

MATERIAL LANGUAGE, SITUATED VISION

Mirella Bentivoglio as a Methodological Model for Visual Research

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Abstract. This article examines the verbo-visual practice of Mirella Bentivoglio (1922–2017) as a methodological model for research–creation and visual inquiry. Situating her work within contemporary visual methodologies, multimodal research, and interpretative ethics, the study argues that Bentivoglio’s artistic strategies function not merely as aesthetic experiments but as structured modes of knowledge production. Through the material interrogation of language, spatial organisation, fragmentation, and silence, her works mobilise verbo-visual forms as research devices capable of investigating the conditions of meaning, perception, and ideological construction.

Adopting a qualitative and interpretative framework grounded in visual analysis and research–creation, the article approaches Bentivoglio’s artworks as epistemic objects that actively participate in the production of knowledge. Close readings of *Storia del monumento* (1968), *Gabbia (HO)* (1966–70), and *La scrittura del silenzio*

(1975) demonstrate how semantic displacement, spatial constraint, and absence operate as methodological tools that redistribute interpretative agency and foreground the viewer’s role as co-producer of meaning. These works expose the relational and contingent nature of interpretation while challenging regimes of visual authority and linguistic stability.

By positioning Bentivoglio’s practice in dialogue with contemporary debates on multimodality, participation, and ethical reflexivity, the article proposes verbo-visual creation as a transferable research framework. It ultimately argues that creative practice can function as a rigorous epistemic process, offering critical methodological insights for visual research concerned with embodiment, relationality, and the ethics of meaning-making.

Keywords: Mirella Bentivoglio, verbo-visual poetry, visual research, research–creation, multimodality, interpretative ethics.

1. Introduction

The intersection of artistic practice and research has become increasingly significant in contemporary scholarship, particularly within the domains of visual culture, verbo-visual poetry, and multimodal inquiry. This article examines the work of Mirella Bentivoglio (1922–2017), whose verbo-visual strategies exemplify the capacity of artistic creation to function as a methodologically rigorous site of knowledge production. Rather than treating language and visual form as merely expressive or aesthetic resources, Bentivoglio mobilises them as investigative devices capable of interrogating the structures of meaning, perception, and ideology. Her work demonstrates how the processes of fragmentation, spatialisation, and silence can be conceptualised as research instruments, generating epistemic insight through experiential, interpretative, and reflexive engagement.

Mirella Bentivoglio worked as a poet, artist and curator within the field of verbo-visual artistic research. Across her career, she sustained a dedicated commitment to advancing artistic practices in which language and image were interwoven, with particular attention to women's creative agency in this domain. She maintained an enduring network of contacts with artists, critics, art historians and writers, both in Italy and abroad, and her significance rests not only on her own artistic output but equally on her substantial activity as a curator. Bentivoglio's methodological significance is inseparable from her position within the Italian neo-avant-garde. She was associated with the verbo-visual current that crystallised around Florence's Gruppo 70 – founded by Eugenio Miccini and Lamberto Pignotti in 1963 – and worked in close proximity to figures such as Adriano Spatola, with whom poesia visiva shared a commitment to treating the word as a material, manipulable sign rather than a transparent linguistic unit. Her practice diverged from this milieu, however, in its sustained institutional commitment to women's verbo-visual production: in 1978 she curated *Materalizzazione del linguaggio* at the 38th Venice Biennale, presenting verbo-visual work by eighty women artists and marking one of the earliest institutional recognitions of feminist art practice within that context. It is worth noting that Bentivoglio herself maintained a

degree of critical distance from feminism as a political position, framing her curatorial project instead around disciplined and self-aware research into language – a stance that arguably reinforces, rather than undermines, the methodological argument advanced here: her engagement with gender operates through the structure and institutional framing of practice itself, rather than through programmatic statement. This positioning – simultaneously inside and at a critical remove from the dominant currents of Italian visual poetry – situates Bentivoglio's individual verbo-visual works, including those examined below, within a broader historical project of reclaiming language as a site of feminist and methodological intervention.

To clarify the research design underpinning this study, the article adopts a qualitative, interpretative approach structured around a focused corpus of selected works by Mirella Bentivoglio. The analysis centres on *Storia del monumento* (1968), *Gabbia (HO)* (1966–70), and *La scrittura del silenzio* (1975), chosen as case studies for their distinct yet complementary articulation of key verbo-visual strategies – namely fragmentation, spatial constraint, and silence. These three works were selected, out of Bentivoglio's wider verbo-visual oeuvre, on the basis of two main criteria. First, chronological range: spanning 1966 to 1975, they trace a trajectory across roughly a decade of her practice, allowing the analysis to register development as well as consistency in her methodological approach. Second, operational diversity: each work isolates a distinct verbo-visual procedure – semantic fragmentation of an existing word in *Storia del monumento*, spatial and synaesthetic constraint through letter-isolation in *Gabbia (HO)*, and the total withdrawal of legible text in *La scrittura del silenzio* – together forming a graduated sequence from decomposition, through constraint, to erasure, which allows the article to test its methodological framework against the full range of Bentivoglio's strategies rather than a single recurring device. These works are not treated as illustrative examples but as analytically generative sites through which broader methodological claims can be examined. The study employs close visual analysis informed by visual semiotics, multimodal analysis, and research–creation frameworks, attending to the material, spatial, and perceptual dimensions of each artefact. The analytical

procedure proceeds through a systematic examination of (1) the material and linguistic configuration of the work, (2) its spatial and compositional organisation, (3) the perceptual and interpretative dynamics it activates, and (4) the forms of epistemic and ethical engagement it produces. This structured yet reflexive approach allows the study to articulate how Bentivoglio's verbo-visual practice operates not only as an object of analysis but as a methodological model, while maintaining critical awareness of the situated and interpretative nature of the analytical process itself. Table 1 summarises how each of the three works engages these four analytical steps, making explicit the passage between theoretical framework, analysed work, and methodological contribution.

It should be stressed that these four steps are proposed as an analytical apparatus for organising the present interpretation, rather than as a description of how any viewer perceptually or cognitively encounters Bentivoglio's work in real time. The works examined below are explicitly synaesthetic and embodied in their address, resisting linear or sequential apprehension; the four-step structure is the researcher's tool for rendering that resistance legible and discussable, not a claim that the artistic encounter itself unfolds in four discrete stages. This distinction is not incidental to the article's argument but central to it: the friction between a structured analytical method and a non-linear aesthetic experience is itself a methodologically productive site, revealing something of what is gained, and what is necessarily lost, when embodied artistic practice is translated into the rigorous, citable language research conventionally demands.

Drawing on scholarship in visual methodologies, sensory ethnography, and multimodal research (Pink, 2009; Rose, 2016; Warr et al., 2016), this study situates Bentivoglio's practice within a broader methodological framework. It argues that her verbo-visual strategies exemplify a mode of inquiry in which the material, spatial, and perceptual dimensions of language are systematically mobilised as analytical tools, rather than treated as secondary or illustrative features. In Bentivoglio's work, meaning is shown to be contingent, relational, and procedurally generated, emerging through acts of reading, viewing, and interpretation that implicate the observer as an active participant. This emphasis on interpretative labour foregrounds the ethical

responsibilities inherent in meaning-making, drawing attention to questions of agency, visibility, and power embedded in visual and linguistic forms. By foregrounding the operational potential of language, form, and silence, Bentivoglio anticipates contemporary research approaches that privilege participatory engagement, reflexivity, and multimodal epistemologies, positioning creative practice as a site where knowledge is produced through embodied, situated, and critically attentive processes.

The article proceeds in five sections. The first establishes the methodological significance of Bentivoglio's verbo-visual strategies, articulating how they function as research devices within an expanded notion of knowledge production. The second section focuses on Bentivoglio's methodology as a relational and participatory mode of inquiry, in which verbo-visual forms actively position the observer as a co-producer of meaning. The third section provides close readings of selected works, namely *Storia del monumento, Gabbia (HO)*, and *La scrittura del silenzio*, demonstrating how fragmentation, spatial constraint, and silence operate as methodological tools. The fourth section discusses the implications of these close readings, situating Bentivoglio's verbo-visual practice within contemporary visual research methodologies and examining its relevance to current debates on reflexivity, multimodality, participatory meaning-making, and ethical engagement in visually mediated contexts. The concluding section consolidates the article's central argument, positioning Bentivoglio's verbo-visual practice as a historically grounded yet methodologically forward-looking model for visual research, and outlines directions for future inquiry building on the analytical framework proposed here.

Through this investigation, the article positions Bentivoglio not only as a seminal figure in the history of verbo-visual art but also as a practitioner whose strategies provide a compelling and transferable model for the integration of artistic practice and methodologically informed research. Her work demonstrates how creative processes can operate as structured forms of inquiry, capable of generating knowledge through experimentation, interpretation, and reflexive engagement. In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing debates on the epistemic potential of creative practice,

foregrounding the ways in which artistic methods can function as legitimate research tools. At the same time, it engages critically with questions of ethical responsibility embedded in visual and sensory methodologies, emphasising the need for attentiveness to power, agency, and interpretation in the production and circulation of meaning.

2. Methodological Framework: Visual Analysis, Research-Creation and Interpretative Ethics

This article adopts a qualitative and interpretative methodological framework grounded in visual methodologies and research-creation, combining close visual analysis with a reflexive consideration of the conditions under which visual knowledge is produced and interpreted. Rather than treating images as transparent data or illustrative evidence, the analysis approaches Bentivoglio's visual artefacts as epistemic objects that actively participate in the research process. This position aligns with scholarship that emphasises the situated, mediated and relational nature of visual data, and that foregrounds reflexivity as a central methodological requirement in visual research (Pink, 2009; Rose, 2016).

Visual analysis in this context is understood not as a neutral decoding of formal elements, but as a situated practice shaped by the researcher's positionality, theoretical orientation and interpretative choices. Images are embedded within institutional, discursive and technological frameworks that condition their production and reception, making interpretation a negotiated process rather than a linear transmission of meaning. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model provides a productive lens for conceptualising this dynamic, insofar as it emphasises the structural conditions of meaning-making while allowing for multiple, negotiated or oppositional readings (Hall, 1980). Bentivoglio's work explicitly activates this space of negotiation, staging visual and linguistic elements that resist dominant or preferred readings and invite interpretative plurality.

Research-creation provides a crucial methodological framework for this study, as it conceptualises artistic practice as a site of knowledge production rather than

expressive output. Borgdorff's formulation of artistic research as "thinking in and through practice" (Borgdorff, 2012) allows Bentivoglio's verbo-visual strategies to be understood as experimental procedures that generate knowledge through process, iteration and material engagement. Seriality, constraint and semantic displacement function in her work as methodological operations that expose the instability of meaning and the constructed nature of visual authority.

Interpretative ethics constitute a central concern within this methodological approach. Visual methodologies have increasingly drawn attention to the ethical dimensions of interpretation, particularly the power relations embedded in acts of looking, categorising and explaining visual material (Buckingham, 2009; Pink, 2009). In Bentivoglio's case, ethical reflection does not primarily concern the representation of subjects, but the regulation of meaning itself. Her strategic deployment of ambiguity, fragmentation and reflexivity resists interpretative closure and challenges the researcher's impulse to stabilise or resolve meaning.

Bentivoglio's work disrupts dominant structures of visual authority by redistributing interpretative agency and foregrounding the viewer's embodied and cognitive labour. From a methodological perspective, this necessitates an ethical mode of analysis attentive to uncertainty, opacity and multiplicity, acknowledging the partial, contingent and negotiated character of visual knowledge.

By integrating visual analysis, research-creation and theories of encoding and decoding, this methodological framework enables a reading of Bentivoglio's practice that is both analytically rigorous and ethically attuned. It positions the article itself as a reflexive contribution to visual research, concerned not only with what images mean, but with how meaning is produced, contested and shared within mediated research contexts.

3. Bentivoglio's Verbo-Visual Strategies as Research Devices

Mirella Bentivoglio's verbo-visual practice can be understood as a set of research devices, methodological tools that generate knowledge through the manipulation of language, space, and perception. Her approach

ch challenges conventional hierarchies of knowledge production by treating artistic creation not merely as expressive or aesthetic work, but as a process of inquiry in which letters, words, and forms become operative elements of investigation. In this sense, verbo-visual strategies function as instruments for exploring semantic structures, perceptual processes, and cultural ideologies, demonstrating the productive potential of creative practice as research (Pink, 2009; Rose, 2016).

One of Bentivoglio's central methodological strategies is the material interrogation of language. Letters and words are approached as objects with physical, spatial, and symbolic properties, rather than as transparent conveyors of meaning. This allows for the investigation of how language shapes understanding, mediates memory, and participates in ideological processes. From a research perspective, such an approach exemplifies a material-semiotic methodology, in which textual elements are treated as nodes within larger interpretative systems. By foregrounding the materiality of language, Bentivoglio demonstrates how epistemic interventions can be enacted through the manipulation of textual form, layout, and structure (Bohn, 2011).

Another key strategy is the use of spatialisation and visual arrangement as a research tool. In verbo-visual practice, the placement, repetition, and relational organisation of letters and words produce conditions for meaning-making that are contingent on perception and interpretation. These configurations can be analysed as experimental environments: spatial relationships between elements generate hypotheses about how meaning is perceived, how attention is guided, and how semiotic systems operate under constraint. From a methodological standpoint, spatialisation enables a form of embedded experimentation, where the material properties of language themselves become the medium for inquiry (Freitas, 2012).

Bentivoglio's work also exemplifies the productive use of absence and silence as a research device. The strategic withholding of legible text or the creation of visual gaps enables researchers to investigate how absence influences interpretation, engagement, and perceptual awareness. Silence, in this framework, is treated as an epistemic condition: it produces data about the observer's response, the activation of infe-

rential processes, and the cognitive negotiation of incomplete information. This methodological principle resonates with approaches in sensory ethnography and visual research, which recognise the epistemic value of unarticulated, non-discursive, or perceptually mediated experience (Pink, 2009; Warr et al., 2016).

A further dimension of Bentivoglio's research methodology is the relationality and participatory structuring of meaning. By constructing forms that require active engagement, her verbo-visual strategies embed the observer as a co-investigator, transforming interpretation into a generative, reflexive process. This aligns with contemporary perspectives on visual research, participatory methods, and ethical reflexivity, in which knowledge is not extracted passively but co-produced through the encounter between material artefacts, perception, and interpretative labour (Rose, 2016). Methodologically, this situates Bentivoglio's practice within an expanded notion of research in which agency, engagement, and epistemic responsibility are integral to knowledge production.

Finally, Bentivoglio's strategies emphasise experimentation and iterative exploration. By manipulating linguistic, visual, and spatial elements, her approach encourages hypothesis testing, perceptual experimentation, and critical reflection on interpretative processes. Verbo-visual creation thus functions as a laboratory for investigation, in which the dynamics of meaning, perception, and materiality can be explored in a controlled yet generative manner. The methodological significance of such an approach lies in its capacity to demonstrate how creative practice itself can be structured to produce epistemic insights, bridging the domains of artistic experimentation and rigorous inquiry.

In sum, Bentivoglio's verbo-visual strategies exemplify a distinctive approach to research in which language, form, and perception are simultaneously objects of study and instruments of exploration. Her work provides a model for understanding creative practice as a methodological enterprise, offering tools for investigating material-semiotic relations, perceptual engagement, and interpretative processes. By foregrounding the operational potential of verbo-visual strategies, this framework positions artistic creation as an ethically and epistemically rigorous mode of inquiry.

4. Close Analysis of Key Works by Mirella Bentivoglio

To illustrate concretely how Mirella Bentivoglio's verbo-visual practice operates as a methodological intervention, this section offers close readings of selected works from her extensive oeuvre. Approaching these works not simply as artistic objects but as epistemic artefacts – sites of meaning-making and inquiry – allows us to articulate the procedural, symbolic, and relational logics that underpin her practice. The following analyses focus on *Storia del monumento* (1968), *Gabbia (HO)* (1966–70), *La scrittura del silenzio* (1975). Each of these works exemplifies her strategic engagement with language, image, object and viewer — a practice that expands beyond the aesthetic into the methodological.

The reading that follows traces Bentivoglio's procedure across all four analytical steps outlined above, though not in strict sequence. It begins with the material and linguistic configuration of the work, tracing how the decomposition of a single word generates semantic residue, before turning to its spatial and typographic organisation, in which the visual prominence of a single letter carries historically specific ideological weight. The epistemic and ethical implications of this procedure are addressed throughout rather than reserved for a final stage, before a closing moment considers the perceptual and interpretative dynamics activated in the encounter with the work itself, and the discussion draws these threads together.

The portfolio *Storia del monumento* (1968), comprising six pages, was produced by Bentivoglio in collaboration with Annalisa Alloatti. The work was issued as a typographic print edition in 1968 by De Luca, Rome, based on a prototype executed using transfer lettering.¹

In *Storia del monumento* (1968), Bentivoglio's procedure of *scomposizione* operates not merely at a formal level but as a historically and politically charged act. The fragmentation of the word *monumento*

generates a series of semantic residues that open up divergent interpretative trajectories. Among these, the emergence of the term *nume* is particularly significant. While its full resonance presupposes familiarity with pagan cosmology – where *nume* designates a divine or tutelary presence – within Italian usage the word also retains a looser, evaluative meaning, referring to an individual endowed with exceptional qualities or authority. In this sense, *nume* subtly reintroduces the logic of veneration that underpins monumental culture, while simultaneously exposing its arbitrariness: the monument is revealed not as a neutral historical marker but as an act of elevation, contingent upon ideological and cultural frameworks that determine who is deemed worthy of commemoration.

Equally telling is the generation of the word *muto* – silent – which introduces a critical counterpoint to the monument's ostensible function as a bearer of collective memory. Rather than articulating or preserving history, the monument is here refigured as a device of silencing, one that neutralises conflict and conceals forms of violence, exclusion, or ideological manipulation beneath the rhetoric of permanence, stability, and reverence. Bentivoglio's semantic dislocation exposes how monumental forms often operate through omission, transforming historical complexity into a fixed and univocal narrative. This semantic slippage foregrounds the paradox inherent in monumentalisation itself: the monument claims to make history visible and enduring, yet it frequently does so by suppressing alternative narratives, marginalised voices, and contested memories. In isolating *muto* from *monumento*, Bentivoglio draws attention to the ways in which silence is not an absence but a produced condition, actively sustained through cultural and political mechanisms of remembrance. Her intervention thus reframes the monument not as a transparent site of memory, but as a discursive structure whose authority depends precisely on what it renders inaudible or invisible.

The visual and typographic prominence of the letter *M* further intensifies this critique. Rendered as the dominant graphic element, the *M* inevitably evokes its historical instrumentalisation under Italian Fascism, where it functioned as a metonymic sign for Mussolini himself, often isolated and capitalised in monumental inscriptions, architecture, and propaganda. Bentivoglio's insis-

¹ The work can be consulted online via the Bentivoglio Archive's official website: <https://mirellabentivoglio.it/mirella-bentivoglio-alla-59a-biennale-di-venezias/> (last accessed 24 June 2026).

tence on the *M* thus activates a dense field of historical associations, transforming a typographic choice into a critical gesture. The decomposition of *monumento* can therefore be read as a symbolic dismantling of fascist monumental logic, an operation that disintegrates not only the word but the ideological structure it sustains.

Encountering *Storia del monumento* is itself a temporal and perceptual event. The viewer first registers the familiar shape of *monumento* before its fragments destabilise that recognition, producing a brief cognitive lag in which the word must be re-read rather than simply read. This hesitation is not incidental: it reproduces, at the level of perception, the work's broader claim that monumental meaning is never immediately given but must be actively assembled, and can therefore just as easily be taken apart.

Through this combined process of linguistic, visual and perceptual disaggregation, *Storia del monumento* performs what might be described as a counter-monumental practice. The monument is not replaced by another stable form but dissolved into a constellation of fragments whose meanings remain unstable and open to interpretation. In doing so, Bentivoglio reframes monumental memory as a site of contestation rather than consensus, proposing fragmentation, ambiguity and semantic excess as strategies for resisting authoritarian fixity. The work thus exemplifies her broader verbo-visual method, in which the material manipulation of language becomes a tool for historical critique and epistemic reorientation.

Unlike the more sequential treatment of *Storia del monumento*, the reading that follows treats the four analytical steps as deeply interwoven. It opens with the material and linguistic configuration of the work – the letters H and O as autonomous graphic entities – but moves almost immediately into the perceptual and interpretative dynamics this configuration produces, since the letter H's silence is, in this work, simultaneously a linguistic fact and a sensory experience. The spatial and compositional organisation of the cage is then addressed directly, itself fused with the same perceptual register. The discussion closes by isolating the epistemic and ethical implications of the work as a distinct moment, in which the viewer is positioned not merely to register constraint but to take an interpretative stance against it.

In *Gabbia (HO)* (1966, silkscreen on cardboard, 15x11cm),² Bentivoglio stages a rigorous exploration of linguistic minimalism, spatial constraint and perceptual dissonance through the exclusive use of the letters H and O. The title itself – *gabbia*, or cage – establishes a conceptual framework of containment that is not merely represented but enacted through the visual and sensory logic of the work. The letters are not assembled into a readable word but treated as autonomous graphic entities whose meaning emerges through spatial organisation, repetition and restriction. Central to this configuration is the letter H, which in Italian is a silent sign, devoid of phonetic value. Its muteness introduces a crucial synaesthetic tension: H structures language without producing sound, functioning as a perceptual absence that nevertheless exerts semantic control. In *Gabbia (HO)*, this silence becomes operative. The subject is enclosed within a cage that is acoustically void yet visually insistent, generating a form of sensory disjunction in which what is seen does not correspond to what can be heard. The cage, therefore, is experienced not only visually but perceptually, as a condition of enforced silence.

At the same time, the H assumes a decisive graphic role. Typographically rigid and angular, it functions as a structural element that visually constructs the cage itself. In this sense, Bentivoglio exploits the synaesthetic gap between sound and sight: the letter that produces no sound becomes the very mechanism of visual confinement. The result is a double enclosure — silent at the level of phonetics, yet materially present at the level of form. Language thus operates simultaneously across sensory registers, revealing how constraint can be enacted through absence as much as through presence. The letter O, by contrast, introduces a circular, continuous form that evokes wholeness, corporeality and the self. Yet its placement within the rigid geometry of the H undermines any notion of autonomy or completeness. The O becomes a figure of subjectivity subjected to spatial and semiotic control, enclosed within a structure that is at once visible and inaudible. This interplay reinforces the synaesthetic logic of the work: the subject is visually enclosed, acoustically silenced, and conceptually immobilised.

² The work can be viewed virtually at: <https://www.fondazionebonotto.org/it/collection/poetry/bentivogliomirella/3806.html> (last accessed 24 June 2026).

Analytical step	<i>Storia del monumento</i>	<i>Gabbia (HO)</i>	<i>La scrittura del silenzio</i>
(1) Material/linguistic configuration	Semantic decomposition (scomposizione) of “monumento” into residues (nume, muto)	Reduction of language to two letters (H, O); H as phonetically silent sign	Total withdrawal of legible text; writing displaced from signification to presence
(2) Spatial/compositional organisation	Typographic dominance of the letter M, evoking Fascist-era monumental inscription	H as rigid graphic cage enclosing the circular O; spatial constraint enacted typographically	Surface, texture and spatial distribution assume semantic agency in the absence of text
(3) Perceptual/interpretative dynamics	Viewer traces divergent semantic trajectories opened by the fragments	Synaesthetic disjunction between sight and sound; oscillation between recognition and abstraction	Viewer compelled to “read” through sight and embodied attention rather than decoding
(4) Epistemic/ethical engagement	Exposes ideological construction of monumental authority and historical silencing	Implicates viewer in an interpretative, ethically charged act of resisting constraint	Reframes silence as resistance and epistemic openness rather than negation

Table 1. Summary of the four-step analytical procedure applied to the three works discussed

Although “HO” can be recognised as a grammatical form of the verb *avere* in Italian, Bentivoglio suspends its syntactic resolution, isolating the letters from their communicative function. The viewer oscillates between linguistic recognition and visual abstraction, navigating a perceptual field in which meaning is continually deferred. This oscillation foregrounds the embodied dimension of reading, transforming interpretation into a multisensory experience rather than a purely cognitive one. Moreover, the visual salience of the letter O, distinguished by its colour and relative isolation within the composition, introduces a deliberate methodological inflection. Detached from the enclosing structure, the O emerges as a site of semantic and perceptual tension rather than enclosure. In Italian, “o” functions grammatically as a disjunctive coordinating conjunction, marking an alternative between mutually exclusive possibilities – *this* or *that*. By foregrounding this disjunctive function, Bentivoglio transforms the O into an operative device that requires active examination on the part of the viewer. Interpretation is no longer confined to recognising constraint, but demands a positioning in relation to it. The highlighted O thus invites the viewer to engage in a critical act of selection, implicitly calling for an epistemic stance taken in opposition to the silent cage

constructed by the surrounding letters. Methodologically, this gesture shifts the work from perceptual diagnosis to critical intervention: the viewer is not merely asked to register enclosure, but to identify and activate the possibility of an alternative. In this sense, meaning is produced not through resolution but through an ethical and interpretative decision, situating the audience as an agent capable of resisting the regimes of silence and constraint enacted by the visual structure. Through this synaesthetic interplay of silence, form and spatial restriction, *Gabbia (HO)* exposes the mechanisms by which language disciplines perception and subjectivity. The work does not communicate a stable message but constructs a perceptual apparatus that compels the viewer to experience constraint across sensory registers. In doing so, Bentivoglio articulates a verbo-visual methodology in which linguistic signs operate as material, sensory and ideological structures: a method that anticipates later critical engagements with embodiment, perception and visual research.

The reading that follows engages all four analytical steps, but in a configuration distinct from the two works examined above. Because *La scrittura del silenzio* withdraws legible language altogether, the material/linguistic and spatial/compositional steps are here approached negatively, through what is absent rather

than what is present on the page. The discussion accordingly begins with this withdrawal as a configuration in its own right, before turning to the perceptual dynamics it activates – addressed here ahead of the work’s spatial organisation, since perception is what first registers the absence before the visual economy of the piece can be described. The reading closes by isolating the work’s epistemic and ethical implications as a distinct moment, before a final methodological synthesis.

In *La scrittura del silenzio* (1975),³ Bentivoglio radicalises her interrogation of language by pushing verbo-visual practice to the threshold of erasure. Unlike earlier works that operate through fragmentation and recomposition, this piece foregrounds absence as a constitutive element of meaning. Language is not dismantled into visible units but withdrawn altogether, leaving behind a field in which silence becomes both material and operative. This gesture does not signal negation or lack, but rather a reconfiguration of writing as a perceptual and epistemic experience.

Silence in this work functions as a form of writing that resists phonetic articulation while remaining visually and materially present. The absence of legible text activates a synaesthetic mode of perception in which the viewer is compelled to “read” through sight, spatial awareness and embodied attention rather than through linguistic decoding. As in *Gabbia (HO)*, Bentivoglio exploits the disjunction between sensory registers: what cannot be heard or read in conventional terms is nonetheless experienced as a dense communicative field. Silence, here, is not the opposite of language but its extension into another perceptual domain. The visual economy of *La scrittura del silenzio* invites slow, contemplative engagement. Deprived of textual anchors, the viewer confronts the material support of writing itself – surface, texture, spatial distribution – which assumes semantic agency. Writing is displaced from the realm of signification to that of presence, transforming interpretation into an open, participa-

tory process. Meaning is no longer transmitted but generated relationally, through the encounter between object and observer. This shift foregrounds the interpretative responsibility of the viewer, aligning the work with methodologies that privilege reflexivity and situated knowledge.

Crucially, *La scrittura del silenzio* can also be read as a critical response to the historical saturation of language by ideological discourse. By refusing inscription, Bentivoglio suspends the authority traditionally vested in the written word, exposing its complicity in regimes of power, commemoration and exclusion. Silence becomes a space of resistance, in which the excesses of language – its capacity to dominate, categorise and monumentalise – are momentarily neutralised. In this sense, the work resonates with broader counter-monumental strategies that seek to disrupt the rhetoric of permanence and visibility.

From a methodological perspective, *La scrittura del silenzio* anticipates contemporary visual research practices that foreground absence, affect and embodied perception as legitimate sources of knowledge. The work proposes an expanded notion of data, one that includes silence, hesitation and perceptual ambiguity. By doing so, Bentivoglio challenges the primacy of verbal articulation within research, suggesting that knowledge can emerge through what remains unsaid as much as through what is articulated. *La scrittura del silenzio* encapsulates Bentivoglio’s verbo-visual method at its most radical. By transforming silence into a material and perceptual event, the work reframes writing as an open system in which meaning is neither fixed nor authorially controlled. Instead, it emerges through encounter, attention and interpretative labour. This reorientation not only extends the possibilities of verbo-visual poetry but also offers a compelling methodological model for visual research grounded in sensory awareness, reflexivity and critical restraint.

The close analysis of *Storia del monumento, Gabbia (HO)* and *La scrittura del silenzio* demonstrates how Mirella Bentivoglio’s verbo-visual practice operates not only as an aesthetic exploration but as a sustained methodological inquiry into the conditions of meaning, memory and perception. Across these works, language is systematically destabilised: fragmented, spatially constrained, or withdrawn altogether. In

³ The work consists of an open book carved from white marble, upon which rests a real pencil, likewise white. White marble and pencil, 15 × 18 cm. The work is currently held at the University of Padua.

each case, Bentivoglio resists the fixity of linguistic and visual authority, foregrounding instead processes of dissolution, suspension and interpretative openness.

In *Storia del monumento*, the decomposition of the word *monumento* exposes the ideological underpinnings of monumental culture. Through semantic slippage and typographic emphasis, the work reveals the monument as an apparatus of veneration and silencing, historically implicated in authoritarian forms of memory-making. The disintegration of the word becomes a symbolic dismantling of fascist monumental logic, proposing fragmentation as a strategy of historical critique and epistemic resistance.

Gabbia (HO) shifts this critique from the historical to the perceptual, transforming language into a site of synaesthetic tension. The silent letter H constructs a cage that is acoustically absent yet visually operative, enclosing the circular O – a figure of subjectivity – within a structure of sensory and semiotic constraint. Here, Bentivoglio exposes the mechanisms through which language disciplines perception, producing forms of enclosure that operate simultaneously across visual, auditory and spatial registers.

With *La scrittura del silenzio*, this logic reaches its most radical articulation. By withdrawing legible text, Bentivoglio reframes silence as a material and epistemic condition. Writing is displaced from signification to presence, and interpretation becomes a reflexive, embodied process. Silence functions not as negation but as resistance, suspending the authority of language and opening a space for alternative modes of knowing grounded in attention, affect and perceptual awareness.

Taken together, these works articulate a verbo-visual methodology in which meaning is neither fixed nor authorially prescribed, but emerges relationally through the encounter between material form, spatial organisation, and the interpretative activity of the viewer. Bentivoglio's practice consistently resists closure, instead foregrounding processes of reading, seeing, and sensing as constitutive of meaning itself. In doing so, her work shifts attention away from the artwork as a self-contained object and towards the conditions under which meaning is produced, negotiated, and contested. This relational orientation situates interpretation as an active, embodied, and ethically charged practice, in which the viewer is implicated not merely

as a recipient but as a co-producer of knowledge. Through this methodological openness, Bentivoglio anticipates and productively informs contemporary visual research frameworks that privilege multimodality, sensory engagement, and reflexive modes of inquiry. Her integration of textual, visual, and material elements exemplifies an approach to knowledge production that acknowledges the interdependence of different semiotic modes and the situated nature of perception. By treating language as material, silence as a methodological device, and interpretation as a shared responsibility, her practice offers a robust model of research-creation in which making and thinking are inseparable. Such a model remains acutely relevant in an era characterised by visual saturation and contested regimes of visibility, where critical engagement with how meaning is produced, circulated, and authorised is both methodologically and ethically imperative.

5. Synthesis and Implications: Bentivoglio and Contemporary Visual Research

The preceding sections have established Mirella Bentivoglio's verbo-visual practice as a methodological intervention that foregrounds visual creation as a mode of inquiry, challenging conventional separations between language and image, research and representation.

Visual research today encompasses a plurality of methods, from participatory and spatial approaches to digital and multimodal practices. Central to these frameworks is the recognition that meaning is not inherent in visual materials but emerges through the interaction between artefacts, context, and interpretation (Hall, 1980; Rose, 2016). This perspective situates images and visual artefacts as epistemic objects, capable of producing knowledge when engaged with critically, rather than serving as passive representations. Bentivoglio's work, which consistently invites active interpretation and viewer participation, exemplifies these principles, demonstrating that the process of seeing and reading can itself generate insight.

Ethical considerations have long been central to visual research, encompassing questions of representation, agency, authorship, and the social circulation of images. Visual materials do not merely reflect reality

but actively participate in the construction of meaning, shaping what can be seen, recognised, and interpreted within specific historical and cultural contexts. As a result, visual research necessarily involves ethical decisions concerning whose perspectives are rendered visible, how subjects are positioned in relation to power, and how images circulate within broader social and political frameworks.

Scholarship on political visual literacy has emphasised that images operate within regimes of visibility that are structured by ideological, cultural, and historical forces. From this perspective, interpretation is not a neutral or purely analytical act but a situated practice that requires reflexive awareness of the power relations embedded in visual forms. Ethical visual research therefore demands interpretative frameworks capable of accounting for both the material conditions of image production and the subjective processes through which meaning is negotiated by viewers. Such frameworks foreground responsibility, reflexivity, and critical attentiveness as integral components of visual inquiry.

Bentivoglio's verbo-visual practice closely resonates with these methodological and ethical concerns. Her feminist and reflexive approach consistently challenges dominant regimes of visibility by disrupting conventional hierarchies between text and image, authority and interpretation, monumentality and silence. By requiring active participation from the reader-viewer, her works expose the ethical dimensions of meaning-making itself, transforming interpretation into a critical and self-aware process. In this sense, Bentivoglio's creative practice does not merely illustrate ethical principles but actively enacts them, offering a model for visual research that is attentive to power, relationality, and the responsibilities embedded in acts of seeing and reading.

Multimodal analysis offers further insight into Bentivoglio's significance for contemporary research methodologies. Meaning is rarely produced through a single semiotic mode; rather, it emerges through the interaction and tension between textual, visual, spatial, and sensory elements. Contemporary visual research increasingly recognises that knowledge is generated through these interrelations, as different modes activate distinct perceptual, cognitive, and interpretative processes. Multimodal approaches therefore foreground the relational nature of meaning-making, attending

not only to individual components but to the ways in which they co-constitute one another within specific contexts of reception.

Bentivoglio's verbo-visual strategies anticipate these concerns by consistently integrating text and image into dynamic configurations that resist hierarchical ordering. In her work, language is not subordinate to the visual, nor does the image simply illustrate the word; instead, meaning arises from their reciprocal interference, fragmentation, and spatial negotiation. This relational structuring compels the viewer-reader to navigate between modes, actively producing sense through embodied and interpretative engagement. Such practices exemplify how hybrid forms can facilitate complex, situated knowledge production that remains open, provisional, and responsive to context.

By mobilising multimodality as a deliberate methodological choice, Bentivoglio demonstrates the potential of creative practice to operate as a research tool in its own right. Her work foregrounds process over resolution, interpretation over transmission, and experience over representation, aligning closely with contemporary methodological frameworks that value reflexivity, participation, and epistemic openness. In this way, her verbo-visual practice extends beyond the artistic domain, offering methodological insights relevant to broader scholarly inquiry concerned with how knowledge is produced, mediated, and ethically engaged through multimodal forms.

These perspectives collectively indicate that Bentivoglio's methodological legacy extends well beyond its historical moment, remaining deeply relevant to contemporary debates in visual research and related fields. Her practice articulates a form of inquiry that is simultaneously reflexive, participatory, multimodal, and ethically attentive, foregrounding the conditions under which meaning is produced rather than treating visual materials as transparent carriers of information. In this sense, Bentivoglio offers not simply a set of aesthetic strategies, but a coherent methodological orientation that aligns creative practice with critical investigation. By insisting on the viewer's active role in meaning-making, her work situates interpretation as a relational and situated process, one shaped by material form, spatial configuration, and perceptual engagement. This approach resonates strongly with current

methodological paradigms that emphasise process, relationality, and reflexivity as central to research practice. Moreover, Bentivoglio's sustained interrogation of language, silence, and visibility foregrounds the ethical dimensions of visual inquiry, drawing attention to questions of agency, power, and responsibility that remain central to contemporary scholarship.

Through its attention to the procedural and interpretative dimensions of visual materials, Bentivoglio's practice continues to inform and challenge emergent methodological frameworks, demonstrating how historical verbo-visual strategies can meaningfully enrich the analytical tools available to visual researchers today. Her work thus serves as a critical bridge between avant-garde experimentation and contemporary methodological innovation, underscoring the enduring relevance of creative practice as a site of epistemic production and ethical reflection.

6. Conclusions and Future Directions

This article has examined Mirella Bentivoglio's verbo-visual practice as a methodological model for visual research, demonstrating how her work mobilises language, space, and material form as operative tools of inquiry. Through a qualitative and interpretative analysis of *Storia del monumento*, *Gabbia (HO)*, and *La scrittura del silenzio*, the study has shown that Bentivoglio's strategies of fragmentation, spatial constraint, and silence function not merely as aesthetic devices but as structured research operations that generate knowledge through perceptual, semantic, and relational processes. Across these works, meaning emerges as contingent and co-produced, requiring the active interpretative engagement of the viewer and foregrounding the ethical dimensions of meaning-making.

By situating Bentivoglio within contemporary visual methodologies and research-creation frameworks, the article has argued that her practice anticipates key methodological concerns, including multimodality, reflexivity, and participatory knowledge production. Her work demonstrates that artistic practice can operate as a rigorous form of inquiry, in which making and thinking are inseparable and where knowledge is produced through embodied, situated, and

critically attentive engagement with material forms. In this sense, Bentivoglio's verbo-visual strategies provide not only historical insight into neo-avant-garde experimentation but also a transferable methodological framework for current research practices.

The contribution of this study lies in reframing Bentivoglio's work from an object of art historical analysis to a methodological resource for visual research. By articulating the epistemic and ethical dimensions of her practice, the article expands the conceptual tools available for engaging with multimodal artefacts and reinforces the legitimacy of creative practice as a site of knowledge production. At the same time, it underscores the importance of interpretative responsibility, highlighting how acts of seeing and reading are always implicated in broader structures of power, visibility, and meaning.

As proposed at the outset, the four-step procedure functions here as an analytical apparatus rather than a description of how Bentivoglio's work is perceptually or cognitively encountered, and the three close readings undertaken above can be read as a test of that apparatus against works that strain it in distinct ways. In *Storia del monumento*, the steps blend rather than separate, with the work's epistemic and ethical implications surfacing almost immediately within what is nominally a discussion of linguistic decomposition. In *Gabbia (HO)*, the steps fuse: the material configuration of the letters H and O gives way almost at once to the perceptual experience they generate, before the work's ethical stakes are isolated as a distinct, later moment. In *La scrittura del silenzio*, the apparatus is strained most acutely, as the steps must be approached negatively, through the absence of language and form rather than their presence, and in an order – perception before composition – reversed from the other two works. Taken together, these variations suggest that the gap between a structured analytical method and the lived, often non-linear character of aesthetic encounter is not incidental to this study but recurrent across it, and merits further reflection beyond the scope of the present article.

This tension between method and experience might itself be taken up directly in future work – for instance, through practice-based or phenomenologically informed approaches that attend more closely to the

viewer's lived encounter with verbo-visual works. Future research may also build on the present framework by extending verbo-visual methodologies to digital and interactive contexts, exploring how contemporary media environments reshape the conditions of perception, participation, and interpretation. Further investigation into feminist and decolonial verbo-visual practices could also deepen the critical and methodological implications outlined here, particularly in relation to alternative regimes of visibility and knowledge production. Bentivoglio's work demonstrates that visual research is not only concerned with analysing images, but with interrogating the processes through which meaning is produced, negotiated, and transformed. Her practice offers a model of inquiry grounded in materiality, relationality, and openness – one that remains acutely relevant in navigating the complexities of contemporary visual and multimodal culture.

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Bio

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