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Mental Dough
A Dialogue on Poetry and Artistic Practice

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I'd like to tell how I got to know your work (along with the work of Vincent WJ van Gerven Oei) roughly ten years ago. I remember I was planning my first theoretical book, *Relational Syntax* (I was at the very first stages), and I was trying to do research on the relationship between art, geopolitics and photography. In those days I was living in Tokyo and I spent a lot of my time studying. More than a real work of theory, *Relational Syntax*, I think, could be imagined as a book on friendship and generational fellowship. That was what I needed, after all—a dialogue with the creative itinerary of other young people. To see the world through eyes different from mine (literally, since we were talking about photography). I remember that at the time I was fascinated by Francesca Banchelli's videos and also by your writings. I remember your book, *Redefinition*, which I read some extracts of online. I got to know you online and so began reading your work. Those were years when I'd completely and (so I thought) definitively exhausted and abandoned every possible idea of writing. Your texts struck me particularly because there was great visual, almost photographic, tension in them. It was extremely insightful and original, perhaps close to what I'd have liked to produce myself. I remember that many years before, a similar effect had been produced when I read Yang Lian, translated by Claudia Pozzana. In this case, too, I'd been struck by the visual component of the texts. On reading your work, I had the impression that something unusual and compelling was happening, in Italy and not only, and that you yourself were managing, though not without difficulty, to decode something that maybe was in the air but hesitated to materialize. As you practiced it, writing became increasingly "contemporary", opening up explicitly—and technically—to the domain of the visual arts and above all to the tangible experience of international conceptual art. How did you reach this specific reality? Why do you talk about poetry, and writing in general, as *artistic practice*? And why do you talk about it at this precise historical moment?

When you interviewed me for *Relational Syntax*, we decided to publish a series from *Augmented Writing* (www.augmentedwriting.com). The concept of "Language Art" grew out of this project for conceptual and visual writing, as well as my *reading environments* (this is what I call my performance and installation work, preferring this description to the terms "performance" and "installation", for various reasons I think will emerge in the course of this dialogue) for electronically processed voice (http://www.alessandrodefrancesco.net/reading_environments.html). Perhaps it's worth our while to discuss this before we go into the notion of "poetry as artistic practice". I first developed the concept of "Language Art" to describe my artistic practice in relation to language, without referring to the work of other artists, even less to the *Art&Language* movement. But I soon realized that some of the criteria expressed by this concept could also be valid for the work of other artists from the 1960s to our day, and so in 2013 I began my series of research seminars at the European Graduate School, which were in fact called *Language Art*. The idea was to explore with the students the intersection of poets who were investigating the limits of writing, of the page, with the voices of artists who based their work on language, or who had started out as poets, such as Marcel Broodthaers and Vito Acconci. All of this was examined in a particular "theoretical" light, that of the conjunction of language and reality or, better, the concept of language as part of the real and not as a form of representation.

Historically, many strategies have been adopted to highlight what can be seen as belonging, rather than conjunction. These have gone from concrete poetry to asemic writing, from performance art to conceptual art based on formulas, instructions, actions and processes triggered by language. In a certain sense, therefore, the notion of "Language Art" aims to explore the correspondence between artistic practice and poetry under the aegis of language conceived as a single bed, or sea, of anti-rhetorical and, especially, anti-metaphorical practices ranging from poetry to visual and audio arts. Thus, the notion of "Language Art" interprets the well-known formula of Marcel Broodthaers in his *Department of the Eagles*, according to which "poetry and the visual arts show their splendor hand in hand", in terms of a unity, or even – following Fabien Vallos' interpretation – a poetizing of the visual arts as a way of freeing them from the laws of the show, the market and the *doxa*. Basing himself on a notion of *poiesis* in a certain sense opposite to that of *technè*, Vallos shows how poetry and the visual arts are joined by a common signifying etymology, i.e., *poiein* or artistic "making", a making that is also making against, a creation of possibility against representation. This is a direction that also leads away from language, as for example in Jean-Marie Gleize's notion of "post-poetry", where a memory of poetry and language can also underlie operations that no longer have anything to do with language. And maybe this is also true in your work – let me know if you agree, but I think it can be said that in your work there is a continuum between the practice of writing and other practices and media that don't systematically use language,

such as photography and painting. Your awareness of the possibilities of language also imbues your non-linguistic works, so that a photo can be "Language Art" as much as your experimental novel, *Apertura* can. As a free collection of practices and functions, language also underlies your treatment of images and objects, which take on a different value through the poetic work pervading the treatment.

By contrast, the idea of *poetry as artistic practice*, although aware of this historical heritage – and particularly of what is known as "conceptual" writing (I've been deeply influenced in particular by the poetry of "conceptual" artists like Robert Barry, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Bernar Venet, as well as Acconci and Broodthaers, who are very well-known in the art world but unknown to the majority of Italian poets) – aims only at describing my own work as poet and artist in the contemporary context and from a different point of view than "Language Art". Rather than conceive of art "po(i)etically", the idea of *poetry as artistic practice* conceives of (my) poetry as *one* possible artistic practice, and so it maintains the distinction between poetry and the other arts. In *poetry as artistic practice* poetry and the visual arts go "hand in hand" as two different though complementary entities. Poetry remains poetry, though abandoning, we may say, the bed of literature to slip into that of art. Still, the answer to your question "why this notion today, and why should poetry have to become an artistic rather than a literary practice?" reveals a historical denominator common to these notions, which can once more be traced back to the conception of language as portion of reality and machine against representation. In order to explain summarily a passage that is in fact very complex, and if I may allow myself a reference to my own article (*Poetry as Artistic Practice*, in "L'Esprit créateur" 58:3, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018) for further details, I could say that through the notion of "poetry as artistic practice" poetry becomes neither a self-referential post-Mallarmé practice, or a narrative post-Pessoa fiction, or a harbinger of the representation or creation of "images", whether mental or real. Poetry is a practice that founds its strategies on language as a semi-immaterial element: material insofar as it is treated as such, like other materials used for artistic practice; but above all immaterial, both because it joins emotions to ideas and because, treated poetically, it is pushed as far as the inconceivable and





beyond the laws governing the commerce of the representable and imaginable. In “poetry as artistic practice” poetry therefore embodies a paradox that is both cognitive and political: it is a practice that attempts to found its language on spheres that don’t compete either with verbal expression or with representation.

To answer the final part of your question, in my opinion this need is in itself contemporary, for three reasons above all: because poetry continues to abandon its “bourgeois” literary identity, where by “literary” I mean the more or less codified ways through which language becomes a historicized representation of reality and/or an erudite linguistic game; because through poetry I try to join the emotive and the conceptual spheres in a far more

intense way than the “mathematical”, “rigorous”, “geometrical” and at times formalistic part that characterizes the history of 20th century conceptual art; and because, more broadly, this operation allows me to produce a critique of representation (not only literary, but also the common speech of politics, journalism and advertising) and a consequent vitalization of our relationship with the world and with language, which seems really urgent today.

In turn, this approach produces operations whose contemporaneity in the use of media is no other than a reflection of the profound aesthetic, political and cognitive needs underlying *poetry as artistic practice* – as, for example, the production of *reading environments* in virtual reality with motion tracking, where the poetic text is the object of immersive interaction at the same time as it remains impalpable in its digital immateriality. Another example is the digital processing of the spoken voice, which recreates the pre-verbal environmental nature of language; or else, simply, poetry books in which, without resembling concrete or visual poetry at all, the typographical treatment of the text attempts to multiply the planes of reading and the experience of meaning in a way that is, I hope, new. And perhaps another aspect of the intervention of poetry as artistic practice in this moment of history is that technologically advanced means such as motion tracking with occipital sensor are located precisely on the same plane as printing a book. The “magic” fascination for technology is coming to an end, it must come to an end.

I’d very much like to know how you see yourself respect to all this, if you recognize yourself in the idea of “Language Art”, and what you think of the historical consequences of the idea of “poetry as artistic practice”. It’s incredible how much our very different practices can find

significant points in common, above all in our approach to language. But the essential difference lies precisely in the fact that, despite the various media and devices used by me, I remain inside poetry and conceptual art, whereas you use means, techniques and gestures more closely linked to the visual arts as such, like photography, painting and film. How would you explain your position regarding the use of language and your interest in poetry and, simultaneously, what role do non-verbal media play in your work?

Left and Right: A. De Francesco, “Mental Dough”,
Sculpture-performance, 2019,
Photo ©Alessandro De Francesco

For me it’s mainly a matter of *frame*, perimeter and delimitation. I’ve never gone outside the frame. Painting, photography, film and video. Writing. Everything is held inside a frame and not in an installation. Even my *Rimozioni* are visual and conceptual interventions conceived of and directed at a perimeter. In the end, it’s all a discourse about “frame”. I do a lot of things, but I always try to stay inside a frame. My painting is closed in a frame. For about a year now, I’ve adopted an ideal format. I work in 120 × 100 cm squares—or, better, panels, given that I always buy industrial plasterboard supports rather than canvas. This constitutes a frame, a constriction I’ve carried over into painting from photography. Photographic plates are 12×10 cm in size. Multiplying this proportion by 10 you get the 120×100 cm panels I use for painting. The proportions are identical, creating a surface that is 10 times larger than a photographic plate. I don’t go out of the frame in anything I make. Videos? The same: the image is contained within the bright, immaterial perimeter of the screen, which is another frame. Paradoxically, like photography, being a conceptual activity, my writing breathes inside a precisely defined and outlined perimeter. The page becomes a painting. The photographic plate, the negative, which becomes a painting or a plywood panel. Without a frame, I don’t exist, my work doesn’t exist. But what is my work? No doubt it is also the work of writing. But if I use words, I do so to create images, to form images (conceptual, mental, but still images). As I see them, images are condensations of sense, which develop, branch, and pulsate in a non-visual matrix, exactly as words can generate and create simple images.





Gino De Dominicis discredited poets. In his view it is the image that comes first because it's purer and more primordial than the word, and those who work with the "pure" image, as he did, the "true" artists, are using a "higher" means than those who work by composing text. The fundamental idiocy of this sort of reasoning allows us to grasp that, at least in the West, we still don't understand that an image is never something "immediate", as might seem; rather, it is the *political construction of something immediate*. The contemporary image serves chiefly to reveal and isolate the artifice of the immediate, which is always a *political* artifice. One important definition of political poetry has been proposed by Jeroen Mettes. For Mettes, to do "political" poetry doesn't mean banally to talk about news or contemporary history: it's not an external matter that involves newspapers, the latest elections, or some demonstration or other. To do political poetry

means to push a language, the expressive potential of language, to its furthest limits, because language belongs to a *polis*. Language is a frame, a perimeter. I don't want to speak about Mettes now. I'll speak about him later on, when we discuss Carla Lonzi and Rossella Biscotti.

As I was saying, the image isn't something immediate. What is latent in reality is never an intangible or metaphysical given/datum; on the contrary it is clearly political. The *noumenon* is political. We forget this too often. Reality has become simply the oblivion of politics. We also get to the political through dream and schizophrenia. This shows that in the final analysis all perceptive exploration becomes political investigation. There is no *beyond*, no *here-after*, no *depth* that is not political, in the sense that it connects the individual to the one and only reality, that of the *polis*. As a treatise on clinical psychiatry, Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* has little value, to be sincere. But there is one thing they have grasped for sure: schizophrenia, the delirium of the schizophrenic, often contains a political content, it is a social semiotic that disintegrates. The delirium of President Schreber is a political delirium, not only in its contents but also in the urgency of its form. In the days of the Greeks, mad people claimed they'd been kidnapped by Zeus or Athena, who had carried them up to Olympus. Today, they might say they've been kidnapped by Batman or by aliens. Once again we have politics, religion, and culture.

Delirium is not characterized by its absurdity, but by its radicalism. You don't try to dissuade a madman, you tell him he's right. This may seem to be something to take for granted, but it's more complicated than it seems. There are two modes of argumentation, for now, the saturated and the unsaturated. We are used to thinking in terms of *correct*

Left: A. De Francesco, "((": Uitgeverij / punctum books, 2021, front cover of the trilingual edition. Some texts of the book were also used for the piece "Expanded Poetry #1".

argumentation and *erroneous* argumentation. But that's not the way it is, we have to understand not so much whether the contents of an argument or an intellectual proposal are correct or not, but instead whether it is saturated or unsaturated. Meaning, what we have to understand is whether or not the person who is speaking is willing to be challenged about what they say, independently of what they say. Madness is not eccentric thinking; rather, it is immovable thinking. This is connected to art, and to everything art has to say. Politics in our day has a lot in common with delirium, that is, with *not-thought*, something that pretends to be thought but isn't, because it is *saturated*, or immovable. A delirious person isn't so much a poor wretch who thinks they are a tomato. The problem isn't whether you think you are a tomato or not. Rather, the delirium lies in the intensity, the *totalitarian* irreducibility of this thought, which doesn't proceed by hypotheses. If I think I'm a tomato, but am always and in any case willing to question this absurdity, if I see being a tomato as a *hypothesis*, I am no longer a schizophrenic. Even scientific literature today, above all in the more popular versions, seems to have forgotten or ignored proceeding from hypothesis to hypothesis, from theory to theory, and so it dangerously eludes the centrality of doubt, the fulcrum of divergence. It pronounces certainties and proceeds by certainties, whereas it is doubt, hypothesis, the potentially fallible attempt, that create a luminous opening. True truth consists in not adhering to reality, in continually questioning reality. Truth is the capacity of thought to be open to possible, and desirable, refutation. The openness of a discourse is both symptom and synonym of its intellectual validity, and of its plane of truth.

Here lie artistic discourse and the importance of verbal language in art: recovering that doubt, stemming that affirmation, making the way thought acts on the world indirect, creating a reservoir of awareness and indefiniteness between thought and action. Into that doubt, into that divergence, the artistic or literary object is introduced, which is inevitably both *material and immaterial*, as you rightly observe regarding your writing. I remember a verse in your first book, *Lo spostamento degli oggetti*. You speak about "a vanishing point in the dark permanently moving away". And this seems to me one of the best possible definitions of doing art: founding and being founded, through the artistic object, the knowledge-seeking practice that is a prerogative of art and of thought. A vanishing point in the dark, exactly, moving farther and farther away until it is unreachable. I imagine that the implications of that verse are even more complex and profound, but for now I want to concentrate on this possible metaphor. Art, and especially linguistic art, may be the road to follow to give back the great gift of doubt to collective political thought. So, can you see that talking about *Language Art* today becomes more complicated than talking about conceptual art in the Sixties? Yes, let me repeat: today's world and its problems are more complicated than before, and the introduction of text, of poetry, of textual writing in general, in the practice of art is an enormous problem.