etc.” (Niccolai 2015: n.p.). Here, “the image that refers to the thing coincides with the material convocation of the thing. The poem, in fact, coincides with its object.” (Niccolai 2015: n.p.; see Kotz 2005).

— *Poema & Oggetto* is undoubtedly one of her best known and most exhibited works.¹³⁾ Niccolai never showed individual plates from the book but similar works that could be described as variations on the theme.¹⁴⁾ Among the works in the plaquette one finds *Typewriter-Object* [Fig. 4]. An elegant black-and-white illustration of an Olivetti typewriter appears on the page, its flat surface literally disrupted by a small sheet of paper emerging from a slit at the level of the typewriter’s carriage. On this sheet, the word *poema* (*poem*) is (type)written in red letters, as if it were a compelling and resounding message. *Poema* (1973), a variation of this poem-cum-object, was exhibited in *Materializzazione del linguaggio*, the exhibition organized by artist and cultural propeller Mirella Bentivoglio as part of the 1978 Venice Biennale, exploring “the relationship between women and language” (Bentivoglio, 1974/2022: 3).¹⁵⁾

— *Materializzazione del linguaggio* presented the work of 80 national and international artists within the context of the 38th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia. The exhibition was organized in a remarkably short time—well after the official opening of the 1978 Venice Biennale—and in relatively peripheral spaces (the Magazzini del Sale, near Punta della Dogana). It was primarily intended to counterbalance the patriarchal orientation of the official exhibition and of the institution at large, which, under the presidency of Carlo Ripa di Meana, was undergoing a process of renewal during what would later be remembered as the Years of Lead, a period of intense social and political turmoil in Italy.¹⁶⁾

— The 80 women invited to show their work(s) in Venice were all presenting “poetic operations” (Bentivoglio 1978: 3) that implied a subversive use of the language in which the work was conceived. In their artistic practices, they considered and articulated language as an object “returned to the materiality of the body, as a performative element [. . .], as a concrete fragment of narratives (dominant,

13)

Poema & Oggetto has been interpreted as a vivid testimony of the subordination to which Niccolai was subjected as a woman (albeit polyglot, financially and intellectually very independent) in those years (see Giammei 2017). This plaquette closes the phase of Niccolai’s concrete and visual poetry. From here on she would devote herself to linear poetry, with an exception made for the intermedia experimentation represented by *Facsimile: Fotografie concettuali* (Facsimile: Conceptual Photographs) (see Niccolai 1979), a pamphlet in which Niccolai explores the conceptual matrix of photography through words and black-and-white images. After the closure of the magazine *Quindici* in 1969, the artist and her research and life companion, Adriano Spatola, left Rome, a city they felt to be much too politicized to allow one to pursue authentic inquiry in the field of literature, and moved to the Mulino di Bazzano (a former watermill in the countryside between Parma and Reggio Emilia) (see Rossi 2010). During the 1970s, under the aegis of Niccolai, Spatola, and fellow poet Corrado Costa, this rural house would become one of the most important poetic experimentation laboratories of the national and international neo-avant-garde, a laboratory that Niccolai left at the end of the 1970s to start a new phase of her kaleidoscopic life—a phase in which she became a Buddhist nun (1990), always challenging the borders of what we call *poetry* through her *Frisbees* (1982–2012), or poems born to be thrown to the public—relational poems through which the artist puts the epiphanic moments of her life in verses, hoping to elicit similar emotions and cognitive uprisings in those who receive her literary compositions (see Niccolai 2012b). With her *Frisbees*, one often has *aha moments*: sudden realizations, inspirations, comprehensions—one feels free to be free.

14)

Niccolai, telephone conversation with the author, April 25, 2020.



// Figure 4

Left: Giulia Niccolai, *Poema & Oggetto*, 1974/2014, front cover. Right: Giulia Niccolai, *Typewriter-Object*, in *Poema & Oggetto*, 1974/2014, 22.5 × 16 cm

masculine, patriarchal, symbolic or idealistic) to be overthrown” (Subrizi 2017: 67).

— Bentivoglio did not question the unfavorable conditions in which she was forced to work, but called together the 80 artists, with whom she had been in contact for years, to shed light on the quality of their work. She even managed to borrow from the artist Emilio Vedova a space adjacent to the exhibition galleries to host a program of readings, performances, and projections, which, taking place in close temporal and spatial proximity to the opening, further gave concrete form to the artists’ work.

— During the opening days of *Materializzazione del linguaggio* (September 20–23, 1978), 11 artists engaged a live audience performing their work. Patrizia Vicinelli—the other key figure of this paper, to be introduced shortly—and Niccolai presented their work on September 22. Niccolai, 44 years old at the time, read poems from *Harry’s Bar e altre poesie* (Harry’s Bar and Other Poems), a collection she had been compiling since 1969, which was eventually published in 1981 (see Niccolai 1981).¹⁷ Niccolai’s poems were materialized through her voice and exhibited through *Poema*, an artwork which sums up very well the artist’s operational practice.

— Niccolai was a poet who used the typewriter (an instrument very familiar to any writer of the time, especially to a woman who has worked as an editorial secretary for years) to create poems that are also three-dimensional objects, piercing the paper and manifesting their will to live, their need to inscribe themselves in space-time in all their materiality through the voice and the sound they produce. An indication of the importance of the role of the voice in Niccolai’s way of thinking about poetry can also be found in her active participation in *Baobab–Informazioni fonetiche di poesia* (Phonetic Information on Poetry) (1978–1989), the first audio magazine of sound poetry published in Italy on music cassettes, which began in 1978 around her kitchen table in Bazzano (near Parma).

— As mentioned before, like Giulia Niccolai, Patrizia Vicinelli also took part in the opening days of *Materializzazione del linguaggio*, screening her video *Fragmentation d’une vie d’héroïne* (Fragmentation of a Heroine’s Life) (Subrizi 2019; Perrella et al 2024) and performing the first draft of *Proiettare il samurai* (To Project the Samurai), the fourth part of her epic poem *Non sempre ricordano* (They Do Not Always Remember) (Vicinelli 1985). *Fragmentation d’une vie d’héroïne* is a radically experimental work in which Patrizia Vicinelli disassembles the imagined biography of a heroine into fragments, exposing the patriarchal structures of language while articulating a fluid and resistant female subjectivity.

15)

See Bentivoglio 1978. This publication does not present a list of the exhibited works. I was not able to retrieve this list, neither at the Venice Biennale Historical Archive of Contemporary Art (ASAC) nor in the Fondo Mirella Bentivoglio at the Biblioteca Nazionale (National Library) in Rome. As of today, I have not been able to trace either the existence or the exact whereabouts of Niccolai’s work exhibited in Venice. Note that *Corps Orbite*, one of the historical capsules within Cecilia Alemani’s exhibition *The Milk of Dreams* (59th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, April 23 – November 27, 2022) was partly conceived as a response to the 1978 exhibition *Materializzazione del linguaggio* (the catalogue of which was reprinted in facsimile for the occasion). *Corps Orbite* brought together 19th- and 20th-century artists and writers who use(d) expanded forms of textual production as tools of emancipation and practices of difference. The verbo-visual writing and concrete poems of Mirella Bentivoglio, Tomaso Binga, Ilse Garnier, Giovanna Sandri, and Mary Ellen Solt were placed in a dialogue with the experiments in automatism and mediumistic writing of figures such as Eusapia Palladino, Georgiana Houghton, and Josefa Tolrà, as well as other forms of what was

16)

The show has recently been studied and re-actualized in the context of the exhibition *Re-Materialization of Language 1978–2022* (Bolzano, Fondazione Antonio dalle Nogare, October 2, 2022 – June 10, 2023) and of its accompanying trilingual publication (see Perrella and others 2024).

17)

The reading performance was characterized by the participation of fellow artists Anna Oberto, Giovanna Sandri, and Conni Trobaiolo. It was videotaped, but given the low-quality conservation of the tape, one cannot exactly identify the performed poems (see Perrella et al. 2024: 12–13).

The orthography of the word “*héroïne*” in the title is noteworthy, as it simultaneously points to the name of the drug and, through phonetic identity, conjures the figure of a female protagonist.

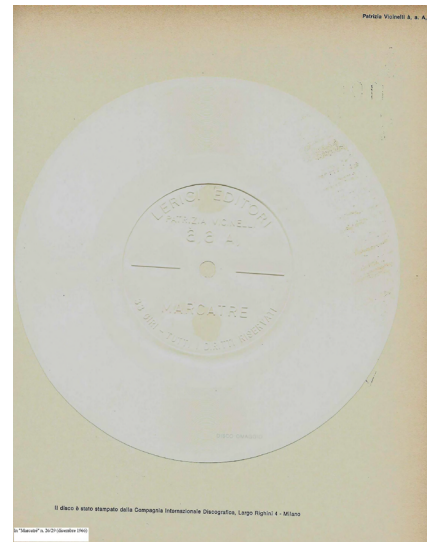
— In September 1978, at the time of the Venetian opening, Vicinelli was a 35-year-old poet who had been engaging with concrete, visual, and linear poetry for nearly two decades. She had just regained her liberty after six months in prison in Rome. Back in 1968 she was condemned to two years in prison because she was found in possession of two grams of hashish (see Magazzeni 2015). As she underlines on the screen, in the text which introduces her *Fragmentation d'une vie d'héroïne*, she had spent almost a decade in hiding (mainly in Morocco), making serious use of drugs as a way to come to terms with her distressed condition. Sharing William Burroughs' thoughts, whom she quotes at the very beginning of her video, during the troubled years of her absconding, doing drugs had become a way of life (see Burroughs 1953/1962).

— In *Fragmentation d'une vie d'héroïne*, Vicinelli's face, heavily scarred by the aftermath of fleeing, the use of drugs, and of a car accident (in which she did not protect her face to instead protect her second-born daughter), is captured in the foreground, in the act of performing phonetic experiments, smoking (heroin?), talking on the phone. These fragments show no signs of heroism, but convey, beyond the pun on the title, the tenacity of a heroine intent on expressing her personal and poetic epic, as audiences at the time could experience by attending the reading of *Proiettare il samurai*, the fourth part of her epic poem *Non sempre ricordano*.

— *Non sempre ricordano* was written in hiding between 1975 and 1976 and rewritten before publication in 1985. It is structured in ten chapters of ten sections each and explores the themes of myth, guilt, and innocence. Its narrative employs experimental and visual language, including drawings and verbal-visual devices that enhance the work's sonic and phonetic dimensions. Originally designed as a colorful dazebao¹⁸⁾ to be performed loudly, it could be described as a “external monologue” (Guglielmi 1992, 59 qtd. in Lorenzini 2009, XV) or, in Vicinelli's words, as a “meditation voiced through a persona” (Vicinelli 1985, VIII). *Non sempre ricordano* is a linguistic pastiche of literary quotations (Homer, García Lorca, Dante, Zola), rhythms, and expressions reminiscent of the protests of the 1970s in Italy, while also drawing on everyday language and the broader countercultural milieu. The poem is traversed by the idea of radical contestation and communicates the need for collective commitment as well as that of an alternative spiritual search (see Sciarrino 2014). The disorder of Vicinelli's

18)

Dazebaos were mural newspapers typical of the Maoist revolution which were later adopted in the student protests in the West.



// Figure 5

Patrizia Vicinelli, à, a. A, in *Marcatré* 26–29, 20.5 × 19.55 cm. Vinyl

passionate, troubled existential experience is rendered here by the mobility of meaning and sign, by the friction caused by disconnected syntactic modules, by asymmetry, and by shouted contrasts which are visualized, implied, and magnified in the structure of the verses as well as in the alternation of upper- and lower-case writing (see Lorenzini 2009). The intensity of Vicinelli's poetry was amplified and put into action by the magnetic energy she was able to create through her voice, gestures, and movement in space.¹⁹⁾

As she stated in her introductory text to *à, a. A*, her first published plaquette of concrete poetry, which was exhibited within *Materializzazione del linguaggio*, Vicinelli conceived her concrete and visual poems with "an ideal reading" already in mind—one that, according to her, is "devised in the very creative act" of composing her poetry (Vicinelli 1967, n.p.). Vicinelli's poems are inseparable from their sonic dimensions because they are born simultaneously. Indeed, Vicinelli's *à, a. A* was published on vinyl (December 1966; [Fig. 5]) and in print (January 1967) (see Vicinelli 1966; Vicinelli 1967).²⁰⁾ The print version of *à, a. A* is composed with Letraset, stamps, pen, and typewriter and then photo reproduced to be printed (25 × 20.5 cm, 40 pages) [Fig. 6]. It is inhabited by abstract and semantic calligrams, typed texts as well as handwritten indications. The urgency of communication led her to change the tenses and focus on iterations and alliterations by shattering verses, syntax, and words. In the most audacious works in the plaquette, words, reduced to phonemes, acquire value as sounds that inhabit space: sounds to be pronounced and listened to, to be felt with the body, which speaks even when one is silent.

The energy and the subversive power of the work presented within *Materializzazione del linguaggio* could not go unnoticed by the audience of the Venetian performance days. A few photographs conserved in the Venice Biennale Historical Archive of Contemporary Art (ASAC) document the presence of a large, hypnotized audience that included, for example, national and international fellow artists, e.g., Anna Oberto and Paula Claire, and art professionals, e.g., exhibition maker Harald Szeemann [Fig. 7].²¹⁾

In the materiality of Niccolai's and Vicinelli's poetry, sound

19)

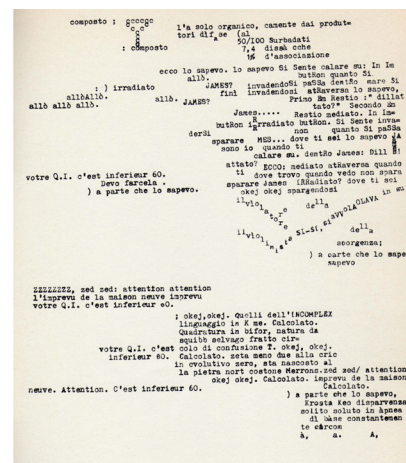
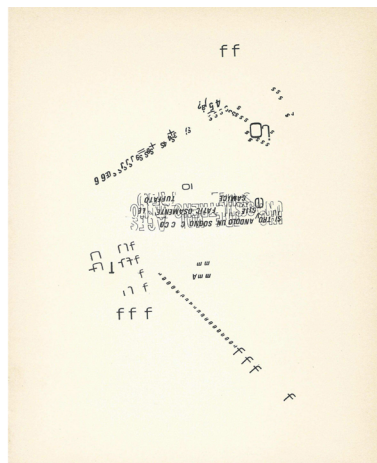
One can get an idea of Vicinelli's poetic stamina watching the recording of one of her performances of *Non sempre ricordano* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBm-WewjNfXA&t=9s>; accessed March 30, 2026). Note, however, that this video dates from 1987, about ten years after Vicinelli's performance in Venice and portrays Vicinelli in her mid-40s, just a few years before her premature death from HIV-related causes.

20)

In June of that year, Vicinelli, a young bourgeois writer born in 1943 and active from a very young age in the field of literature, theater, and experimental cinema between Bologna and Rome, was invited to the fourth conference of Gruppo 63 held in La Spezia, where she captivated the audience and caused a stir by performing some passages from *à, a. A*.

21)

The scope and art-historical significance of this exhibition, with its three-day program of readings, screenings, and performances, clearly merit a separate, in-depth study. Only a handful of documents remain at ASAC, but judging from the distinguished participants in the event, above all the celebrated Harald Szeemann, an in-depth examination could be made of how and why well-informed fathers were the first to defend and perpetuate patriarchy.



// Figure 6

Left: Patrizia Vicinelli, *à, a. A*, 1967, front cover. Right: Patrizia Vicinelli, *à, a. A*, 1967, 25 × 20.5 cm

plays an important and inescapable role in the poems being and becoming artworks. Alliteration, repetition, homophony are key elements in the semantic shifts that occur in the oeuvre of both artists. The sound of the voice in the reading of their compositions, whether purely concrete, verbo-visual or linear, is a fundamental element and materializes in the space of the discourse behind their conceptual and poetic production. Moreover, for Vicinelli, the characterization of her voice takes on a materiality, a fundamental presence. Close to avant-garde theater and underground cinema circles, Vicinelli liked to describe herself as the “reader of her own texts [. . .] [, as] a woman of great charm [. . .] [, a] performer-actress with an extraordinary ability to involve the audience.” (Vicinelli 1989: 357). Not surprisingly, her poems were published on paper and vinyl as early as Winter 1966–67: the two dimensions, the concrete-material and the constitutive but seemingly ephemeral sonic one, were perceived very early on as inseparable.

— The visual aspect of concrete and visual poetry has dominated discussions within the art historical debate (see footnote 3). This brief contribution—part of a recent effort to rediscover and reassess the work of these two artists, alongside other women practitioners of concrete and visual poetry between 1960 and 1980—aims instead to highlight the centrality of sound, thereby emphasizing the inherently performative dimension of their work. The mode of poetry fruition, traditionally linked to print and bibliographic culture but also to widespread norms in curatorial practices and exhibition studies, has profoundly influenced the way these works have been received. Compared to the diffusion and reception of these works in the 1960s and 1970s, the spatialization of sound, the reading aloud, and the performance of the works have been too often confined to the space of the page, to the sheet. An aesthetic, (art) historical, and critical re-evaluation of these works, of their material and sonic dimension, is fundamental and still ongoing.²²⁾

22)

In this context, I would like to pay tribute to the work done as part of the retrospective exhibitions *Patrizia Vicinelli. Who Is Afraid of Patrizia Vicinelli?* and *Because I Do It Because. The Poetic Life of Giulia Niccolai* (see footnote 4). No exhibition catalogue was conceived as part of these exhibitions, but following a tradition dear to the artist, a vinyl was produced in the larger framework of Vicinelli's exhibition (see Filipponi, 2023). Moreover, I would like to mention the research on Vicinelli by artist and poet Jonida Pfriti (see Pfriti 2014). The recent exhibition dedicated to Tomaso Binga (the artistic pseudonym of Bianca Pucciarelli Menna), *Euforia, Tomaso Binga* (curated by Eva Fabbris with Daria Khan, Naples, Museo Madre, April 18–October 6, 2025), deserves mention in this context (see Fabbris et al. 2025), as does the vinyl produced in 2025 exploring the sonic dimension of Binga's poetry (Binga 2025).



// Figure 7

Gisela Frankenberg, *Nommology*, image from proof sheet depicting the performance at Magazzini del Sale, 1978. Harald Szeemann is recognizable among the audience (third person from the right), just behind Mirella Bentivoglio, who holds the microphone. Photography by ASAC. Courtesy Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC.

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