Elisabetta Rattalino

"Sono rimasta sorpresa: nella piazza ho notato un albero fiorito".

Notes on Mirella Bentivoglio's Participation in *Gubbio '76*.

"Nella Pianura di Gubbio un tempo erano tanti
ora son stati tutti tagliati
Povera Natura".
Poesia all'Albero, 1976

On August 27th 1976, passers-by could have an unexpected encounter in Piazza della Signoria, the main square of the medieval hill-town of Gubbio: a leafless maple tree they had never seen there before stood in front of Palazzo dei Consoli. An artist invited them to record their thoughts about the tree on paper. The notes, hanging from the tree branches as the new leaves of the tree, were harvested at the end of the day. The artist composed a poem with them and recited it. Following this performative moment, the notes were burnt as a closure to the artistic intervention. Conceived for the Biennale della Ceramica di Gubbio (*Gubbio '76*) curated by art historian and critic Enrico Crispolti, *Poesia in Piazza* – this is the original title of the work later known as *Poesia all'Albero* – was an extemporaneous intervention proposed by visual poet and curator Mirella Bentivoglio (Klagenfurt, 1922-Rome, 2017) alongside her official intervention, entitled *L'Ovo*.[1] Mirella Bentivoglio is best known for her commitment to the work of women artists in the field of Visual Poetry.[2] Since her collaboration with Anna Oberto at the Milan-based Centro Tools in 1971, she organised over twenty women-only shows of Visual Poetry, her career as a critic culminating with the appointment as curator of *Materializzazione del linguaggio* (1978), the only women-only show ever held at the Venice Biennale.[3] Even though supporting other women's work in public exhibitions and museum collections was her central concern throughout her career, Bentivoglio was never a militant feminist.[4] "I already know my works and thus, selfishly, my solo shows interest me less than someone else's work, whom I like to write about and delve into", she confessed in a letter to the friend and poet Betty Danon, her curiosity leading her to curate numerous Visual Poetry exhibitions of both emerging and established artists in Italy and abroad, favouring non-commercial galleries.[5] In addition to her dedication to the work of others, Bentivoglio had been a prolific practitioner herself since the late 1960s: her artist's books and her artistic work demonstrated her ability to develop a personal language at the intersection of Visual and

Concrete Poetry, experimenting with the expressive possibilities offered by the materiality of language.[6] It was her practice which had inspired Crispolti to invite her to Gubbio.

During the 1970s, Bentivoglio's poetic work commented on existential and socio-cultural issues of her time, ranging – for instance – from the abomination of racism (*Fiore nero*, 1971) to the toxicity of motor-vehicles (*Autotesto*, 1973) and to the corruptive allures of consumerism (*$oul*, 1970; *Il consumatore consumato. Uomo à la coque*, 1974; *Il cuore della casalinga ubbidiente*, 1975). In parallel, since the late 1960s, she started engaging with two of the three privileged themes of her poetics of all time: the symbolic form of the egg, and that of the book. *Poesia all'Albero* – the artistic operation that surprised beholders in Piazza della Signoria – inaugurated the third one: the tree.[7]

Since 1979, Bentivoglio produced several sculptural works that promoted the tree as an archetypical symbol of knowledge and logic.[8] We can retrace this body of arboreal-themed works in her book *Un albero di parole* (1992), in which the artist collated her artistic investigations on the topic, beginning with her intervention in Gubbio sixteen years earlier.[9] If the tree as a symbolic form became prominent over the 1980s and 1990s, *Poesia all'albero* was the first and only of her works so radically open to the collaboration with others. *Poesia all'albero* stands out as an *unicum* in her artistic production. The participatory character of the work, however, connects it with other artists' the contemporary experimentations in the field of social-political engagement in Italy at the time.

This article, therefore, examines the way in which *Poesia all'albero* manifests Bentivoglio's brief incursion into the contemporary phenomenon of Arte Ambientale, of which the curator of *Gubbio'76,* Crispolti, was one of the main theorists.[10] It is organised in three consequential sections. The first part briefly introduces key aspects of Crispolti's theorisation and the way in which his ideas translated into the curation of *Gubbio '76.* Drawing on Crispolti's premises, the second section explores how Bentivoglio reconfigured the two-dimensional and three-dimensional works and articulated her ideas to respond to the urban fabric of Gubbio in her two contributions to the event. The final section of the article focuses on *Poesia all'albero* specifically. It delves into the role played by the tree and its relocation in the unfolding of the participatory action. In so doing, the article intends to clarify the way in which Bentivoglio's practice and Crispolti's theories converged, marking an experimental moment, unique in its kind, in the artist's practice that successfully contributed to the cultural and socio-political scope of the event.

As conceived by Crispolti, *Gubbio '76* aimed to renovate the format of the

traditional Biennale della Ceramica di Gubbio. Crispolti started contributing to this event in the 1960s, and in 1973, he was appointed as its coordinator.[11] When Crispolti's mandate started in 1973, the Biennale was in the process of reconfiguring itself, and he was asked to contribute to its renewal: over four years, he eased the transition of the Biennale from a crafts-focused event to an innovative curatorial format, focusing on sculptural works that use metal and ceramics in 1973 and 1974, and then, in 1975 and 1976, bringing his socio-political commitments and his aesthetic beliefs to the Biennale.[12] *Gubbio '76* was the apex of Crispolti's curatorial experience in Gubbio and one of the case studies on which he based the theorisation of his curatorial approach in his book *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale* (1977).[13]
Crispolti's theoretical propositions find accomplishment for the first time in *Volterra '73* (1973).[14] Three years later, his curatorial career culminated with his appointment as member of the commission for the Italian pavilion at the Venice Biennale alongside Raffaele De Grada.[15] Crispolti's and De Grada's pavilion, entitled *Ambiente come sociale*, proposed a framework for artists intervening in the social sphere, thus consecrating Crispolti as one of the most prominent voices in the art field of Arte Ambientale emerging at the time.[16] Arte Ambientale was not an aesthetic movement but, as recently investigated by Martina Tanga, a "rete diffusa" across Italy of artists, designers and architects practicing temporary and site-specific interventions, in peripheral areas and adopting a range of diverse media.[17] Creating a parallelism with the heterogeneous movement of the theoreticians and militants known as Autonomia, Tanga clarifies that these experimental practices aimed at asserting artists' autonomy from the art establishment and a new, democratic notion of worth for the arts, beyond aesthetic considerations.[18] In this context, Crispolti championed and theorised a new role for artists and the visual arts in society, one to negotiate social participation in public institutions and – more generally – in cultural production, as a first step towards citizens' political empowerment.[19] From his perspective, a new kind of *committenza* had emerged from the contemporary circumstances of socio-political and economic unrest, from the decentralisation of decisional authority to the Regioni (the Italian political and administrative districts), and from unprecedented possibility and willingness to participate in decision-making political processes of a wider and more diverse part of society.[20] Crispolti suggested a shift in the practice of visual arts to respond to this exceptional socio-political circumstances. Artists' practices should have changed in two main directions: one that was "extramural", or moving away from museums and market-driven galleries to engage with the socio-cultural environment of a specific urban context, and one that was "extra media", which was a term he coined later in 1978 to define artists' flexible practices, determined not by an

object-bound media tradition, but by specific circumstances of aesthetic communication.[21]

Based on Crispolti's propositions, the experimental character of the Biennale was reflected by the distribution of the works in several dislocated venues around the town, and in the artists' attempt to weave more complex relationships with the local community, especially during the preparatory phase of the event. The event aspired to engage not with the abstract monumentality of the urban space, but with the socio-economic reality of Gubbio.[22] *Gubbio '76* branched out to become five sections. It included two more traditional exhibitions to reconnect with the previous editions of the Biennale: Palazzo dei Consoli hosted a retrospective of a local ceramicist, Nedda Guidi, as well as an exhibition including fifteen artists working with ceramics.[23] The three other sections – those that manifested an engaged with socio-economic and cultural aspects of the town – were on display in several sites around Gubbio. Due to the lack of preparatory time, these parts displayed visual materials of projects, some completed and others to be pursued in the future. This was the case for the restoration of the San Martino neighbourhood and for the activities conducted in collaboration with the local primary schools and the municipality-led summer camps, but also for the most experimental part of the event: the inclusion of *Interventi* and *Animazioni urbane* (Urban Interventions and Animations), presented as prototypes at the Palazzo dei Consoli and Palazzo Ducale and included in the exhibition catalogue, but envisioned for engaging with the local dwellers in the streets, squares and countryside of Gubbio.[24]

Crispolti asked Bentivoglio to contribute to the latter section. When invited to participate to the Biennale, she had no experience in this field. Bentivoglio's urban intervention on the urban scale of Gubbio, however, appeared as a coherent development of her work. Since the late 1960s, she had adopted different media for visualising her poetic contents. Following experimentation of Concrete Poetry and Spatialism, she had explored the potentials of poetry in space autonomously: "Bentivoglio claims total freedom of action for herself, it would be wrong to harness her work in precise categories", Renato Barilli stated after having measured her artistic language against the artist's precedents in the field of Visual Poetry, and against the contemporary work of the Florence-based collective Gruppo '70.[25] From the early 1970s she composed concrete poetries, adopting typographical signs of individual words on the two-dimensional page plain, such as for instance *Successo* (1969), where the letters acquire the composition of a ladder, *Sinonimi* (1971), which uses a symmetrical composition, or *Gabbia "Ho"* (1970), where the letter "H" encages the letter "O" (in Italian, "Ho" means "I have").[26] At the time,

Bentivoglio also started to create three-dimensional artefacts, articulating the page plain in three-dimensional objects. *Itinerario* manifests her attempts to transition from two-dimensional poetry to three-dimensional poetic objects and artist's books. Besides referring to the journey needed to reach one's self (*io*, I, typed in a larger size), *Itinerario* adopts the book format that more effectively mimics the meaning of the world itself: the *leporello* – a folded strip of ten pages – echoes the word "itinerary" written in Italian, creating a linear narrative space, where the typographical signs mark the directionality of the physical space of the book. In *Pagina/Finestra* (1971), Bentivoglio hybridises her typographical compositions with objects.[27] While the repetition of the word "pioggia" mimics the monotony of a rainfall, the transparent resin surface that substitute the paper materialises the window suggested in the title. These and other works displayed in her exhibitions reveal that the artist progressively embraced the expressive possibilities of the poetic object, in which word and shape, signifier and signified, fully identify.

For *Gubbio '76*, her work on poetic objects lost the explicit connections with verbal language, acquiring instead a monumental scale and a different relationship with the space of location. *L'Ovo* was a 2.30-meter egg-shaped wooden and stone structure dedicated to the "adultera lapidata", a biblical character of a women punished for adultery.[28] Adopting this story as a symbol of resistance to the patriarchal system manifested Bentivoglio's endorsement of issues of interest to the feminist movement at the time, such as the position of the women in the family and society at large.[29] Due to this association, the work was to be considered as the first feminist sculpture in a public space.[30] The main concern of the artist, however, was to integrate this intervention within the fabric of the town: "One stone bears a dedication to the adulterer and it is not positioned in full-sight", she wrote in the project description in the catalogue. The choice of hiding the dedication was meant "not to hinder the structure's evocation of multiple meanings to vitalise what is repressed and the prehistory of what is".[31] Furthermore, the choice of the egg itself was not a reference to femininity but, as she interpreted it, a symbol of equality, where male and female signs converge.[32]

The artist herself took care of explaining the way in which she had woven together – to use a metaphor adopted by Agnes Danes to write about it – this work within her artistic practice and the physical and symbolic dimension of the urban fabric of Gubbio.[33] The egg recurred in Bentivoglio's artistic research at the time. *L'Ovo* resulted from her visual inquiry into the pre-linguistic level of language and her interest in stone as a material.[34] As with other women artists at the time, she had pursued her personal research into verbal language and the alphabet.[35] Initially, she was interested in the alphabetic letter "O" both as a grammatical conjunction expressing alternative and as the initial of

the word "origin".[36] Considering the shape of the sign "O" as the starting point of a chain of formal connections, she later adopted the egg as a symbol to play with and comment on contemporary cultural stereotypes in works such as *Ab Ovo/Natura e Tecnologia* (1971), or *Uovo e Portauovo/Genesi e Cultura*.[37]

In *L'Ovo*, Bentivoglio integrated the symbolic shape of the egg in the urban fabric of the town: "For small works, the context is not important. It may be private or public, with no influence on their various levels of meaning" – the artist confessed in a 2013 interview – "The works I made for public spaces are strictly bound to the character of those spaces."[38] She named this kind of interventions "strutture simboliche", symbolic structures.[39] Following Crispolti's ideas of engagement with the social *milieu* of the town, *L'Ovo* was co-authored by the artist and the Cooperative Edile Eugubina, and the result of the artist's collaboration with local carpenters and stoneworkers.[40] She defined this process of making that excludes the physical intervention of the artist as "desogettivizzazione" (de-subjectivation).[41] More importantly, every element of the installation resonated with the urban fabric on a symbolic level: the material adopted, the size of the piece and its location are all elements that participate in the connotative meaning of the work and in the relations between it, its specific site of location and the beholder. The egg was made of a wooden structure filled with local stones, each around the size of a closed fist. The choice of using stones, whom the artist considered as a material particularly suitable to her poetics, served the purpose to create a counter-memorial (a crumbled one), reminiscent of the rocks used in the practice of stoning, but also the construction technique used in the building and in the ancient wall surrounding the intervention. This egg-shaped sculptural piece was permanently installed in a small triangular space alongside the ancient city walls and close to one of its doors, that of Sant'Ubaldo.[42] Besides appreciating the silent aesthetic dialogue between the installation and a fig tree growing on the same spot, Bentivoglio had chosen this place because she believed that punishments by stoning were traditionally perpetrated in urban spaces similar to that peculiar spot: secluded and alongside the city-walls to prevents victims from escaping.[43] Just a few months after the installation, she discovered that this specific location used to be a wood where expiation ceremonies took place.[44] The object formally resonated with the texture of the sculptural object with ancient walls and of historic architectures that surrounded it, thus entertaining a complex and carefully orchestrated net of symbolic connections with the site. *L'Ovo* coagulated the "hypertext" – it was an "iperlapide" (hyper-commemorative stone) to use the artist's words – of

meanings reverberating in the space of the town, thus reinforcing the dialogue with the urban fabric.[45]

Demonstrating similar forethoughts in the selection of location, *Poesia all'albero* took place in one of the iconic sites of Gubbio, but it was conceived extemporaneously: strolling across hilly cultivated surroundings of Gubbio, the artist had noticed a number of fallen trees in the fields.[46] With the help of local farmers, Bentivoglio brought one these dead plants to the Piazza della Signoria. The *piazza* extended in front of Palazzo dei Consoli, one of the institutional venues of the Biennale, and overlooked the surrounding countryside from where the tree originated. More importantly, it was the heart of the medieval centre of the town, where the Festa dei Ceri, a traditional celebration, takes place every year on May 15th, and possibly dates back to the sixteenth century.[47] Here, the artist installed the tree in the same position where the banner of the Festa is hoisted every year, the tree's sturdy trunk and branches granting it a sculptural presence in the square.

Although removed from its original context and an alien element in the urban *piazza*, Bentivoglio's tree was a well-known element of the local botanical and anthropological landscape: an *oppiello*.[48] As literary historian Fiona Stafford observes, trees have long been protected, and at times worshipped, across the globe since ancient times.[49] In different moments in history, communities have come to protect specific trees because of a memorable event that had occurred under their canopy, because they had commemorative functions, having been seeded on special occasions, or because they are believed as sacred. The *oppiello* was instead "un albero operaio" (a working-class tree), as Crispolti defined it, which belongs to a variety of maple (*acer campestre*) widely adopted alongside elm trees for the traditional cultivation of grapevines. Positioned in rows and bound one to another by wooden structures (*alberata*), they had a practical use in the hilly countryside around Gubbio: elevating the grapes from the ground, they protected the fruits from animals and parasites, as well as from frost in the coldest months.[50] This mode of grape cultivation, first adopted by the Etruscans and later spreading to northern and central Italy, is known as *vite maritata*, literally meaning "wedded tree", a term that clearly reflects the intimate and complementary relationship between the plant species. It had been disappearing since the postwar years: whole communities of land workers were replaced by tractors and harvesters. Forms of agriculture that required a large labour-force were dismissed, and farmers preferred intensive rather than the *vite maritata and other* mixed cultivations, thus erasing the traditional elements of the local cultural landscape.[51]

Bentivoglio's temporary relocation of an *albero operaio* in the iconic *piazza* of the town stood as an ephemeral monument to an anthropological symbol of

traditional agriculture. It also expressed Bentivoglio's environmental concerns, which had surfaced in her poetics and theoretical contributions during those years. In a 1977 feminism-themed issue of *SpazioArte*, Bentivoglio's environmental sensitivity converged very explicitly within her feminism.[52] Asked to comment about the phenomenon of feminism and its commodification, she expressed her critique of consumer society at large and demonstrated to have embraced what she defined as the most advanced expression of feminism, one that "stands in contrast with the whole codified reality. It is the critique of the institutional way to behave at all levels. The refusal of a society's way of being intentionally misled by and alienated in the technological productivity. The rehabilitation of a compressed physicality".[53] Within this framework, the artist compared the minor advantages and the neurotic frustrations of women's domestic isolation with the damages on the Italian landscape provoked by the railway infrastructures and the unruly urbanisation of the postwar years, blaming men's alienation in contemporary societal organisation for these conditions. Until then she had produced very few pieces commenting on ecological matters (*Cartello d'albergo*, 1972; *Autotesto*, 1973), but with no connection with her feminist ideas. One of the pieces was about trees: *Addio agli alberi* (1971), a serigraphy on transparent resin to be installed to an urban widow, expressed a nostalgic critique of the contemporary tree-cutting and decimation of vernacular woodlands following the postwar *speculazione edilizia* in Italy, harshly denounced by the environmental activist Antonio Cederna in *Il mondo* magazine at the time.[54] Bentivoglio composes the word "addio" playing with the typeface: five trees of different species compose the letters of the word that means "goodbye" in Italian.[55] Using a visual strategy similar to the one adopted in *L'assente* (1971), the artist played with the transparency of the support surface, thus creating not only a poem to be read, but an actual lens through which to look at the urban surroundings. *Poesia all'albero* resonates with *Addio*: in Gubbio, the relocation of the tree referenced the disappearance of *opielli* from the surrounding countryside. The tree, however, aimed at conveying these ideas "only indirectly", as she herself stated few years later.[56]

Bentivoglio's tree-related intervention was not an installation *per se*.[57] It was a device for "animazione". Drawing on the fields of cinema and theatre, Crispolti considered "animation" as a technique of extemporaneous intervention suitable for provoking beholders' participation, dialogue and action.[58] It can work as a "tecnica liberatoria collettiva", (a collective liberating technique), that allows marginal and subaltern but anthropologically-relevant cultural heritages to become manifest.[59] The artist's vegetal "ready-made" unexpectedly positioned in Piazza della Signoria elicited public engagement by

means of surprise. This what the first line of the poem suggests: "I was surprised: I noticed a blossoming tree in the square".[60] Several passers-by reacted to it – over seventy, in fact – and they did so in different ways. With the eyes of a literary critic, Bentivoglio herself analysed the different contributions and distinguished the relationship they entertained with the work and the tree. The audience's reactions ranged from surprise ("I was surprised: I noticed a blossoming tree in the square") or scorn ("it is truly revolting", "this is silly", "they are uprooted from where they are needed to be placed where they make people laugh") towards the art installation itself, to the appreciation of the beauty of the tree ("oh this is beautiful"). Others recalled funny, even explicitly sexual anecdotes ("the tree represents a bed where to fuck"), anecdotes about their experiences on or under the tree; several people expressed nostalgia for its disappearance from the local landscape ("Some time ago, there were plenty in the plain of Gubbio", "I worked a lot with these trees", "it fills my heart with melancholy"), at times expressing environmental concerns ("you are more valuable than a human", "the tree brings us air").[61] Bentivoglio conceived the tree as a powerful pre-linguistic symbolic form to reconnect with locals. Collecting the notes written by the passers-by and making them the lines of a poem, she opened the process of poetry creation to the inhabitants of Gubbio and, as the lines of the poem suggest, encouraged a reconnection of the locals' memories and personal experiences with the tree, the town, and its surroundings.

Collecting locals' meanings associated with the tree itself, Bentivoglio repositioned her role as an author in favour of an expanded co-authored creation with the audience. When in 1978 literary critic Luciano Cherchi linked Bentivoglio's experimental approaches to the practices described by Roland Barthes in 1968 in his essay on the death of the author, he also named *Poesia all'albero* as one of the most memorable pieces of poetry since Nanni Balestrini's *Tape Mark I* (1962).[62] During a public event in December 1961 Balestrini decided to use a computer to recombine poems of other authors in new and original ways, generating a potentially infinite source of poetic verses.[63] The computer generated a long printout, from which the poet selected a few verses that he found particularly interesting. While the work of Balestrini's poem is the emblem of the technophilia of the early 1960, Bentivoglio's mirrors her time of socio-political turmoil, and experimental contribution of the artist to the timely issues of their time.[64] Using the notes written by beholders, the artistic intervention and then the resulting poem dissolve the author's position in favour of voicing the beholders's meanings attributed to the tree.

By integrating the beholder's participation in the process of creation, *Poesia all'albero* embraces Enrico Crispolti's ideal of a cultural operator working *extra*

media. According to Crispolti, artists were not to renounce experimentation within their medium-specific field of practice to respond to the unprecedented demand of cultural participation at the time, but to verify the effectiveness of their visual language with their new co-participators in the creative process.[65] Crispolti endowed the "operatore estetico" of a social role based on a new relationship with society at large: artists had to relinquish their position of univocal bringer of cultural contents, and become provocateurs and "sollecitatori di partecipazione" to raise a community's cultural self-awareness.[66] From being "operators", artists also had to become aesthetic "co-operators" and to explore not only new forms of expression, but also new themes and cultural models.[67] Although not completely disappearing from the work – after all she composed the people's participation in the poem, Bentivoglio attributed the creation of the poetry lines to the locals: the poem itself is often referred to as the first poem ever written by a community, making this collective creation an expression of local cultural identity.[68] In this unprecedented relationship between the artist and the wider audience, Bentivoglio gained access to new heritages of material culture and ancestral anthropological realities, whilst becoming a promoter of social and cultural growth and, possibly – as Crispolti believed – of political self-awareness.[69]

In *Poesia all'albero*, Bentivoglio's research, influenced as it was by contemporary feminist theory, fully converged and actively informed the political and social engagement of Crispolti's Arte Ambientale. As for other artists, in *Gubbio '76,* Bentivoglio had the possibility to experiment with her artistic language as a visual poet outside the parameters of her established practice. This experience inaugurated a series of interventions in public spaces and, in the following years, stimulated her research on the tree as a symbolic form. Yet, in *Poesia all'albero*, she specifically adopted a participatory methodology that, in conjunction with the relocation of the *oppiello* in a crucial location of the city, generated a space and a time for reflection on the tree and the lifestyle and culture it embodied. The poem wove together as many affective landscapes of Gubbio as the people participating in the artistic intervention. Whilst bringing the contemporary changes in the surrounding countryside to the town centre, the work more explicitly resonated and contributed to Crispolti's wider scope: that of raising the cultural awareness of the collectivity living locally.

[1] *Gubbio '76. Biennale della ceramica 1976*, curated by Enrico Crispolti (Gubbio, 1976), exh. cat. (Gubbio: Agenzia Autonoma Soggiorno e Turismo - Gubbio, 1976), 5/12-5/20.

[2] Daniela Ferrari brilliantly synthesises the way in which critics and scholars have conceived Bentivoglio's crucial contribution, writing that "Bentivoglio ha scritto la propria pagina di artista, ma soprattutto la vasta pagina della poesia visiva al femminile". [Daniela Ferrari, "'Bussate ai sogni, vi sarà aperto…' Mirella Bentivoglio tessitrice di trame, tra simboli, linguaggi e poesia," in *Poesia Visiva: la donazione di Mirella Bentivoglio al Mart*, edited by Daniela Ferrari (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2011), 32].

[3] Rosaria Abate compiles a list of Bentivoglio's women-only exhibition: Rosaria Abate, "Mostre collettive curate da Mirella Bentivoglio," in *La donazione di Mirella Bentivoglio al Mart*, 200-201. *Materializzazione del linguaggio,* curated by Mirella Bentivoglio (Venice: la Biennale di Venezia, 1978).

[4] Bentivoglio's collaborator Franca Zoccoli writes: "Bentivoglio's attitude toward feminism is the same as that toward any organized group or movement: she rejects strict militancy, even as she acknowledges that the movement has nourished her work". [Franca Zoccoli, "Back to the Pictogram: An Inquiry into the Nature of Communication," in Mirella Bentivoglio, Frances K. Pohl and Rosaria Abate, *Pages: Mirella Bentivoglio. Selected works 1966-2012*, curated by Frances K. Pohl (Claremont, CA: Benton Museum of Art-Pomona College, 2015), exh. cat., edited by Elizabeth Pulsinelli (Claremont, CA: Pomona College Museum of Art), 68]. In the same publication, Leslie Cozzi comments on the intersection between feminism and Bentivoglio's curatorial and artistic practice (Leslie Cozzi, "Practice and the Language of Italian Feminism in the Work of Mirella Bentivoglio," in Bentivoglio, Pohl and Abate, *Mirella Bentivoglio*, 78-89). For the artist's position on the topic, see her contributions: Mirella Bentivoglio, *SpazioArte. Periodico di analisi e studi sulle comunicazioni visive*, April-May 1977, 17-18; Mirella Bentivoglio, "Una mostra in progress. Riflessioni e risposte," *Le Arti*, October-December 1975, 47.

[5] Mirella Bentivoglio to Betty Danon, May 29, 1976, Dan I.1.2.2., Fondo Danon, Archivio del '900, Mart, Rovereto, English translation by the author. Original Italian text: "Io già conosco le mie opere e perciò, egoisticamente, le mie personali mi interessano di meno del lavoro altrui, che mi piace esprimere e approfondire". In the mid-1975, she developed a productive collaboration with Stelio Rescio's non-commercial gallery il Brandale, in Savona. This collaboration deserves further attention.

[6] Graduated in English at the University of Cambridge and University of Sheffield, Bentivoglio had started her career as a poet, with a collection titled *Giardino* (Milan: Giovanni Scheiwiller, 1943). Twenty-five years after her first publication, she slowly transitioned to Visual and Concrete Poetry, with her first participation in a collective show at the Club Turati in Milan (*Antologia della Poesia Concreta*, 1967) and the publication of her second book but first of Visual Poetry, *Calendario* (Florence: Nuovedizioni E. Vallecchi, 1968). For a selection of Bentivoglio's major exhibitions and contributions, see: *Mirella Bentivoglio: dalla parola al simbolo* (Rome: Edizioni De Luca, 1996), 122-126.

[7] The piece was in her imagination since a year earlier, as she confessed in a letter: Mirella Bentivoglio to Betty Danon, July 6, 1977, Dan. I.1.2.24, Fondo Danon, Archivio del '900, Mart, Rovereto.

[8] Mirella Bentivoglio, in *Mirella Bentivoglio:*

dalla parola al simbolo, 50. For instance: *Simbolo totale* (1984); *Genesi della cupola* (1984); *Libro Etimologico* (1985); *Logos* (1993). Two more tree-themed works are installed in the garden of Villa Buttafava, near Varese, among which *L'unità della coppia* (2002). Many thanks to Paolo Cortese (Archivio Mirella Bentivoglio, Rome) for making me aware of them.

9 Mirella Bentivoglio, *Un albero di pagine* (Mirano: Eidos, 1992).

10 About Arte Ambientale, see: Martina Tanga, *Arte Ambientale, Urban Space and Participatory Art* (London: Routledge, 2019). In an unpublished interview by independent art historian Anna Di Matteo about the work of Maria Lai, Bentivoglio explained the influence of Crispolti on her work: "Io so che era naturale insomma per me fare queste cose metterle nel territorio, anche… queste cose non è che venivano fuori dalla nostra testa, eravamo innate da curatori, curatrici. Enrico Crispolti mi ha invitata a Gubbio per fare una struttura simbolica, dovevo fare un intervento sul territorio e ho fatto una cosa che poi è rimasta storica che è l'uovo di Gubbio… Poi sempre Crispolti, sempre a Gubbio, ha detto che bisognava fare… mi ha invi[t]ata e si doveva fare una azione, e da li è nato tutto il mio lavoro sull'albero, cioè vengono… sono cose che sono nell'aria e vengono anche… così… l'artista viene sollecitato dalle mostre alle quali partecipa... per cui non è che l'artista datolo pensa… è tutto uno scambio. […] Per me, Enrico Crispolti ebbe molta importanza, perché portò avanti il mio lavoro". [Mirella Bentivoglio, in discussion with Anna Di Matteo, in Anna Di Matteo, "Maria Lai. Una storia di Segni" (MA dissertation, Università di Roma Tre, 2013), 162]. The thesis was consulted at the Stazione Dell'Arte - Museo dell'Arte Contemporanea, Ulassai, in January 2016.

11 For a history of the Biennale di Gubbio, see: Giorgio Bonomi, *Storia delle Biennali di Gubbio e Museo di Scultura Contemporanea* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2006), 15-35.

12 See: Enrico Crispolti, "Gubbio '76," in *Gubbio '76*, 1/1-1/10; Maurizio Terzetti, "Sequenze di Storia delle Biennali di Gubbio (1955-1996)," in *Storia delle Biennali di Gubbio*, 30-35.

13 Enrico Crispolti, *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale* (Bari: De Donato, 1977). In 1978, Crispolti announced the publication of a second volume on the same topic: Enrico Crispolti, *Extra media: esperienze attuali di comunicazione estetica* (Torino: Studio forma, 1978), 27. Unfortunately, the volume was never published. Sara Catenacci, "'L'ambiente come sociale alla Biennale di Venezia 1976': note da un libro mai realizzato," in *In corso d'opera. Ricerche dei dottorandi di Storia dell'Arte della Sapienza* (Rome: Campisano Editore, 2015), 317-323.

14 *Volterra '73: sculture, ambientazioni, visualizzazioni, progettazione per l'alabastro*, curated by Enrico Crispolti (Volterra, 1973), exh. cat. (Florence: Centro Di, 1974).

15 *Ambiente come Sociale. La Biennale 1976*, curated by Enrico Crispoli (Venice: Giardini di Castello, 1976), exh. cat. (Venice: La Biennale, 1976). The Venice Biennale of 1976 explored the relationships between art, environment, and cultural structures.

16 For a commentary on Crispolti's curatorial framework, see: Tanga, *Arte Ambientale*, 24-61; Emanuele Rinaldo Meschini, "Volterra'73. Alle radici dell'arte sociale in Italia," *Contemporart*, January-March, 2015, 48-49. For an overview of art in the urban space in Italy, see: Alessandra Pioselli, "Arte e Scena Urbana. Modelli di intervento e politiche culturali pubbliche in Italia tra 1968 e 1981," in *Arte Pubblica nello Spazio Urbano,* edited by Carlo Birrozzi and Marina Pugliese (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2007), 20-33; Cecilia Guida, *Spacial Practices. Funzione pubblica e politica dell'arte nella società delle reti* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2012); Alessandra

Pioselli, *L'arte nello spazio urbano. L'esperienza italiana dal 1968 ad oggi* (Monza: Johan & Levi editore, 2015).

17 Tanga, *Arte Ambientale*, 7-16.

18 Ibid., 11-14.

19 Crispolti, *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale*, 17-27; 30-40. For a contemporary debate on the role of the artist, see: "Il ruolo dell'operatore visivo," *SpazioArte. Periodico di analisi e studi sulle comunicazioni visive*, January – March 1977, 1-16.

20 Crispolti, *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale*, 7-12.

21 Tanga uses the term "extramural" to analyse Volterra 73 and the Venice Biennale in 1976 (Tanga, *Arte ambientale*, 24-61). Crispolti, *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale*, 27-30; About "extra media", see: Crispolti, *Extra media,* 8-15.

22 Crispolti, "Gubbio '76," 1/3-1/4.

23 For a list of contributors: Bonomi, *Storia della Biennale di Gubbio*, 71. About Nedda Guidi's Retrospective, see: Crispolti, "Gubbio '76," 3/1-3/32; 6/1-6/38

24 *Animazione*: ibid., 4/1-4/42; *Progetti di intervento, e animazione urbana*: ibid., 5/1-5/124; San Martino: ibid., 7/1-7/7.

25 "Bentivoglio rivendica per sè una totale libertà di mosse, sarebbe sbagliato imbrigliarla in categorie precise". Translated by the author. Renato Barilli, "Alla ricerca del simbolo perduto," in *Mirella Bentivoglio: dalla parola al simbolo*, 12. For an analysis of Bentivoglio's early works, see: Umbro Apollonio, "Rigore e fantasia nell'opera di Mirella Bentivoglio," in *Bentivoglio* (Milan: Galleria Schwarz, 1971-1972), exh. cat. (Milan, Galleria Schwarz, 1971), 3-22; and the critical texts collected in: Mirella Bentivoglio, *Mirella Bentivoglio. Poesia Visiva* (Rome: Galleria Pictogramma, 1973), exh. cat. (Rome, 1973), p.n.n.

26 Mirella Bentivoglio, *Itinerario* (n.p.: Magma Editions, 1971).

27 Piero Pacini, "Apollinaire e la Bentivoglio visualizzano la pioggia," *Il Cristallo*, no. 2 (1976), 127-28.

28 Mirella Bentivoglio, "Struttura Simbolica," in *Gubbio '76*, 5/12-5/16; Mirella Bentivoglio, *All'adultera lapidata* (Rome: Tipografia della pace, 1977), p.n.n.

29 The referendum for the reform of the law on family (Riforma del diritto di famiglia italiano) took place in spring 1975. Italian feminist positions on this topic were diverse. See Beatrice Pisa, *Il Movimento Liberazione della Donna nel femminismo italiano. La politica, i vissuti, le esperienze (1970-1983)* (Canterano: Aracne Editrice, 2017).

30 Luigi Fontanella (1979) and Agnes Danes (1981) defined *L'Ovo* as such. See: Mirella Bentivoglio, *Strutture simboliche* (Barcellona: 1982), p.n.n.; Frances K. Pohl, "Language / Image / Object: The Work of Mirella Bentivoglio," *Woman's Art Journal* 6, no. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1985): 20.

31 Bentivoglio, "Struttura Simbolica", 5/12, English transation by the author. Original Italian text: "Uno [un sasso] reca la dedica all'adultera e non è posto in piena evidenza, per non ostacolare il richiamo della struttura a plurimi significati di vitalizzazione del represso e preistoria del vitale".

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Other artists were engaged in such research at the time. They were animated by an understanding of language as technological device animated by men and thus manifested the necessity to break free from it. Writing about the women only-show curated with Bentivoglio, Anna Oberto wrote that women were fighting for their position in society, creating new poetic languages. She believed that women liberation was their liberation from masculine language (Anna Oberto, "Poesia al Femminile,"*Le Arti*, October-December 1975, 10-12). See also the work of the Italian Bianca Menna, alias Tomaso Binga, and Cloti

Ricciardi: Raffaella Perna, "Alfabeti della differenza", in *Arte, fotografia e femminismo in Italia negli anni '70* (Milan: Postmedia books, 2013), 43-64. See also *Semiotics of the kitchen* (1975) by the American artist Martha Rosler.

36 Pohl, "Language / Image / Object," 18. For further analysis of Bentivoglio's research on language and its convergence in *L'Ovo*, see: Cozzi, "Practice and the Language," 78-87.

37 *Mirella Bentivoglio. Poesia Visiva*, p.n.n.; *Bentivoglio* (Milan: Studio Santandrea, 1975), exh. cat. (Milan: Studio Santandrea), p.n.n.

38 Mirella Bentivoglio, "Interview with Mirella Bentivoglio," interview by Benjamin Kersten, in *Pages: Mirella Bentivoglio. Selected works 1966-2012*, 59.

39 Enrico Crispolti, "The symbolic structures of Mirella Bentivoglio," in *Mirella Bentivoglio* (Barcelona: Metronom, 1982), exh. cat. (Barcelona: Metronom, 1982), p.n.n.

40 Bentivoglio, "Struttura Simbolica," 5/14. Both Bentivoglio's and the cooperative's name appeared on the work.

41 Ibid., 5/16.

42 After surviving the deadly earthquake that occurred on April 29, 1984, *L'Ovo* crumbled in 2004.

43 Bentivoglio, "Struttura Simbolica," 5/12.

44 Mirella Bentivoglio to Betty Danon, March 16, 1977, Dan. I.1.2.16, Fondo Danon, Archivio del '900, Mart, Rovereto.

45 Bentivoglio, "Struttura Simbolica," 5/12.

46 Crispolti, "Gubbio '76," 5/14.

47 Ibid., 5/18; Bentivoglio, *Un albero di pagine*, p.n.n.

48 Enrico Crispolti, "Poesia all'albero," in *Gubbio 2016 XXVI Biennale di Scultura* (Gubbio: Palazzo Ducale, Palazzo dei Consoli, 2016-2017) exh. cat. (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2016), 114.

49 Fiona Stafford, *The Long, Long Life of Trees* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 1-19.

50 Mauro Agnoletti, "Tuscany," in *Italian Historical Rural Landscapes. Cultural Values for the Environment and Rural Development*, edited by Mauro Agnoletti (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 320.

51 Henry Desplanques, "I paesaggi collinari tosco-umbro-marchigiani," in *Paesaggi umani*, edited by Emilio Bianchi and Michele D'Innella (Milan: Touring Club Italiano, 1977), 114-116.

52 Bentivoglio, *SpazioArte*, 17-18.

53 Ibid. 17, English translation by the author. Original Italian text: "Si pone come elemento contraddittorio a tutta la realtà codificata. È la critica del modo istituzionale di comportarsi a tutti i livelli. Il rifiuto del modo di essere di una società mistificatoria e alienata nella produttività tecnologica. Il recupero di una fisicità compressa".

54 Antonio Cederna, *La distruzione della natura* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), 57; 199-203; 231-234.

55 *Bentivoglio* (Milan: Galleria Schwarz 1971), 23. Many thanks to forester Giorgio Cordin who identified some of the trees: a spruce, oak, cypress, and larch.

56 Bentivoglio, *Un albero di pagine*, p.n.n.

57 This was the case of a 1977 work by conceptual sculptor Antonio Paradiso. Paradiso had developed a conceptual practice around the notion of *usura* (wear) within the field of *arte antropologica*. As part of a wider investigation on the cultural and natural forces shaping the landscape of his native Puglia, in 1977, Paradiso brought an olive tree accompanied by a photographic series documenting the man-made shapes of olive trees to Expo Arte - Fiera international di arte contemporanea, held in Bari. Resonating with the Duchampian ready-made and with the contemporary anthropological understanding of landscape, his artistic operation aimed at bringing shapes produced by a specific culture – that of southern Italy – and the temporal dimension they encapsulated to the gallery space, overturning the distinction between high

art and the material culture produced by subaltern social groups. About Paradiso's practice, see: Sara Fontana, *Arte e antropologia in Italia negli anni Settanta* (Milan: Postmedia books, 2018), 89-113. About his intervention in Bari, see: *Antonio Paradiso. Teatro Antropologico. La vita, l'usura, la morte. 1977-1980. Quattro anni di ricerche* (Milan: Fabbrica di Comunicazione, 1980) exh. cat. (Milan: Paradiso, 1980), 20; *Antonio Paradiso. Arte + Antropologia – Antropologia + Arte,* curated by Anna D'Elia and Lidia Carrieri (Martina Franca: Fondazione Stusio Carrieri Noesi, 2013), exh. cat. (Martina Franca: Fondazione Stusio Carrieri Noesi, 2013), 14.

58 Crispolti, *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale*, 34-36.

59 Ibid., 36.

60 The poem is published in *Gubbio '76*, 5/19-5/20, English translation by the author. Original Italian text: "Sono rimasta sorpresa: nella piazza ho notato un albero fiorito".

61 Ibid., English translation by the author. Original Italian texts: "Sono rimasta sorpresa: nella piazza ho notato un albero fiorito"; "è veramente schifoso"; "è una vaccata"; "si tolgono da dove servono per far metterli dove fanno ridere la gente"; "oh come è bello"; "l'albero rappresenta un letto per scopare"; "Nella pianura di Gubbio un tempo erano tanti"; "io ciò [sic] lavorato tanto con questi alberi"; "mi riempie il cuore di malinconia"; "sei più prezioso dell'uomo"; "l'albero ci dà l'aria".

62 Luciano Cherchi's text is reproduced in a booklet that accompanied the exhibition and poem reading, entitled *Bentivoglio. Poesia/azione*, at the gallery Spazio Alternativo in Rome (March 13-29,1978).

63 About the relationship between Concrete Poetry and electronic literature, see: Matteo d'Ambrosio, "The early computer poetry and concrete poetry," in *Electronic Literature: Affiliations*, edited by Rui Torres and Manuel Portela, *Materialidades da literatura* 6, no. 1 (2018): 52-72.

64 Ibid.

65 Crispolti, *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale*, 17-27.

66 Ibid., 18.

67 Ibid.

68 Bentivoglio, *Un albero di pagine*, p.n.n.

69 Ibid., 18-19.