

A conference is born with mysterious ancestors

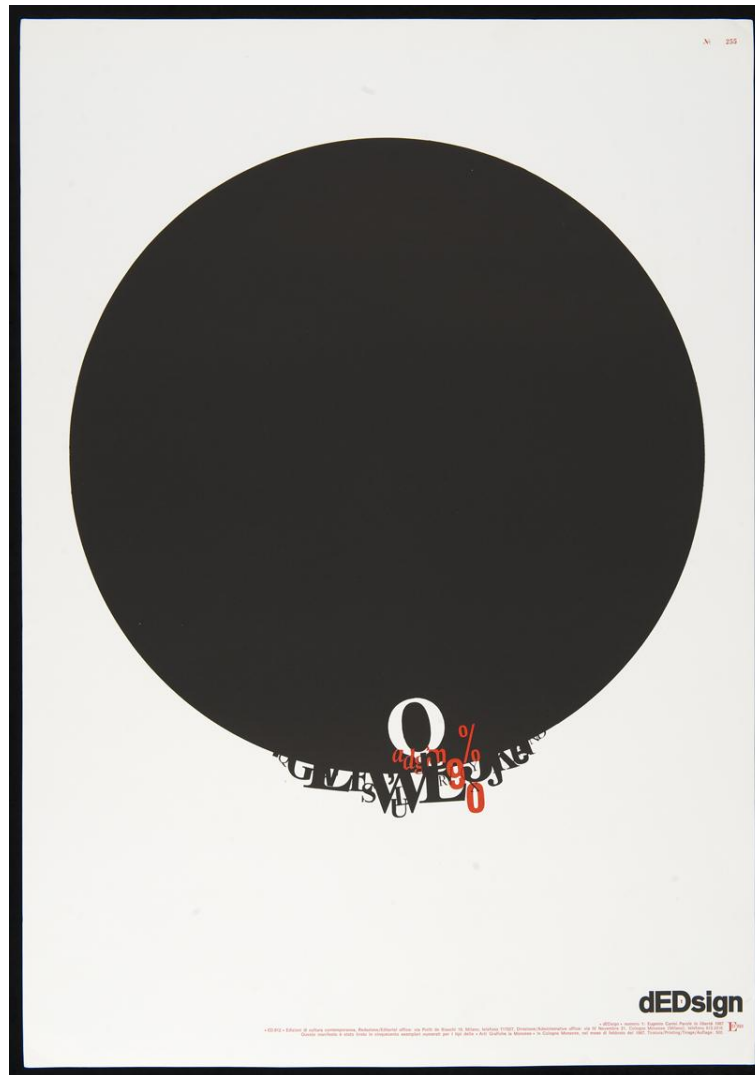
Sarah Tremlett

Whilst visiting Berlin five years ago I bought a copy of *Fluxus In Germany – A Long Tale with Many Knots* (my husband acerbically commented that we couldn't have flown Ryan Air, then, as we usually only take hand luggage, and the publication in question is the size of a healthy, pregnant, spiral-bound file). The book has a thick, corrugated-plastic, transparent cover (the kind of material normally used for packing), which, like a fog obscuring headlights on a November night, partly conceals a dim inner glow of mustard and maroon sheets, pleasingly delivering a seemingly inexhaustible supply of stentorian text. From time to time I have lovingly opened it and gazed at the curious goings-on – absorbed the muddled cartwheels of genius flung up from various associations and happenings, captured forever within the pages. However, in some senses it has been a bit of a tomb-like tome – part art-collectible object; one of those works which sit and wait on the shelf, pausing; somehow or another it hadn't yet revealed its full potential or purpose – what was this 'tale' doing on my shelf, after all?

Over a year and a half ago, now, I happened to meet Lucy English at a poetry conference at Chichester University. We were both travelling back 'on the train' and, as normal for England on a Sunday, there weren't any trains – not until somewhere in the middle of Wiltshire – so we spent a good deal of time on the bus together. Conferences became the topic of conversation – since (as some of you may well know) Lucy had run a particularly groovy poetry gathering at Bath Spa three years previously. Turning things over we ruminated and extrapolated about how Bath has much to offer and then it was time to get off. Time passed. In the spring of 2011 like the rising of a new tide, I felt it was time to get to grips with this now, fairly established genre of videopoetry, and got in touch with Lucy – what about a conference on video narratives? We began to hatch our plan and the big, glowing, plastic bound file began to vibrate.

At the same time, unbeknownst to us, another slumbering giant was about to reawaken, deep in the corridors of the topiarised and be-peacocked Elizabethan manor – Corsham Court (which was originally Bath Academy of Art and now a home to Bath Spa University postgraduate research students). One stormy afternoon, with rain lashing at the mullioned windows, in the course of archiving old material a long-forgotten drawer was re-opened; it revealed two B2-sized plastic bags. Inside the transparent containers were three editions of assorted prints (ED.912 stamped on every sheet, and mostly dated around 1967) by Maciunas, Brecht, Diacono, Sassi and Blaine, alongside many others.

¹ Term 'Chance Operations' in Block, René (ed.): *Fluxus in Germany – A Long Tale with Many Knots 1962-1994*, Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, Stuttgart, 1995: in *An Anthology* – Jackson Mac Low and La Monte Young, New York, 1963 Full title: *An anthology of chance operations concept art anti-art indeterminacy improvisation meaningless work natural disasters plans of action stories diagrams Music poetry essays dance constructions mathematics compositions* (download: <http://www.ubu.com/historical/young/index.html>)



Parole in libertà, Eugenio Carmi, Ed. 912 Milan, 1967,
70 x 50 cm; Bath Spa University collection

The provenance of the prints, it transpired, was a complete mystery. However, they became variously known as ED.912 or the *Fluxus* prints (since one entitled *US surpasses all Nazi genocide records* was by the originator of the term *Fluxus* - the Lithuanian artist George Maciunas), and were believed to be part of the art collection which had been established by Clifford Ellis (the director from 1937-1972). They were thought to have left Corsham Court in 1986, when the art school moved to Sion Hill, in Bath. It is understood that the prints lay in the art school library at Somerset Place for around twenty years until the building was sold, at which point they were returned quietly and unobtrusively to their current location. Their peripatetic journey had ensured both their mystery and their survival – being in more or less pristine condition – but were they, like Tutankhamen’s tomb, cursed by their discovery – an enigmatic ‘tale with many knots’? Guess what! Lucy emailed. Serendipity I texted; the Fluxus spirit is alive and kicking! The conference began to materialise, seemingly shadowed by a coincidental ghost – but was it a coincidence?

Why were the prints at Corsham Court, and how did they get there in the first place? The mystery, (like many conundrums surrounding the itinerant people, places and origins of Fluxus, itself), gradually deepened. Rumours abounded. Some said the prints were collected by the artist John Furnival and used as examples during graphic design classes (drawing-pin holes on the corners),

recalling the heady, hands-on, chiaroscuro days of moveable type, leading, set-squares (and yes, even the wormy detritus of messy rubbers) amidst the eccentric iconoclasm of Elizabethan bohemia.

Definitions and Consent

But were the prints actually examples of Fluxus work, or not? Like the term itself, (which can be defined as a term for an anti-term), this theory seemed perpetually under debate. Soon, the practicalities of life took precedence, and a happy state of 'not knowing' seemed the most appropriate way of moving forward. It was as if the chance discovery and the questionable provenance were part of the 'event of the prints'; a performance which we were enacting, a sort of Fluxus motion, as if George (Maciunas) might have been looking over the progress of the conference and maybe, even, having a quiet chuckle.

As is well-known, Maciunas was no stranger to attempting to martial and classify groups of mercurial artists; according to sources (and please let us know if you have any information to add) he reportedly coined the term when he organised the first Fluxus event in New York in 1961. Dick Higgins, in his 'Child's History of Fluxus' describes Maciunas as having chosen the name as a 'very funny word for change'. It is well-known that the lineage of the often text-based Fluxus family tree of indeterminacy, chance and flow, is many-branched, and springs from many sources, such as George Brecht – though the 'face' to set all fonts scattering is nearly always cited as the legendary pioneer John Cage. Apparently, whilst not directly following Cage's theories, Maciunas had a good knowledge of, and a 'respectful affection'² for, his earlier experimental music. Whether an artist saw themselves as part of Maciunas' definition is another matter. Reflecting on this question, I notice that my Fluxus tome is beginning to glow once again, vibrating to the voice of Johannes Cladders in his reminiscences with Gabriele Knapstein (p.6):

I can no longer say with certainty whether I was familiar with the term at the time.

Knapstein goes on to add:

George Maciunas... understood how to bring artists from very different areas and approaches into actions together under the name Fluxus, but the artists only identified in part with the definitions that Maciunas tried to give the term during the early sixties... there were continual differences of opinion as to who would be allowed to lay claim to the term Fluxus and who wouldn't.

He observes, however, that Maciunas found the term useful to suggest an opposition to:

art's rigidification since the late fifties by reconnecting to the avant-garde movements of the 1910s and 1920s. In the face of the strong presence of abstract painting and sculpture in the postwar era, they pushed ahead with their interdisciplinary approaches to broaden the conception of art.

So, it seemed appropriate enough, for the moment at least, that we could consider the spectre of the prints surrounding the conference as a blessing of consent – yet their mystery remained unsolved. Time passed.

² Jean-Pierre Wilhelm, 1962, *The Fluxus Reader*, Ken Friedman, 1998, Academy Editions

From stillness to motional text: Fluxus to video narrative and videopoetry – a family ‘videopoetree’?

It can be argued that many of the Fluxus worldwide ‘family’ of artists, belong to yet another species – the family of visual poets. We can even attempt to mark a rough ‘videopoetree’ – which, like ‘the word’, itself is both a linear, yet also three-dimensional, anthropocentric ‘body’, which, ultimately in alignment with technology, has discarded the white page for time and motion and photonic text.

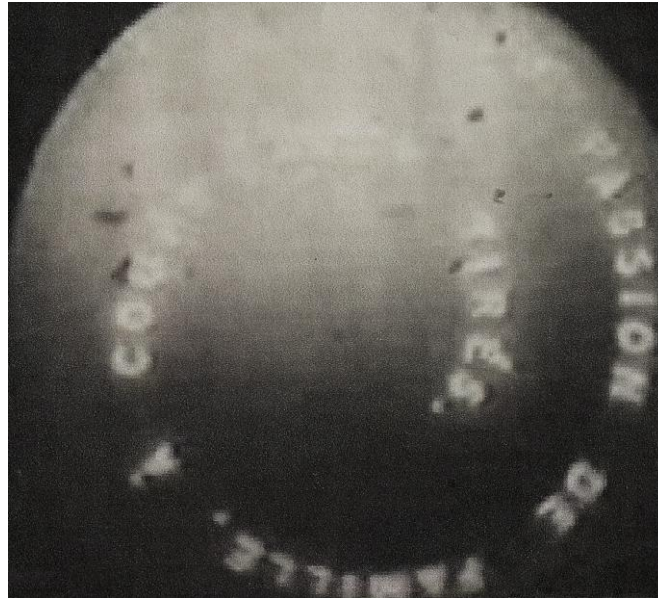
As is commonly recognised, poetic writing which is ‘visual’ and straining to run free can be cited as far back as a few centuries BC, primarily with Hellenistic pattern poetry. Examples can be found throughout history, with or without religious reference, but for the moment we will launch our family tree at the end of the nineteenth century with Mallarmé’s oft-mentioned *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* (A Throw of the Dice Will Never Eliminate Chance) of 1897 (published in book form in 1914).



La Colombe Poignardée et le jet d'eau from *Calligrammes: Poems of Peace and War*, (1913-1916), Guillaume Apollinaire³

³ http://writing.upenn.edu/library/Apollinaire_Calligrammes.html

Moving on to Futurist manifestos 1912-14 – Marinetti’s use of *Parole in Libertà* (Words in Freedom) echoing and blasting to *Zang Tumb Tumb* alongside the visual pleasures of Apollinaire and his *Calligrammes*; stumbling on in decades through Eliot, Tristan Tzara, Hannah Höch and Gloria (Stein) – still the ultimate beginning for the majority of free-forming wordsmiths – although, not to forget, ever, the *dash* master – Virginia Woolf; to what I am calling the first two (Dadaist/Surrealist) examples of filmic poetry – Man Ray’s cinépoème *Emak-Bakia* (Basque for ‘Leave me alone’), and Marcel Duchamp’s rotating text-based work *Anemic Cinema* (both from 1926).



Anemic Cinema, Marcel Duchamp, 1926

We stay in Paris to mark the end of World War II, *Lettrism* (*Letterism*) and the highly significant Rumanian artist and theorist of music Isidore Isou, before moving on to happenstance, Brecht, Cage and Concrete Poetry (Brazil 1955/6), recognising artists such as Ben Vautier pre-Fluxing under the Nice sun, before the beginning of our world in 1959 with Gysin and Lutz in Stuttgart and what are generally considered to be the first programmed computer texts.

Theo Lutz in Stuttgart had already produced the very first electronic poetry, ‘stochastichte text’ in Augenblick... More than ten years later, the first exhibition of automatically produced poems took place in 1975 during the ‘Europalia’ event in Brussels.⁴

Back to Paris and Liliane Lijn (spinning cylinders with poetic words describing the physical properties of the universe – dissolving ‘symbols of vibrations’⁵), alongside Burroughs, Calvino, the Beat Poets and the ‘Séminaire de Littérature Expérimentale’ (Experimental Seminar of Literature), which became known as ‘OULIPO’ (founded in 1960), to explore the new area of electronic poetry. On with the

⁴ French e-poetry – a short/long story by Patrick-Henri Burgaud [www. Dichtung-digital.com](http://www.Dichtung-digital.com) 2002/05-25-Burgaud.htm

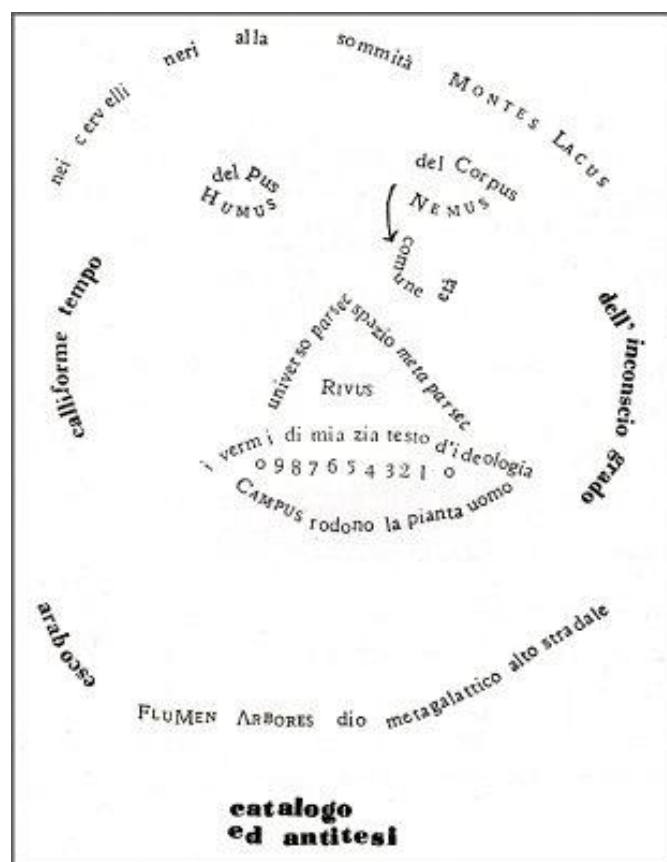
⁵ Catalogue interview with Charles Dreyfus for Lijn’s *Koan* exhibition in Paris, 1997



Young Universe, poem drum, Liliane Lijn, 1962

worldwide spreading of Fluxus, through to Art and Language, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, conceptual art, mail art and a convergence of programmable, motional text and new thinking expanding across all disciplines. As Friedrich Block states in Kac's Media Poetry – an International Anthology:

...the likeness between experimental poetics that developed since the 1950s and the philosophical reflection on language (e.g. Derrida's 'Grammatology', 1967), the media revolution (e.g. McLuhan's 'The Gutenberg Galaxy' 1962), and science (Heinz von Foerster's and John von Neumann's 'Cybernetics') stand out... Around 1967 and 1968 an intellectual climate emerged – at least in Europe – within the context of social, political and cultural movements, which set the stage for the contemporary discourse on digital poetry and media art (2007, p. 232).



Denomisegninatura, Mario Diacono, 1962

And, with particular relevance to motional text Block goes on to state:

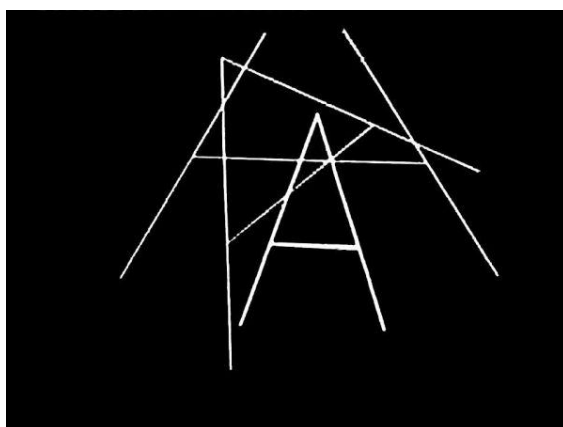
the development of experimental poetry as form or *movement* (my italics) must have been complete by the late 1960s (2007, p. 235).

Stopping for a while and contemplating with Dom Sylvester Houédard, John Furnival, Bob Cobbing (sound and vision), Marcel Broodthaers (looking back to Mallarmé), Franz Mon, Mario Diacono, Gianni Sassi (and all Fluxus-like in Milan), Dick Higgins (and all the artists in the prints) before heralding the broadcast in 1969, of what has been described (setting aside Man Ray's and Duchamp's *filmic* text) as the first *videopoem* – *Roda Lume* (Wheel Light) – by Ernesto de Melo e Castro (black and white 2 minutes, 50 seconds). Melo e Castro describes it as:

integrated verbal and non verbal signs, and the sound was vocally improvised by the author, as a tone poem of sound, letters and words.⁶

As Ernesto de Melo e Castro stated:

The page is no longer there, not even as a metaphor. Space is now equivalent to time and writing is not a score but a virtual, dimensional reality...⁷



Roda Lume (Wheel of Light), Ernesto de Melo e Castro, videopoem, 1969

And now we are reaching up through Art and Philosophy and Joseph Kosuth, Nancy Spero's broken voices of torture entombed with Antonin Artaud, and on to the end of the 1970s where the 'truistic' text-based prints of the artist Jenny Holzer, were soon to morph into world-encompassing motional, poetic digital texts.

The Watershed Moment

By 1985 the now seminal *Les Immatériaux* exhibition at the Pompidou Center in Paris was a turning point for the motional word. The videopoet Philippe Bootz called *Les Immatériaux* the 'starting point of dynamic poetry' (Kac, p. 214); stating that he himself began with generated texts in 1977 and only began working with meaningful or *animated* poetry in 1985. Bootz termed 1985 as a

⁶ <http://www.cibercultura.org.br/tikiwiki/tiki-index.php?page=Ernesto+Melo> - The Encyclopedia of Technological Art

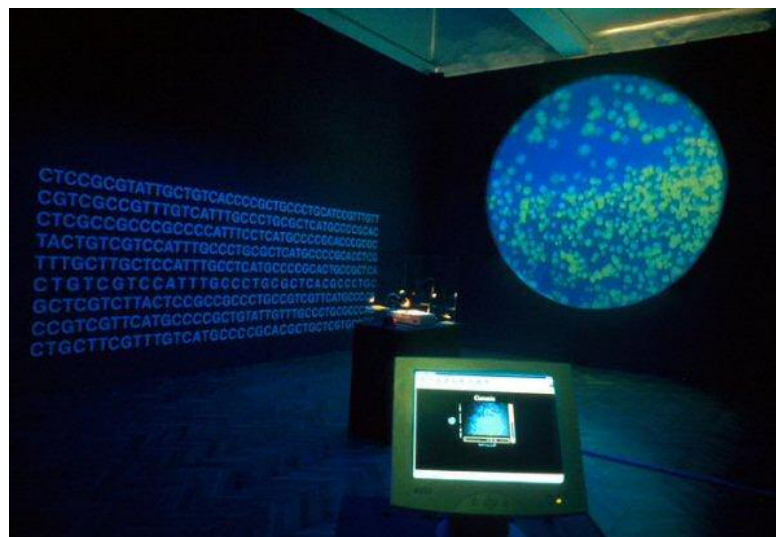
⁷ <http://www.ociocriativo.com.br/guests/meloecastro/video.htm>

transitional period, but stated that all the elements were there at that point, with the first symposium taking place at Cerisy in that year.



Transmission Hologram (still), Richard Kostelanetz, 1987

It was in 1985 that Melo e Castro began the *Signagens* (Signings) videopoetry project at the Open University of Lisbon, where he pioneered the idea to use the character generator to produce animated poems, designed specifically for television.



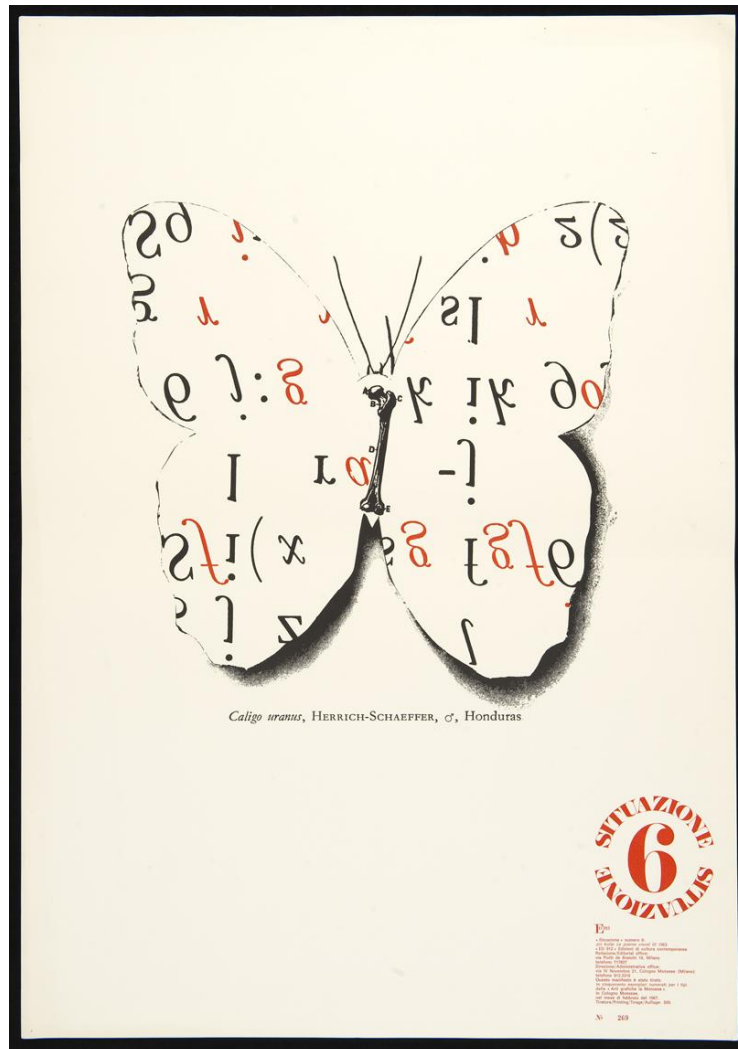
Genesis, Eduardo Kac, video and biotechnological texts, 1999

At the same time the insanely prolific Richard Kostelanetz was producing short video poems and fictions using Amiga text programs compiled in randomly accessed DVDS titled, *Video Poems* and *Video Fictions*; and on the other side of the pond in Italy, Gianni Toti (poet and writer) created 'Poetronica' a hybrid of poetry, cinema and electronic art.

The moving videopoem had arrived, along with George Aguilar, Caterina Davinio, Javier Robledo, Mark Amerika, Maria Mencia, Tom Konyves and the mould-breaking Eduardo Kac – bringing into being Biotechnological texts and genetically coded text – now the family *chronopoetextree* is literally 'written in the genes'.

The Mystery Revisited

As in any list or family tree this is not meant to be a conclusive summing up, but simply a writerly pebble skimming the water of a wide and (literally) deep-flowing river of wordsmiths. But one ripple, one aspect of this 'knotted tale' is the rising to the surface of the enigmatic 'Fluxus' prints. Almost a year after the conference was first mooted, I found myself turning over the mystery, once again.

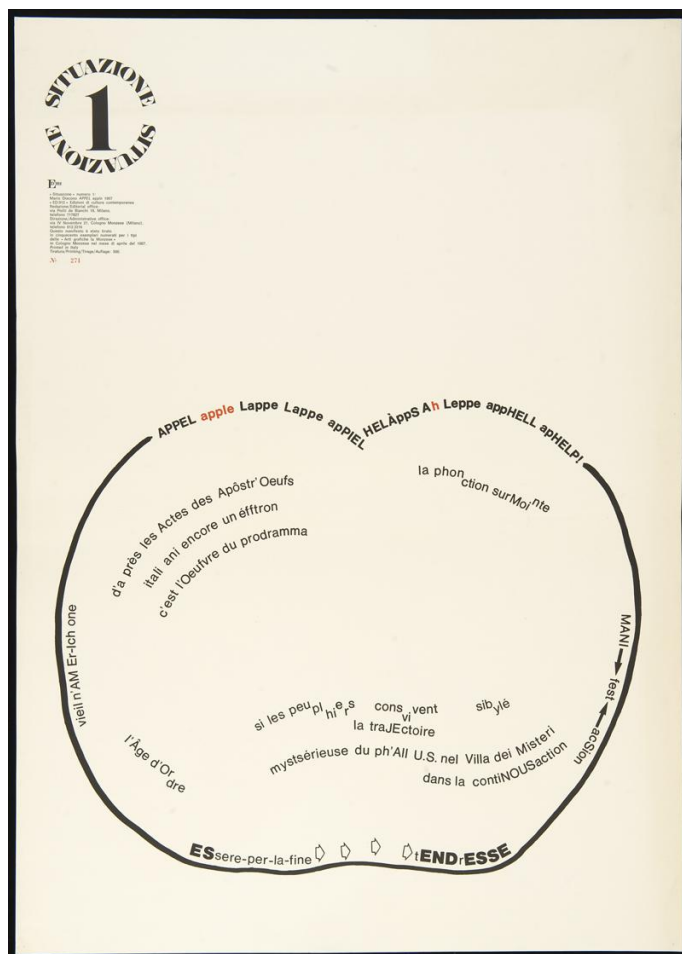


Le poème visuel III, Jirí Kolár, Ed. 912 Milan, 1963,
70 x 50 cm; Bath Spa University collection

I realised, that for my part, it was less a story about *who* had brought the prints to Bath Academy of Art, but *why* they were produced in the first place. I discovered that ED.912 and d.EDsign were a series of prints produced in Milan (around 1967) by Edizioni di Cultura Contemporanea, with a connection to BiT (the avant-garde Italian art magazine), edited by Daniela Palazzoli and co-edited by Germano Celant, Mario Diacono and Tommaso Trini. Many of you will recognise these stellar names as cultural leviathans on the current art world scene – not only attuned to any social seismic shift that might rupture into new art – but traversing history in such a way as to enable their visions to green-light trends and literally *make* movements.

I managed to contact the Italian artist Mario Diacono – who had created the print *Appel* – and I now include the extremely generous and generally heartbeat-skipping reply:

What you call prints were intended to be also posters, not in the sense of *affiches* though, but rather of something combining the aesthetic intent of the print with the unlimited production/diffusion of the poster. Ed. 912 was also the publisher of BiT⁸, but the poster-prints were, in fact, independent from the magazine. Celant, Trini, Palazzoli and I were editors of BiT; the posters were the brainchild of Daniela Palazzoli and of Gianni Sassi, the graphic designer (and an owner) of Ed. 912. They were the ones selecting the artists, writers, etc from whom the poster-prints were commissioned.



APPEL, Mario Diacono, Ed. 912 Milan, 1967,
70 x 49.5 cm, Bath Spa University collection

(Regarding) the basis of what my intentions were in making the visual poem *Appel/Apple*, I recall, the pieces attempted to use the medium of typographic, design-like objects as a way of going beyond the print, the poster, the book, etcetera. It was an attempt, in a word, to socialize, to push in the direction of a diverse accessibility, the fruition of art and literature; to push them beyond their traditional field of creation and consumption.

⁸ An avant-garde, Milan-based art magazine.

Probably the immediate inspiration for the poster-prints had been the work of the Fluxus group, but I was also thinking a lot about the graphic revolution of Schwitters, Futurism, Lissitzky, etc; while Daniela had very much in mind Marshall McLuhan.

So, as we look back to 1967, we see that Diacono looks back to Schwitters – the lineage loops back to draw in another thread. As if this news wasn't enough, there was yet another weaver (or decoder) of the 'knotted tale' on the horizon – Daniela Palazzoli, herself:

What I can immediately tell you about the three sets of posters is that they were part of the cultural strategy of our publishing house: ED912. We were making books, a magazine titled *BiT Arte oggi in Italia*, and three or four lines of posters. Many of the issues you briefly introduce (anti-US propaganda/ anti-Vietnam, avant garde graphic design, Marshall McLuhan) inspired our thoughts at the time – also because many of the people you are quoting (Maciunas, Brecht, Sassi, Diacono) were friends of us – or at least of me, because I was spending much time in the US where I was also teaching at Rutgers University.



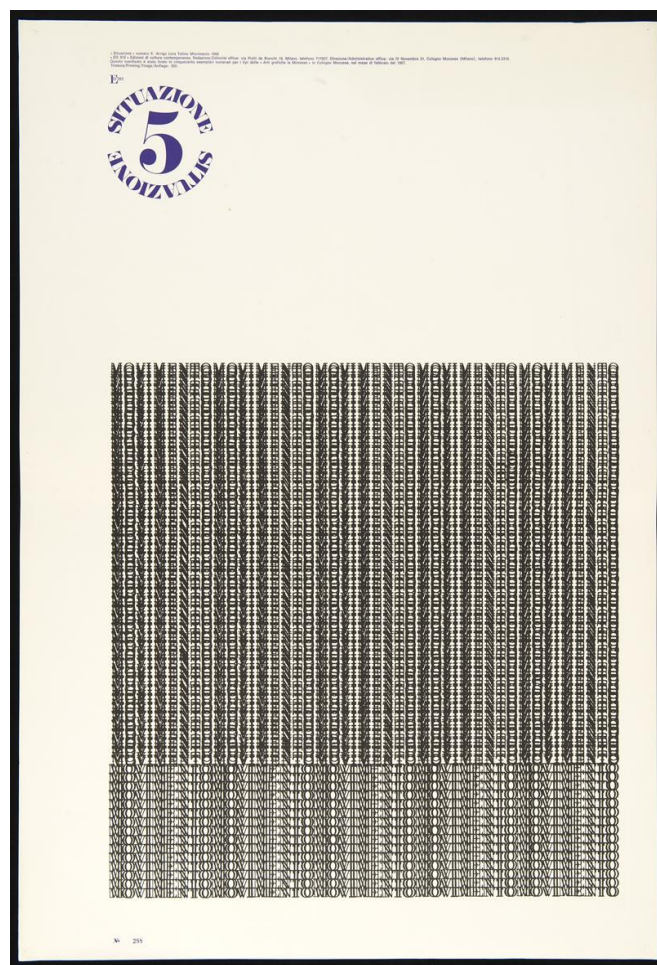
Fiat Lux, Till Neuberg, Ed. 912 Milan, 1967,
70 x 50 cm; Bath Spa University collection

Daniela continues:

We represented Fluxus in Italy, sharing with George Maciunas and the many, many people who collaborated with him all over the world that art had to extend in everyday real life, interacting and involving more people thanks to its ability to dialogue and be understood from individuals with different habits, cultures, and so on. Personally, I was also inspired by Marshall McLuhan intuitions – I was also a good friend of one of his co-authors, Quentin Fiore. For example, I made many shows about books conceived as artworks; and one in particular called ‘The Dragon teeth: The Transformations of the page and the Book in the post-Gutenberg age’ – was devoted to the passage of poetry, page and book from only a visual and intellectual to a total experience.

Through Diacono and Palazzoli the Fluxus posters had risen up like a Phoenix to ‘dialogue’ with videopoetry; as Palazzoli mentions herself:

the original principle to produce them being that these posters were a good extension of art, poetry and cultural revolution (as) messages (being sent) into young people’s intimate living spaces and personal rooms – they were very successful at the time.



Movimento, (repeating the word movimento), Arrigo Lora Totino, Ed. 912 Milan, 1966. 70 x 50 cm; Bath Spa University collection

Perhaps the Maciunas Fluxus Manifesto of 1963 might bear re-examination in the light of Tom Konyves' Manifesto of Videopoetry, which we will be fortunate enough to share at MIX. From calligrammes to film poems, chance, cut-ups and biotext – as we survey this roll-call of pioneers (please forgive any omissions), how many similarities and differences can be further discussed and debated between visual texts and the current practice of videopoetry?

Has *movement* really changed the word for good? Whilst there is little denying that motional text (which in any case is also 'still' since it works on the perception principles of the Phi phenomenon¹¹, like all filmic works), has introduced many new philosophical and theoretical concepts, maybe these posters have re-awoken at this moment in time for a particular reason. Maybe the Fluxus spirit of the 1960s is here to remind us that digital, motional text isn't everything – as Cavan McCarthy's poster reminds us, we, as individuals, with our 'habits and cultures' also have other things to discuss.

¹¹ The phi phenomenon is an optical illusion defined by Max Wertheimer in the Gestalt psychology in 1912, in which the persistence of vision formed a part of the base of the theory of the cinema, applied by Hugo Münsterberg in 1916. This optical illusion is based in the principle that the human eye is capable of perceiving movement from pieces of information, for example, a succession of images. In other words, from a slideshow of a group of frozen images at a certain speed of images per second, we are going to observe constant movement. www.wikipedia.com