

A PROPOSITO DI ... VINCENZO AGNETTI

...the artist is the revolutionary conscience of culture given that culture, for all its specificity, can only provide us with wiretapped messages, like history. Any precept, any signal, any spoken truth (although truth cannot to be uttered) is a rubber medium.

Vincenzo Agnetti, 1976

This exhibition on Vincenzo Agnetti (Milan, 1926–1981) originates from the work *Macchina drogata* (1969), part of the museum's permanent collection. Although long ignored and underestimated, Agnetti stands as a key figure in the Italian conceptual avant-garde.

As an artist, he was active for fifteen years, from 1967 to 1981. A keen observer of the contemporary art world, he was not merely an “artist” but also, as his friend and publisher Vanni Scheiwiller wrote, “painter, sculptor, essayist, writer, theoretician, actor and, above all, a poet.”

After graduation from Accademia di Brera, he moved into poetry and Arte Informale. Towards the end of the 1950s, he chose to give up his own artistic production in order to participate more intensely in the cultural life of the time and better analyze it. His critical writings on fellow artists and friends Piero Manzoni and Enrico Castellani, who shared the same aesthetic interests, remain seminal to this day. He contributed to the creation of Azimuth, first as a journal and later as an avant-garde art gallery.

From 1962 to 1967, he lived in Argentina with his family. It was the so-called period of “no-art” or “non-art” during which he played the role of the “negator” identifying art's essence with its absence. In this period he wrote down his notes and reflections in an almost compulsive manner, texts not meant to be read again, intended “to be forgotten by heart.” His working method arose from such a shapeless mass of words: objects are considered “reminders” of the thinking process. As noted by Giorgio Verzotti, for Agnetti “the work of art cannot be considered other than a trace of thought, a pure aperture on the very act of thinking.”

Agnetti returned to Italy in the late 1960s and resumed his art practice with the idea that art should be pure analysis of concepts, prepositions, and working theories. He intended to upset, and thereby reveal, the relation between signifier and signified. Language, the most direct and deceptive means of communication, is treated as raw material and becomes the main object of the artist's attention while his work develops, in the artist's words, into a form of scientific research. More cerebral than visual, Agnetti's research aimed at the reduction of meaning, leaving behind a body of work hard to define and yet extremely consistent, rigorous, and poetic.

Agnetti's works have been included in the most relevant exhibition of his time including the celebrated Documenta of 1972 and the Venice Biennale of 1974 and 1978.