

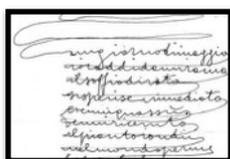
From word to sign | Dalla parola al segno

Accardi Basquiat Boetti Capogrossi Kounellis Novelli Perilli Twombly

curated by

Maria Albani

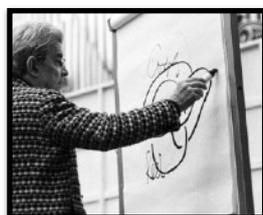
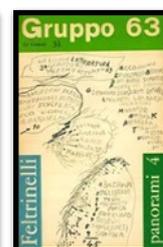
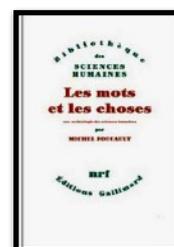
The written word has always inspired great fascination for artists, who experimented with its creative possibilities as far back as the historical avant-gardes. Simultaneously to the Cubists, who inserted paper fragments of common use in their works, the Futurists theorize the *parole in libertà* of Marinetti, present the *onomalingua* of Depero and compositions contaminated by collage, by Severini and Carrà.



The poetics of Dadaism are born from this research – the *livre-objet* by Duchamp and Ray and the collages of Schwitters – and the automatic writing of the surrealists, which draws from the primary source of language.

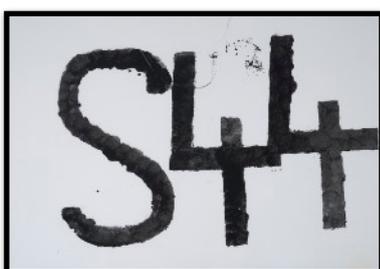
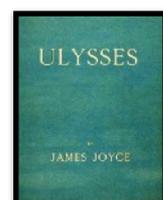
Between the end of the '50s and the beginning of the '60s, in the time of the Informel, the sign appears beside gesture and matter. For some artists, it is the trace of a casual gesture, for others it is personal alphabet or pictorial calligraphy. This is especially true in Rome, where a group of artists interacts vividly with avant-garde of writers and poets (Claude Simon and the Gruppo 63), and American artist Cy Twombly arrives in 1957.

At play is a partial recovery of the heritage of the historical avant-gardes, renewed in its form and content in light of the critical debate surrounding language in the literary field. James Joyce's *Ulysses* is published in Italian in 1960, featuring an unprecedented narrative technique in which the thoughts of the protagonist appear without punctuation, within an internal monologue dictated by stream of consciousness.



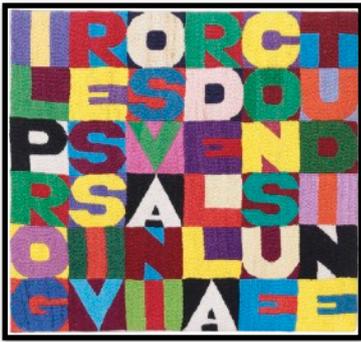
In the philosophical field, Michel Foucault disrupts the structuralist discourse with the publication of *Les mots et les choses* in 1966. Departing from Lévi-Strauss and the psychoanalysis of Lacan,

Foucault concludes that man is no longer the creator of his own thought, but instead thinks, speaks and behaves according to structures and grids of which he is not conscious. It becomes necessary, then, to classify things with stable and adequate signs, so that the order of representation corresponds to the order of the world.

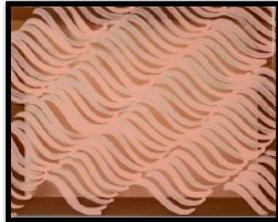


Amidst these diverse experimentations on the written word, we may identify a few conceptual strands.

On one side, we have artists who use letters and numbers by exalting their visual impact, disengaged from semantic meaning, to finally denounce the fragmentation of the real. In the *Alfabeti* by Kounellis, signs traced with a quasi-organic medium on the white support according to a constructivist logic emerge with dramatic force and aural texture.



Later, Alighiero Boetti develops illustrious precedents, from the medieval mysticism of Dürer (Magic square, in *Melancholia I*, 1514, a grid of sixteen squares featuring digits whose sum is always thirty-four) to Paul Klee, who framed letters in squares of colour. Beyond its apparent simplicity, the grid refers to the process of classification of every elementary visual sign, theorized by Foucault. Text within text, signs enter into a mutual rapport according to a mechanism of order and disorder, rule and chance. Reading the letters, like a puzzle, allows us to find tautological propositions (cinqueperqineuenticinque) or poetic phrases on which Boetti invites us to reflect.



Others, instead, like Capogrossi and Accardi, give life to a new alphabet of abstract signs. Apparently derived from writing, oriental calligraphy in particular, these are real and proper founding elements for a new visual syntax. Like in writing, in fact, these signs, each possessing a singular identity, come into contact with one another and find their own compositional rules.

Capogrossi's is a powerful sign, 'comb' to some and 'fork' to others, with a spatial charge proper to a real object, situated on the picture plane with the uniqueness of black and white, deriving from ideograms. His semantic efficacy is such that it may change dimension, presenting itself both as a single, towering sign, or in a group, spread out or tightly superimposed.



For Accardi, on the other hand, from the sixties onwards the sign is characterized by bright colours and oriental influences. It is organized according to a spatial order of solids and voids, rhythmically marked and accentuated by the experimental use of new plastics. Working on sicofoil sheets, the artist gives life to an intimately lyrical syntax, founded upon a luminous game of reflective and opaque surfaces.



Novelli, Perilli and Twombly instead look at language in an entirely new way, transcending systems of codified rules to create an expressive space, in which words and writing move without precise confines, and without limits. The space of the canvas is thus assimilated to the page of a book, or a wall, where fragments of images and notches of colour alternate to create a sort of narration. Composed of quick sketches, often illegible, these form an intimate diary where events are recorded with an infantile, irregular handwriting.

Twombly's works are devised by a subtraction, in which the evanescent tangle of signs eludes the correspondence with noble headings referring to mythology and classical art, to poetry and to nature.



Finally, other artists, polemical towards a society they deemed to be producing a form of commodity-language that quickly consumes itself, question the value of language as communication. Rotella glues and then rips advertisements found on the streets to create a new repertoire of writings and signs that refer to unexplored meanings. Works are born that recover the tradition of the avant-garde collage, presenting surfaces full of sedimentation and stratification, traces and signs materialize from the street.

In the '80s, on the other side of the world, Basquiat emerges from the underground of graffiti, aptly bringing together the abstract-figurative force of writers and the rhythmical elegance of Twombly's elementary mark-making. The words that crowd his paintings, used as a compositional element and for the sound they seem to evoke, possess a rhythm more attuned to rap. His compositions are governed by an energetic contamination of images, collages and phrases deriving from Dada. A highly symbolic and cryptic language emerges from this apparent chaos, disseminated on the surface of a wall without hierarchies.



An investigation on the relationship between painting and writing certainly doesn't end with the artists cited above. Written, drawn, repeated, erased, as casual exercise or foundational element, thesis or method, the word has been used incessantly up until the present day to provoke emotions or manifest experiences, and to spread messages of social and political activism.