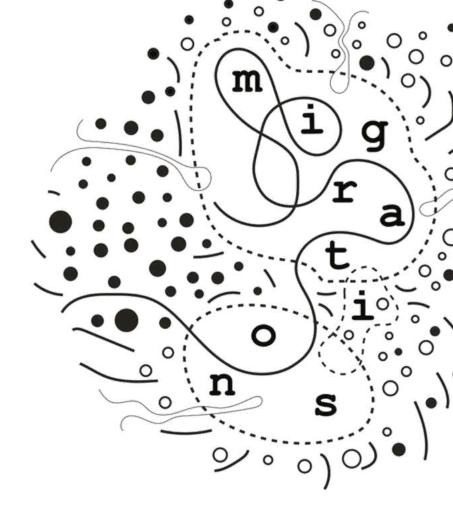


MOTION:MIGRATIONS 35th World Congress



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Concrete Poetry: Exchanges between Brazil and Italy 1950-1980

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze the dense network of relationships between artists of Brazilian and Italian Concrete Poetry in the period of greatest expansion of the movement, between the early 1950s and the end of the 1970s. The idea is to critically evaluate the artistic and theoretical repercussions of the early Brazilian experience on subsequent experiments carried out in Italy.

In 1953, Carlo Belloli — leading exponent of the Second Futurism — visited São Paulo for the first time with the delegation of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, of which he was general secretary. Two years before Belloli's visit to São Paulo, some of his experiments had been exhibited at the Circulo Cultural Paulista (1951), and his work had become known in Brazilian avant-garde circles. In 1952, the brothers Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari, founded the group and journal Noigandres. Four years later, the group organized the National Exposition of Concrete Art of São Paulo, a wide-ranging show that made the Brazilian movement known in the international art scene. Both experiences had a strong and lasting resonance in Italy.

Through the study of archival materials, this paper analyzes the circulation and fortune of Brazilian Concrete Poetry in the Italian verbal-visual landscape, shedding light on a significant episode of the artistic exchange between Brazil and Italy.

KEYWORDS

Brazilian Concrete Poetry; Visual Poetry; Noigandres Group; Post-War Italian Art; Neo-avant-garde.

Brazil and Italy, together with Switzerland and the German-speaking countries, are among the major centres of development and diffusion of Concrete Poetry, a transnational movement that focused, starting in the post-war period, on the intersection between literature and the visual arts, in the wake of Mallarmé's Symbolist experiments, the early Futurist and Dadaist avant-garde, and the poetry of Apollinaire, Pound and Joyce.



Fig. 1. Cover of the first issue of Modulo. Rivista di cultura contemporanea, 1966

A definition that is still valid today for this specific poetic line of research in the verb-visual area, close to but also different from Visual Poetry and Technological Poetry, is the one given by the physicist and philosopher Max Bense in the 1966 issue of the journal "Modulo", directed by Arrigo Lora-Totino (also the ideator of the journal "Antipiugiù", which came out from 1961 to 1966), whose editorial committee included, in addition to Bense, some of the most important art critics such as Umbro Apollonio, Gillo Dorfles and a young Germano Celant. The special issue was the first anthology of Concrete Poetry of international scope to be published in Italy, and was conceived as a response to the anthology on Visual Poetry edited in 1965 by the co-founder of Gruppo 70, Lamberto Pignotti, who had excluded authors ascribable to the Concrete trend in order to underline the distance between the two movements. Bens writes: "We speak of Concrete texts (or of Concrete Poetry) when linguistic elements are used in their triadic verbal, visual and vocal function at the same time and in a semantic as well as in an aesthetic way, when the text (in part or in full) identifies its linguistic world with its linguistic exterior world, or, one might say, when what the words express in reference to the content (with their morphemes or connections) is reflected in the visual adaptation and vocal reproduction."

In the pages of "Modulo" – as in many of Arrigo Lora-Totino's later editorial and exhibition projects – ample space is given to the research developed in Brazil by the poets who gathered in 1952 (so at a very early date) around the journal "Noigandres" and the groups Invenção and Praxis, founded in São Paulo in 1960 and 1961 respectively, which Lora-Totino considered essential references for his work and more generally for the Italian and international Concrete Poetry scene. In the booklet, together with works by Ronaldo Azeredo, Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, Mario Chamie, José Lino Grünewald, José Paulo Paes, Luiz Angelo Pinto, Décio Pignatari and Pedro Xisto, the first Italian translation of the *Plano-piloto para poesia concreta* was published², the manifesto of Brazilian concrete poetry by the de Campos brothers and Décio Pignatari that had appeared almost ten years earlier, in 1958, in the fourth issue of "Noigandres". In "Modulo", Lora-Totino also includes the artist and critic Carlo Belloli among the pioneers of

Concrete Poetry, an exponent of the second futurism, whose Teste poème poème texte (Gomringer Press 1961) is described as the "first experiment in Concrete Poetry carried out by an Italian"³. On this occasion, however, Lora-Totino did not mention either Belloli's previous experiences in the field of visual poetry, which began in 1944 with the panels *Tipogrammi per* Marinetti and Parole per la guerra, or his repeated contacts with Brazil and the possible influence of his work on the Noigandres Group.⁴ It is only since the 1990s that historiography has begun to examine this latter issue, thanks above all to the literary studies of Paola Rolli and Maria Gloria Vinci⁵. The lack of first-hand sources, however, still leaves some questions open: Belloli remains a "mysterious" figure⁶, due to the lack of studies and the difficulty in finding documents relating to his verbal-visual beginnings, starting with the single issue of the journal "Futuristi in armi" (where the panels cited above were published), not present in the Italian catalogue of periodicals, nor in the major collections of Italian Futurism, and whose content is only known thanks to later publications. The reopening of the Belloli collection at the Istituto Internazionale di Studi sul Futurismo in Milan (the International Institute for Futurism Studies), which is currently closed to the public, could perhaps help shed new light on his role and on his relations with the Noigandres Group. However, even the few examples I have just mentioned allow to say that the exchanges between Brazilian and Italian Concrete Poetry were intense from the earliest stages: this text will therefore reflect on the dense network of relations established between the two countries during the movement's greatest expansion, between the early 1950s and the end of the 1970s. I will start by analysing Belloli's experience in Brazil, and then trace an initial map of the circulation of Brazilian Concrete Poetry in Italy, in order to focus on the fortune and effects of this current in the Italian artistic scene of the 1960s and 1970s.

Carlo Belloli in Brazil

In the anthology *Concrete Poetry: A World View* edited by Mary Ellen Solt in 1968, the author acknowledges Belloli's pioneering role in the field of Concrete Poetry. In fact, she stresses how Belloli's reflections, in the

introduction to TESTI-POEMI MURALI published in 1944 (edizioni "Erre", Milan) with an introduction by Marinetti, anticipated the first theories on Concrete Poetry that were to appear in the following decade². Solt, however, speaks of Belloli as an isolated figure and believes that at the beginning of the 1950s neither the Swiss Eugen Gomringer, a leading figure and theorist of concrete poetry, author of the successful collection Konstellationen, Constellations, Constellaciones (1953) nor the members of the Noigandres Group were aware of his work. Lora-Totino had also expressed a similar view two years earlier: in his opinion, the Brazilian group had in fact operated independently, "without entering into contact - at the beginning - with analogous European experiences."⁸ In *Piano pilota*, the de Campos brothers and Pignatari had identified a rich genealogy of predecessors that included, for poetry, Mallarmé, Pound, Joyce, Cummings, Futurism and Dadaism, Apollinaire and the Brazilians Oswald de Andrade and Joao Cabral de Melo Neto; for music, Webern, Boulez, Stockhausen; and for the visual arts, Mondrian, Max Bill and Albers. However, the fact that Belloli is not mentioned in the manifesto is not enough to rule him out as a possible source of the Brazilian group. In more recent times, Solt's position has been questioned by critics who, despite the lack of documents attesting to direct contact between the Brazilian authors and Belloli in the early phases of Concrete Poetry, have nevertheless put forward the hypothesis of a link between the two events. According to the reconstruction proposed by Maria Gloria Vinci, in the mid-1940s Belloli met the future founder of São Paulo Concretism, Waldemar Cordeiro, who was a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome. In 1946 Cordeiro moved to São Paulo, where he met the brothers Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari and where he founded the avant-garde group "Ruptura" in 1952.

In Rome, in the mid-1940s, Belloli was also in contact with Emilio Villa, whose collaboration with Pietro Maria Bardi for the Museo di Arte di San Paolo (MASP) is well known, as is his acquaintance with the Noigandres Group. In the same period in which Villa was in Brazil, Belloli exhibited his works in São Paulo for the first time: according to Vinci, in 1951 some pieces from the series *Corpi di poesia* (still to be identified) were exhibited at the

Círculo Cultural Paulista⁹. The exhibition would therefore precede the foundation of the journal "Noigandres" by one year and Belloli's arrival in Brazil by two. In fact, the artist arrived in São Paulo for the first time in 1953 on the occasion of the fourth centenary of the city's foundation, together with a delegation from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, of which he was secretary general. In São Paulo, at the Club Ipitiranga, Belloli presented a selection of verbo-visual works, dated between 1943 and 1951, belonging to the series *Parole per la guerra, Testi-poemi murali, Tavole visuali, Corpi di poesia,* accompanied by a recital of *Testi-poemi* at the Italian-Brazilian Cultural Institute.



Fig. 2. *Poesia visuale. Omaggio a Carlo Belloli*, exhibition catalogue and brochure, Studio Santandrea, Milan 1977.

Many years later, in 1977, the writer Lúcia Machado de Almeida, on the occasion of the exhibition *Omaggio a Carlo Belloli*, held at the Studio Santandrea in Milan, directed by Gianfranco Bellora, recalled the strong impact the 1953 exhibition had on the Brazilian avant-garde circles: "Carlo Belloli's bodies of poetry, made of Plexiglas and transparent plastic materials, produced in numbered series by an American company, were sold at very high prices for the time by the book dealer and gallery owner Francisco Pignatari, destined for the libraries and salons of Paulist high society, for the fazenderos of southern Minas, but also for the many intellectuals who, like me, saved their money to buy them (...) Belloli's poetry constituted an absolutely new and revolutionary phenomenon in the Brazil of those years."¹⁰

Belloli's relations with Brazil from 1957 onwards were further strengthened by his marriage to the sculptress Mary Vieira, whom he met at the beginning of the decade and who won the prize for Sculpture at the second edition of the São Paulo Biennale in 1953. Lacking further documents, as Matteo D'Ambrosi argues, it is difficult to ascertain a direct influence of Belloli on the developments of the Noigandres Group⁴; however, in my opinion the hypothesis is not only plausible, but also probable, given the close formal affinity between his panels and those of the Brazilian Concretists. In this regard, it is useful to compare two famous works: Belloli's Guerra (1944) and Décio Pignatari's Terra (1956). In both cases, these are works in which the transparency of the poetic text is challenged, the undermining of the referential function of graphic signs goes hand in hand with the use of precise structural solutions. The graphic space is understood as a structural element of the poetic composition and the alphabetical signs are arranged according to precise modules and visual patterns. A very limited number of words are repeated on the page, conceived as a spatial field, following a permutative logic. "Alphabetical letters, words, phrases and fragments of phrases are used in their printed form and for their visual and physical characteristics, aiming to make the poem a real (concrete) object."¹² For Brazilians, concrete poetry is in fact the antithesis of individual

communication, it works against a poetry of subjective and hedonistic expression, the same way Belloli claims that "words are no longer means to communicate analogical images or psychic hiatuses, they become form-content."¹²

The Noigandres Group in Italy

In establishing a link between Belloli and the exponents of Noigandres in the 1950s, as we have seen, we are moving in the field of hypotheses and stylistic comparisons. On the other hand, numerous traces document the circulation of the works of Concrete Poetry in Italy starting from the following decade. The theoretical and artistic activity of the members of Noigandres had a significant and long-lasting resonance in Italy, culminating in 1991 with the exhibition *Poesia visiva in Brasile*,¹⁴ curated by Lenora de Barros and Paola Mattoli at the Archivio di Nuova Scrittura in Milan, founded in 1988 by Ugo Carrega and the collector Paolo Della Grazia (now in part kept at the MART in Rovereto, in part at the Museion in Bolzano)¹⁵.

Thanks to artists such as Carrega himself, Adriano Spatola, Mirella Bentivoglio, Stelio Maria Martini, as well as the already mentioned Arrigo Lora-Totino, Brazilian Concrete Poetry circulated widely in anthologies, official journals, *esoeditoria* publications and exhibitions of Visual and Concrete Poetry throughout Italy. An unpublished letter written by Haroldo de Campos in response to Stelio Maria Martini, dated 2 December 1965, documents the first relations between the Noigandres Group and the Italian artists connected to "Linea Sud", an avant-garde journal directed by Luca (Luigi Castellano), which appeared in Naples in 1963 taking over from the previous "Documento Sud" (1959-1961). In the letter de Campos accepts the invitation to collaborate with "Linea Sud", of which he had already received a copy in Rome from Mario Diacono, at that time very close both to Martini – the two had been co-directors of the journal "Quaderno" (January-May 1962) – and to Villa, with whom he had founded "Ex" (1963-1968). De Campos writes: I had our anthology *Noigandres / Dal verso alla poesia concreta* sent to you a week ago (by sea; unfortunately the postal air service is extremely expensive here...), which includes our *piano-pilota per la poesia concreta* (pilot plan for concrete poetry). Décio Pignatari will soon send you issue number 4 of our journal 'Invenzione'. You will be able to take what you want in the anthology and/or in the journal: most of the texts are unpublished in Italy. This is in answer to your invitation to collaborate with 'Linea Sud'. I believe that you may be interested in our *Teoria della Poesia Concreta* (*1950/1960. Testi critici e manifesti*), which appeared this year.¹⁶

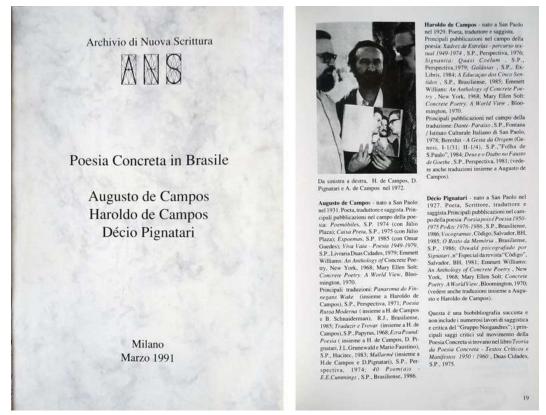


Fig. 3. *Poesia visiva in Brasile*, exhibition catalogue, Archivio di Nuova Scrittura, Milan 1991.

Although the contacts between the Brazilian group and "Linea Sud" continued over time – as documented by another unpublished letter in the

Mart archives, sent by Pignatari to Martini, dated 24 January 1967¹² – the journal ceased publication in April 1967 without having hosted either the works or the posters of the "Noigandres".



Fig. 4. *Poesia Concreta. Indirizzi concreti, visuali, fonetici*, exhibition catalogue, The Venice Biennale 1969

The exchange with the already mentioned Lora-Totino was more productive: one year after the release of the Concrete Poetry anthology in "Modulo" (where the Piano pilota had appeared) and after the publication of an article in "Graphicus" (December 1966),¹⁸ accompanied by the image *Luxo-Lixo* by Augusto de Campos, Lora-Totino introduced the "International Exhibition of Concrete Poetry and Electronic Music" at the Salone Audizioni of the Teatro Donizetti in Bergamo¹⁹, together with Enore Zaffiri (a musician with whom he had founded The Aesthetic Information Studio in Turin), Belloli, Pietro Grossi and Lara Vinca-Masini. The exhibition, organised by Studio 2B, inaugurated in April of that year by two active supporters of Programmed and Kinetic Art, Lorenzo Boggi and Elio Cenci, included a great number of Brazilian artists: in the section dedicated to Concrete Poetry, in addition to the de Campos brothers and Pignatari, there were also José Lino Grünewald, Luiz Angelo Pinto, Pedro Xisto, Ronaldo Azeredo and Edgard Braga. The same group, with the exception of Pinto and Xisto, was presented in September 1969 by Lora-Totino in the exhibition Poesia Concreta. Indirizzi concreti, visuali, fonetici,²⁰ co-curated with Dietrich Mahlow at Ca' Giustinian/Sala delle Colonne as part of the Venice Biennale; an exhibition that, due to the prestige of its venue and its international scope, can be considered the most significant on Concrete Poetry held in Italy during the decade.

The similarities between Lora-Totino's works and those of the Brazilian Concrete Poets are many: in the modular structure of the "Verbotetture" – a neologism coined by the artist in 1973 – it is possible to trace the influence of the constructivist tendency present in Brazilian Concrete Poetry. The use of coloured letters in his *Cromofonemi* also follows in the footsteps of Augusto de Campos with his *Poetamenos (Poesie in tono minore*, 1953), which, however, in Lora-Totino's work, achieves more radical optical-perceptual results, bordering on Optical and Kinetic Art. From a stylistic point of view the connection with Adriana Spatola is not as close, although the latter was, together with Lora-Totino, among the most active promoters of exchanges with Brazilian poets: in the spring-summer of 1967, the first issue of "Malebolge" – the journal founded in 1964 together with Corrado Costa and Giorgio Celli, published by Scheiwiller with a graphic

design by Giovanni Anceschi – hosted the text *Poesia concreta brasiliana* by Haroldo de Campos, which opened with the quotation from Dante "esto visibile parlare, novello a noi perché qui non si trova" (from the 10th Canto of the Purgatory), and continued with a detailed explanation of the origins and the aims of the movement²¹.



Fig. 5. Augusto de Campos, *Profilograma 1, Pound/Maiakovski*, 1966, work belonged to Mirella Bentivoglio, courtesy Archivio Lettera_E.

In the same period, the Brazilian group was invited to the exhibition *Segni nello spazio*,²² co-curated by Spatola, at the Castello di San Giusto in Trieste (8/31 July 1967), where almost everyone of the Brazilian group was once again present (Braga; the de Campos brothers; Grünewald; Pignatari; Pinto; Xisto). On this occasion, Augusto de Campos and Pignatari exhibited, respectively, the aforementioned *Lixo-Luxo* (1966, *Spazzatura-lusso*) and *Cristo é a solução* (Christ is the Solution), both openly political and anti-capitalist, where the iconic quality of the image, of Pop derivation, has a greater weight than in the past, and the boundaries with non-concrete visual poetry become more blurred. In my opinion, these are the experiences that an Italian artist such as Mirella Bentivoglio looked at most closely. Her ties with Brazil were strong starting from the early 1970s, when she exhibited in a solo room at the 12th São Paulo Biennial in 1973.

The same edition of the exhibition featured the founder of the "Poema processo" group Neide Dias de Sá, who a few years later would be invited by the exhibition "Materializzazione Bentivoglio to del linguaggio" (Materialization of Language) at the 1978 Venice Biennale. The exhibition brought together for the first time in the Biennale's spaces more than eighty women artists, including Anesia Pacheco E Chavez, then active in Brazil. Some of the works that Bentivoglio exhibited at the 12th São Paulo Biennial, including Successo, dated 1968, or works such as La firma (1973), reveal the influence of the works by de Campos and Pignatari we have just mentioned. But it is perhaps with the Cuore della consumatrice ubbidiente that the link with Pignatari's earlier Beba Coca-Cola becomes more evident and highlights a similar ideological stance towards American consumerism. Bentivoglio acknowledged this influence on more than one occasion; in a self-presentation in 1996 she wrote: "I was among the followers of Concrete Poetry, a movement born in Brazil, which promoted a poetic analysis of language not only on the basis of the sound of the word but also on the basis of its form."²³ Even more explicit is her introduction to the exhibition Poesia concreta. Bentivoglio Lora-Totino Sandri Spatola, held in 1977 at the Santandrea Studio in Milan, which in my opinion clearly expresses the importance of the Brazilian experience for Italian Concrete poets: "The

Rubicon of institutional literariness was crossed with the first manifesto of the founders of Concretism; or – to use a specific expression of theirs – with their pilot plan. They were Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, Décio Pignatari and the group gravitating around the Brazilian journal 'Noigandres'. In São Paulo, more than two decades ago: the two decades of the new poetry."²⁴

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Endnotes

I. Max Bense, "Stili sperimentali", *Modulo, rivista di cultura contemporanea*, no. 1 (1966): 8. 2. Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari, "Piano Pilota per la poesia concreta di A. de Campos, D. Pignatari, H. de Campos", *Modulo, rivista di cultura contemporanea*, no. 1 (1966): 103-104.

3. Arrigo Lora-Totino, "Ragioni di una scelta per un'antologia della poesia concreta", *Modulo, rivista di cultura contemporanea*, no. 1 (1966): 23.

4. Only many years later Arrigo Lora-Totino makes a connection between Belloli's experience and that of the Noigandres Group. He reports the passage in the essay *Poesia concreta*, in Claudio Parmiggiani, *Alfabeto in sogno: dal carme figurato alla poesia concreta* (Milan: Mazzotta, 2002), 406.

5. Gloria Maria Vinci, "Carlo Belloli in Brasile: un geniale precursore della poesia concreta", *Mutatis Mutandis*, no.1 (2016): 53-67; Paola Rolli, "Anglo-American concrete and visual poetry", (Master diss., I.U.LM., Milan, 1994).

6. Teresa Spignoli, *La parola si fa spazio. Poesia visiva e poesia concreta* (Bologna: Patron Editore, 2020), 67.

7. Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete Poetry: A world view*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 5.

8. Arrigo Lora-Totino, "Ragioni di una scelta", 22.

9. Maria Gloria Vinci, "Carlo Belloli in Brasile", 53-67.

Io. Lúcia Machado de Almeida, "Attualità di Carlo Belloli precursore della poesia visuale e concreta," in *Poesia visuale. Omaggio a Carlo Belloli* (Milan: Studio Santandrea, 1977), 2.
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12. Sauro Fabi, *L'avanguardia per tutti: concretismo e poesia visiva tra Russia Europa e Brasile* (Macerata: EUM – Edizioni Università Macerata, 2008), 23.

13. Carlo Belloli, "Poesia audiovisuale," in *Poesia visiva. Storia e teoria*, ed. Pino Masnata (Rome: Bulzoni, 1984), 204.

14. "Poesia Concreta in Brasile" exhibition (21st March to 21st June, 1991) Archivio di Nuova Scrittura, Milan, edited by Leonora de Barros and Paula Mattioli. On the occasion of the exhibition Augusto de Campos gave the "Non-conferenza" (Unconference) on Brazilian concrete poetry and its relationship with Italy The reading was repeated in Rome, at Palazzo Doria Pamphili, on the 25th November of the same year. It was introduced by Elio Pagliarani on the occasion of the second stage of the exhibition. The audio is a digitization of the audiocassette (Fuji ER Type I 60' model) containing the recording of the "Non-conferenza" preserved in the Archivio di Nuova Scrittura collection at the Archivio del '900 of the Mart in Rovereto,

https://archive.org/details/augusto-de-campos-non-conferenza-milano-archivio-di-nuova-scri ttura-26-marzo-1991-audio [accessed September 18th 2021].

15. On the history of the Archivio di Nuova Scrittura see: Daniela Ferrari, *Archivio di nuova scrittura Paolo Della Grazia: storia di una collezione / Geschichte einer Sammlung* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana, 2012).

16. Unpublished letter sent by Haroldo de Campos to Stelio Maria Martini, dated 2 December 1965, Fondo Stelio Maria Martini, Archivio del '900, MART. The letter is written in Italian: "Le ho fatto spedire ormai da una settimana (per via marittima; purtroppo il servizio aereo postale è eccessivamente caro da noi...) la nostra antologia *Noigandres / Dal verso alla poesia concreta*, con il nostro *piano-pilota per la poesia concreta*, a corredo. Décio Pignatari le manderà, fra poco, il numero 4 della nostra rivista *Invenzione*. Lei potrà prendere ciò che voglia (sic) nell'antologia ed/o nella rivista: ci sono dei testi nella maggioranza inediti in Italia. Questo per ciò che riguarda il suo invito a collaborare con Linea-Sud. Credo che la (sic) potrà forse interessare la nostra *Teoria della Poesia Concreta* (*1950/1960. Testi critici e manifesti*), apparsa appunto quest'anno".

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21. Haroldo de Campos, "Poesia concreta brasiliana (Gruppo Noigandres)", in *Malebolge*, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1967): 80-82.

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23. Mirella Bentivoglio, "Percorso," in *Mirella Bentivoglio: dalla parola al simbolo* (Rome: Edizioni De Luca, 1996), 49.

24. Mirella Bentivoglio, in *Poesia concreta. Bentivoglio Lora-Totino Sandri Spatola* (Milan: Santandrea Studio, Milan, 1977).