

“What I did, thought and heard, I’ve now forgotten by heart: this is the first authentic document.”

Vincenzo Agnetti

Cardi Gallery is proud to present *Vincenzo Agnetti I Tempo e Memoria* (Time and Memory), an exhibition dedicated to Italian conceptual artist, poet and essayist Vincenzo Agnetti (1926-1981). Taking place simultaneously across Cardi’s two galleries in London and Milan, *Vincenzo Agnetti I Tempo e Memoria* explores the artist’s unique and poetic reflections on language, time and memory through a comprehensive selection of works dating from 1969 to 1975. Installed over three floors of the Mayfair gallery, the London show features Agnetti’s celebrated *Felts* and *Axioms* alongside rarely seen installations that chart his radical and inventive use of images and text.

A central figure in the Italian Conceptual Art movement of the early 1960s, Agnetti first gained renown as a writer and theorist in the Milanese avant-garde alongside Enrico Castellani and Piero Manzoni, whose journal *Azimuth* voiced the ideals and aspirations of a new generation. In 1962, the artist left Italy for Argentina, where he entered a self-proclaimed period of “no-art”, a critical prelude to his later creative endeavours. Across a short yet remarkably prolific and influential career – from 1967 until his premature death in 1981 – Agnetti engaged with the cultural and philosophical debates of his time, channelling post-war preoccupations with media, history and the written word into a deeply personal artistic vision. Although keenly aware of the limits and contradictions of language, Agnetti relied on words as both artistic tool and medium, constantly dissolving and reconfiguring their potential to generate meaning.

Having studied acting at Milan’s Piccolo Teatro school prior to becoming an artist, Agnetti often adopted a performative stance in his practice, insisting on the role of the audience in giving life to a work of art. In a rare display, an entire floor of the gallery is devoted to recreating one of his experimental works of “Static Theatre”, a type of performance he developed throughout the 1970s. *Elisabetta d’Inghilterra* [Elizabeth of England] (1975), a prescient meditation on the intersection of mass culture and institutional power, was originally staged during the 1976 Venice Biennale, and will be re-enacted for the first time as part of the exhibition.

Agnetti's iconic *Felts* – which he painted and engraved with both English and Italian words – offer poetic statements, aphorisms and fragments of letters that point to the evocative powers of language as well as its material and aesthetic qualities. Time and the complex processes of memory are at the heart of the artist's practice. His emblematic *Book forgotten by heart*, first conceived in 1969, serves as a centrepiece to the exhibition in this respect. A traditional medium for assimilating knowledge, here the book's contents have been hollowed out and remain only as a present absence, an apt metaphor for Agnetti's view of cultural history as a whole. The paradoxical phrase "forgetting by heart", first coined by the artist in the late 1960s, alludes to the ways in which the past – which encompasses our knowledge and lived experience – is ultimately "forgotten", internalised, and absorbed into the depths of our unconscious as we move into the future.

With his *Axioms*, a group of black bakelite panels inscribed with cryptic diagrams and philosophical propositions, Agnetti maps out the elusive pathways of thought itself. Through a series of metaphors, tautologies and contradictory statements related to time, he questions how universal concepts are developed and communicated within a society. Juxtaposing the precise language of mathematical formulae with the abstract and free-flowing mechanisms of human thought, the works function as an extension of the artist's intellectual process. They engage the viewer in a playful visual and semantic exchange, initiating a kind of psychological and critical activity without disclosing any resolute meanings.

A multidisciplinary artist, writer, and poet, Vincenzo Agnetti was a leading figure of Italian conceptual art in the 1960s and 70s. Born in Milan in 1926, Agnetti graduated from the Brera Academy and later studied dramaturgy at the Piccolo Teatro school. In the following years, he made paintings inspired by Art Informel and was active as a poet and critic in the Milanese avant-garde scene. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Agnetti befriended fellow artists Enrico Castellani and Piero Manzoni, with whom he collaborated on the influential journal *Azimuth* and shared philosophical and artistic ideals. Little else is known of his life at this time, other than his own elusive account: "What I did, thought and heard, I've now forgotten by heart: this is the first authentic document." In 1962 the artist left Milan and moved to Argentina, where he worked in the field of technological automation. This self-defined period of "no-art" was marked by a "refusal to paint" and "the gaining of awareness through low, dull work, for true freedom; it was about heading towards new horizons." From 1967 to 1981, the year of his untimely death, Agnetti returned to Italy and embarked on a tireless production of works centered around poetry and the written word. In 1967 the artist self-published the first of several experimental novels, *Obsoleto*, and held his inaugural solo exhibition at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara. In 1970 he created his famed *Macchina Drogata*, a mechanical Olivetti calculator whose numbers were replaced with letters, leading to a series of nonsensical words and combinations dictated by chance. Throughout the 1970s Agnetti exhibited his renowned *Felts* and *Axioms*, works which explored the poetic and philosophical uses of language in both Italian and English. In 1973 he opened a studio in New York, where he worked intermittently, and continued to hold numerous exhibitions in Italy and internationally in the following period. For Agnetti, language was both a critical measure for understanding the world and a vast repository of cultural memory and history. In this respect, his works function as elements of a broader intellectual pursuit, generating a conceptual mechanism that remains with the viewer beyond the initial encounter. Vincenzo Agnetti died in Milan in 1981, at the age of 55.