

DJUNA BARNES
MIRELLA BENTIVOGLIO
AND ANNALISA ALLOATTI
TOMASO BINGA
MILLY CANAVERO
MINNIE EVANS
ILSE GARNIER
LINDA GAZZERA
GEORGIANA HOUGHTON
MINA LOY
JOYCE MANSOUR
SISTER GERTRUDE MORGAN
EUSAPIA PALLADINO
GISÈLE PRASSINOS
ALICE RAHON
GIOVANNA SANDRI
HÉLÈNE SMITH
MARY ELLEN SOLT
JOSEFA TOLRÀ
UNICA ZÜRN

CORPS ORBITE

The exhibition *Materializzazione del linguaggio*, curated by artist Mirella Bentivoglio as part of the 38th International Art Exhibition in 1978, included eighty artists – some of whom are featured in the current presentation – working primarily in Visual or Concrete Poetry, wherein the way that writing looks is as critical as what it means. Its ground-breaking introduction of an all-female group of artists to an overwhelmingly masculine context (a critic dubbed the display as the Biennale’s “pink ghetto”) envisioned textual art as a means for women artists to rewrite themselves, as well as their place in art history.

Conceived, in part, as a response to Bentivoglio’s exhibition, this display gathers artists and writers spanning the 19th and 20th centuries who employ expanded forms of textual production as tools for emancipation and the practice of difference. Many of the artists included here – Tomaso Binga, Ilse Garnier, and Mary Ellen Solt – used Concrete poems to deconstruct the linearity associated with traditional text and classical narration. Here, however, writing is also understood as a bodily or spiritual practice. The mid-19th century saw a global revival of interest in Spiritualism and mediumistic practices that were largely the domain of female practitioners. In that context, Linda Gazzera performed mediumistic demonstrations with spiritual viscera appearing from thin air; Josefa Tolrà similarly claimed that her drawings were guided by spiritual entities she encountered while in a state of trance. Georgiana Houghton, Eusapia Palladino, and Hélène Smith used their own bodies as tools to communicate with spirits from other planets or dimensions, creating drawings, casts, and paintings that were received as messages from worlds beyond our own.

While these artists were embedded in the world of Spiritualism, Sister Gertrude Morgan and Minnie Evans employed “automatic” processes to make paintings and drawings that convey visions, dreams, and hallucinations, treating artistic creation as the expression of an unconscious and deeply personal language. In the works and writings of Djuna Barnes, Joyce Mansour, and Unica Zürn, meanwhile, imaginary fabulation provides the opportunity to envision alternative worlds and freedom from male-centric language and culture.

In each of these artists’ experiences, writing is reconfigured as a corporeal, visceral, and deeply creative practice with the potential to challenge established structures of power. Their writings embody what the French literary theorist Hélène Cixous described, in her 1975 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” as *écriture féminine* (women’s writing), a style of writing that is peculiar to women and that reacts against the female voice’s suppression within the dominant, masculinist systems of language. As Cixous urges: “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard.”