

LÉVY GORVY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

LÉVY GORVY TO PRESENT FIRST EXHIBITION OF ITALIAN CONCEPTUAL ARTIST VINCENZO AGNETTI IN LONDON, MARKING THE BEGINNING OF THE GALLERY'S COLLABORATION WITH THE ARCHIVIO VINCENZO AGNETTI

Vincenzo Agnetti: Territories

31 March – 13 May, 2017

Lévy Gorvy

22 Old Bond Street

London, W1S 4PY

Lévy Gorvy is pleased to present the first exhibition in London of Vincenzo Agnetti, one of the most significant and influential Italian conceptualists of the twentieth century. The exhibition focuses on three bodies of work from the artist's diverse oeuvre—*Axioms*, *Feltri (Felts)*, and *Macchina Drogata (Drugged Machine)*—which are key nodes of a sprawling practice that engaged the supple pliability of language with intensity and humor. Agnetti approached language as both content and material, depicting linguistic propositions and language-based abstractions with a signature esoteric streak. Seen as a whole, the artist's work shed light on new possibilities for art's engagement with philosophy and knowledge production: rather than illustrating theories and ideas, Agnetti sought to fully integrate idea and form.

As an artist and writer, Agnetti was an active participant in various Italian scenes from the 1950s through the 1970s. A friend and collaborator of Enrico Castellani and Piero Manzoni, Agnetti contributed criticism to the avant-garde journal *Azimuth*, which was dedicated to conceptual and formal developments of advanced artistic production. Agnetti's own work traversed a wide formal range, but always with a rigor matched only by his curiosity. For Agnetti, the artist's subjectivity was inextricably bound up with the artist's output. Thus, in examining the depth and progression of Agnetti's movement through various styles, this exhibition begins to map the intellectual progression of his artistic consciousness.

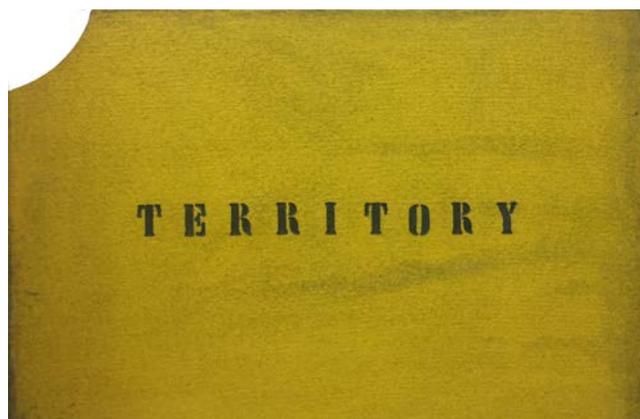
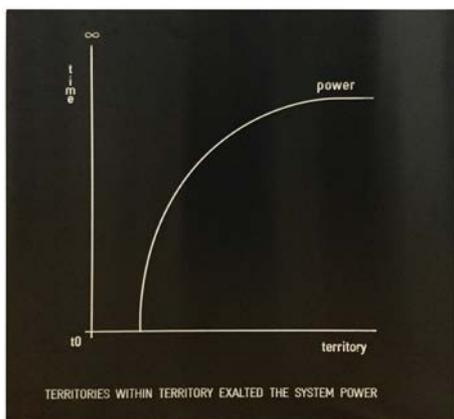
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A student of poetry and art from a young age, the intellectual details of Agnetti's early life remain opaque. In the artist's words: "What I did, thought and heard, I've now forgotten by heart." This deliberate occlusion of biographic information is characteristic of Agnetti's use of language: shifting away from the personal toward a more remote philosophical terrain, Agnetti cultivated a mythic voice. Yet, definitive as these words appear, the epistemological framework is decidedly open: notions of "forgetting" suggest a break with inherited knowledge, experience, and trauma, and the evocative description of forgetting "by heart" (a phrase more commonly attached to the *opposite* of forgetting) invests Agnetti's declarations with a sense of strenuous effort.

The poetic dimensions of Agnetti's linguistic explorations are perhaps most evident in his *Axioms* (1968–1974). These square bakelite panels feature "axiomatic" observations, postulates, and formulas that are cloaked in the self-assurance of fact but are often cryptic, paradoxical, or tautological ("Dimension is the shifting of the mind"; "Territories within territory exalted the system power"). The works' stylistic references emphasize this duplicity: their white text on black grounds is evocative of the blackboard, but the slick finish of their smooth surfaces and engraved words lends a permanent and fixed quality. Through this linguistic and formal play, Agnetti produces a slippage between proposition and truth, calling into question the way meaning is produced and comprehended.

The *Feltri* (Felts) also draw on familiar cultural forms, albeit more art-historical than pedagogical. Many of these works are titled "Paesaggio" (landscape) and "Ritratto" (portrait) but, like the *Axioms*, their main visual content is textual. The portraits and landscapes are aesthetically severe, with stenciled letters burned or painted on a humble felt surface. In many of the *Feltri*, this visual economy is enriched by sensuous descriptions. *Ritratto di Donna* (portrait of a woman), a 1974 dark grey felt panel, features red capital letters reading "Ignara e avvolta da un mistero falsificato" (She appeared unaware and surrounded by a forged mystery). The *Feltri* landscapes put forth more spare and open-ended provocations, as in *Paesaggio*, a 1971 dusky chartreuse felt with a circular chip missing from a top corner, its surface stenciled with the word "TERRITORY" (the equation of landscape and territory being a formulation more complicated and problematic than it seems at first blush). Theoretical and geopolitical conceptions of space constitute another significant concern for Agnetti, as this work boldly indicates.

Along these lines, a 1972 beige felt panel bears two- and three-letter country abbreviations; its title, *Quasi dimenticato a memoria* (Almost forgotten by heart), is a favorite phrase of Agnetti that takes on a particularly deep resonance in conjunction with the work's content and contemporary crises having to do with borders and nationalist sentiments.



LEFT: *Assioma - Territories within territory exalted the system power*, 1972, white nitro on engraved bakelite
RIGHT: *Paesaggio*, 1971, engraved and painted felt

The final body of work featured in the exhibition is the *Macchina Drogata* (Drugged Machine), a device Agnetti created, and a series of photographic enlargements that he made using it. This large Olivetti Divisumma 14 calculator was modified so that its numeric keys were connected with alphabetic type bars, retaining an essential logic but divorcing the machine from practical use. The words that the machine generated evoke a sort of nonsensical concrete poetry that approaches abstraction. Selections from its output were enlarged and printed on canvas, rendered in a range of colors and compositions. These products of the *Macchina Drogata* could be understood as an apex of Agnetti's work with language, in which linguistic forms finally transcend the power structures that saturate the written and spoken word.

Vincenzo Agnetti: Territories will be on view in London until 13 May.

About the Artist

Vincenzo Agnetti (1926–1981) was born in Milan and lived in Italy for most of his life. He graduated from the Brera Academy in Milan and attended the Piccolo Teatro school. In 1962 Agnetti moved to Argentina, where he worked in the field of technological automation. After a brief but formative stop-over in New York, Agnetti returned to Italy in 1967. Although he kept in touch with his artistic peers in Milan during his years abroad, little remains of his artistic output before this period. Agnetti began working in Art Informel and poetry at an early age and contributed to the journal *Azimuth*, which was founded by Enrico Castellani and Piero Manzoni and remains a key document of the Italian avant-garde at the dawn of the 1960s. Later in that decade, Agnetti exhibited his *Macchina Drogata* in Milan against the backdrop of student protests across Europe. This social tumult formed an opportune ground against which Agnetti pursued his deconstruction of language and power. Continuing this practice into the 1970s, Agnetti worked prolifically to explore the possibilities of language as both a foundation and a material for art-making. He emerged as one of the most significant conceptual artists in Italy. The material rigor of his work forged an important link between the itinerant international circuit of Conceptual art and the emergent Arte Povera context. A lifelong writer, Agnetti wrote expansive criticism as well as analysis of his own work.

Solo exhibitions and surveys of Agnetti's work have been presented at Palazzo Serbelloni, Milan (2016), Museo D'Arte Contemporanea Villa Croce, Genova (2013), Centro Italiano Arte Contemporanea, Foligno (2012), and MART, Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto (2013). Among many other group exhibitions, Agnetti's work was included in Documenta 5 (1972), and four Venice Biennales (1995, 1993, 1978, and 1976). A retrospective of his work will be presented at the Palazzo Reale in Milan, from June to September of this year. The exhibition at Lévy Gorvy is the first solo presentation of the artist's work in London. Lévy Gorvy will also present an exhibition of Agnetti's work in New York in summer 2017, accompanied by an illustrated catalogue featuring new scholarship as well as the artist's writings.

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