The Italian semiotician and philosopher Umberto Eco asked in 1962: Why did the term “alienation” become so popular at the beginning of the 1960s, so long after its first appearance? […] [The term] implies that something that is acting upon us, and on which we depend, is something totally extraneous to us, a hostile power that has nothing to do with us, an evil will that has subjugated us despite all our efforts and that someday we may be able to destroy, or at least reject, since we are ourselves and it is an “other,” substantially different from what we are.2

The question of widespread alienation in modern life also deeply preoccupied the Milanese artist Vincenzo Agnetti [1926-1981], who was particularly concerned with how overwhelming sensorial stimuli cause perceptual habits to become mechanical, thereby estranging perceptions and emotions. As a countermeasure, Agnetti produced a body of work aimed at upsetting the expectations of the viewer about how both language and technology function. Through the modification of machines, the use of paradoxes, tautologies and contradictions, and the alteration of artistic techniques, Agnetti revealed not only how machines are constructed to routinize behavior, but also how disciplines and institutions shape and interfere with genuine experiences and actual life conditions.

In what follows, I analyze how two works by Agnetti, La macchina drogata (1968) and NEG (1970), illustrate his anxiety about alienation by interrupting the regular functioning of technology. I also examine how this strategy questions the ideological bases of industrial design, and I elaborate on the relation between Agnetti’s concern with alienation, and the analyses of estrangement by Eco and the Italian critic Gillo Dorfles. While I am not suggesting that Agnetti “materialized” or “illustrated” the theories of Eco and Dorfles, whose work he most certainly knew but never explicitly quoted, striking coincidences exist between their thought and Agnetti’s diagnosis of contemporary alienation. Such similarities testify to a common disquiet in the Milanese artistic and intellectual milieu of the 1960s and 1970s, revealing increasing skepticism about unbridled industrial development.

Agnetti utilized what he called “zeroing” strategies to rethink his approach to language, science, technology, and art in order first to recover what he considered to be their basic elements and, second, to obstruct viewers’ habitual automatic responses to both technology and art. Agnetti’s zeroing techniques included the application of randomness and unpredictability in the regular operations of a mechanism; the use of paradoxical or contradictory language; and the translation of a given discourse from one code to another. The Italian critic Achille Bonito Oliva described Agnetti’s zeroing techniques as “interrupted processes” when he wrote:

The artist, using the strategy of interrupted processes, de-alienates the medium (…) exploits it and thus truly penetrates the formative process, determining an information gap with regards of the use of technology which only art is capable of. The artist has understood that only when the identification with the medium is replaced with its dialectical use is it possible to de-alienate art, and make it engage in an unprecedented relationship with technology, in which the latter is only a tool of knowledge, while art is conscious and deliberate knowledge.3

Agnetti first used his “zeroing” techniques in La macchina drogata, exhibited in Milan in 1968. He altered an Olivetti Divisumma 14 calculator so that letters, rather than numbers, printed when the visitors pressed its buttons. Agnetti exhibited a text explaining the purpose of La macchina drogata in a very narrow corridor, leading to a cubicle (surrounded by a black cloth) where spectators could use the machine. The sheets printed of the machine’s work were then collected and hung on the wall, documenting the production of art by the artist, the viewer, and the machine.4 For not only did viewers participate in operating the machine, but the machine also became a mechanical creator, producing new works of art. Rendered inoperable as a calculator by Agnetti, the appliance acquired a new role as a collaborator in the production of art. The contradiction between the designated purpose of the device and its actual results
deconstructed, as it simultaneously reconstructed, the idea of efficient machines. Agnetti's intervention in the workings of the machine compromised its primary function: the production of numerical operations. First commercialized in 1945 and already out of date when Agnetti used it as a work of art, this particular model of the Olivetti calculator was the first machine to provide a quick way to perform four basic arithmetic operations. Seeing letters where numbers were expected stunned viewers and made them question their assumptions about how, and with what purpose, a calculator operates.

In NEG, Rivelatore di Pausa, or Pausofono, Agnetti altered a Brionvega stereophonic record player so that it allowed the public to listen to the pauses in music. When sounds were played, the machine inhibited the signal and nothing was heard. When there was silence, however, NEG emitted white noise such that spectators could listen to “negative of music,” namely the intervals between emitted white noise such that spectators could listen to "negative of music," namely the intervals between sound and sound. Thus, like "negative of music," namely the intervals between

During the 1950s, Agnetti was an art informel painter. However, he quickly became disenchanted with this artistic language, destroying all his works, and he turned to writing art criticism. During this time, Agnetti associated with the artists Piero Manzoni and Enrico Castellani, and helped edit their journal Azimuth, which was published in only two issues in 1959 and 1960. Azimuth was an idiosyncratic publication on experimental art in Italy, and it was instrumental in putting Italian artists in communication with avant-garde art in the rest of Europe and the United States. The magazine (and the gallery attached to it) also offered a space for discussion to artists disaffected with informel. However, Agnetti left Italy in 1962, traveling and living for the next five years in Australia, Saudi Arabia, and Argentina, where he often worked in the electronic automation sector, experiences that would serve him well in his later artistic production of La macchina drogata and NEG.

During these years of artistic silence Agnetti continued to write fervently. These texts became the material for several of his artworks and literary writings of the late 1960s and 1970s. In addition, as soon as he returned to Italy in 1967, Agnetti published an avant-garde novel, Obsoleto (Obsolete), whose frontispiece Castellani designed. In this text, Agnetti used normal language in experimental ways, breaking syntax, logic, grammar, punctuation and narrative. He also altered readers’ expectations of the normative content and form of a book: some pages of Obsoleto have letters that form drawings; others distribute words unevenly on the page; and Agnetti made reading difficult by having filed the printing plate so that the letters are almost invisible. Obsoleto established a central feature of Agnetti’s artworks, which always includes an interior interruption. The hiatus operates between the functioning of the artwork and the regular functioning of the things that make up the artwork (books, machines, texts).

Azzeramento or “zeroing out” is the category through which Agnetti conceptualized his recurring practice of interrupting the regular functioning of language, communication, and technology. To clarify such notion, Agnetti referred to his piece Frammenti di una tavola di Dario tradotta in tutte le lingue [Fragments of a tablet of Darius translated in all languages] (1973). This work includes a photographic reproduction of one of the Persepolis Elamite tablets, the economic records of the reign of Darius the Great. Agnetti added typewritten sequences of numbers, his fictional translation of the cuneiform writing on the tablets. In Agnetti’s words, “the cuneiform words are zeroed out by depriving them of meaning and replacing them with numbers.” He continued:

And in so far as the meanings of the words disappear, the numbers become nothing more than the possibility of intonation. The visual part of the work is necessary if the work is to have impact upon the spectator, but at the same time it comports no illusionism.

The translation from one code to another, especially to a numeric code, uncharged by emotions and existential meanings, evinces the conventional nature of linguistic practices. Contemporary society, according to Agnetti’s reading, is committed to enthral consumers with
comfort: products are easy to understand and use, so few question their existence or functioning. But by interrupting the transmission of a message through “zeroing,” viewers are obliged to pay attention to the workings of language and communication. For Agnetti the feeling of “not being at home” in society – triggered when viewers realize that things can work in unexpected ways – is the basis for every possible critical thought.

Language is the chief tool for Agnetti’s practice of zeroing, and he used it to provide an extensive explanation of each piece, preventing viewers from being so surprised by the disruption to their expectations that they become intellectually paralyzed. Agnetti achieved his demystification of communication through the critical use of the means of communication itself; in Agnetti’s words, “a demystification with the weapons of mystification itself.”\(^{11}\) Agnetti’s critique is not directed at language in general, but at language as an instrument of power. His practice of defining the intention of the artwork, as part of the artwork itself, evokes conceptual art.

Well informed about the development of international conceptualism, Agnetti was hesitant to consider himself a part of it. In 1974, however, he wrote a very detailed article on the work of the British Art and Language group and other conceptual artists, including himself among those whose work criticized the discourse of art through the use of other disciplines.\(^{12}\) Indeed, Agnetti’s work at the time included aspects congruent with the conceptual approach of Joseph Kosuth, Hans Haacke, and Art and Language, as Agnetti used philosophical and analysis to challenge the operations of ordinary language, especially the unquestioned assumptions of the art system. He also employed paradox and irony to visualize the limits and constructed conditions of art and its institutions.

However, Agnetti also underlined the differences between his practice and that of other conceptualists. Of paramount importance to him was that while he voraciously read philosophical treatises, in his work he used only his own texts, not quotes from other writers.\(^{13}\) In this way, Agnetti’s thought-process and his own analysis of philosophical concepts became the work of art. Furthermore, contrarily to other conceptualists, Agnetti eschewed tautology and hermeticism, and avoided producing solipsistic artworks by constantly connecting the practice of art with other social events. In this way, Agnetti criticized not only the internal logic of language, but also how the organization of disciplines and institutions impacts on human psychology and emotional life.

**Gillo Dorfles and Umberto Eco: Estrangement and Consumer Culture**

Historical factors certainly forced discussions on the price of industrial development to center stage in Italy during the 1960s and 1970s. While Italy had achieved a remarkable economic boom in the years after the end of World War II, by the mid-1960s several sectors of the population – notably students and workers – were unsatisfied with the excessive expansion of consumer society, the lack of power and economic representation of the workforce, and the absence of political change. Discontent was manifested in strikes, very often violently repressed by the police. The 1960s also saw the resurgence of neo-Fascist groups and terrorist attacks, aimed at destroying democratic institutions and establishing an authoritarian regime.

The correlation between the triumph of consumerism and widespread political violence, the two central features of this period, played out in the cultural arena as well. Hence, intellectuals such as Gillo Dorfles and Umberto Eco attempted to elucidate the sentiment of alienation by clarifying the concept of “estrangement” and proposing solutions to it. For instance, Eco applauded the use of dislocated grammar in avant-garde literature as a way to distance the reader from the mystifications of language and to encourage an active engagement in its critical assessment. For his part, Dorfles claimed that all artists should practice what he called a “diastematic art” to de-familiarize the viewers from their incessant flux of perceptions, and encourage the critical questioning of existing conditions of life.\(^{14}\)

Eco, Dorfles and Agnetti were very active in Milan, and members of its intelligentsia. Since 1963, Eco and Dorfles collaborated with the avant-garde magazine *Marcatré*, and Dorfles belonged to the intellectual circle revolving around Manzoni, Castellani, Agnetti and *Azimuth*, in which Dofles published articles. Furthermore, and more importantly for our present context, during the 1950s and 1960s Eco and Dorfles participated in an intense debate on the value of industrial design with other critics such as Giulio Carlo Argan, Tomás Maldonado, and Filiberto Menna.\(^{15}\) This debate took place mostly in Milan because, then as now, Milan is where important design companies are headquartered and renowned designers have studios. Moreover, Italian design and architectural magazines, as well as the Triennale Exhibition of Design, are based in Milan.\(^{16}\)

While coming from different theoretical backgrounds – the Russian formalists on one side, the Hegelian tradition on the other –Dorfles and Eco mostly agreed on their diagnosis of contemporary culture, and their interpretations of estrangement complemented each other. Both approached alienation dialectically, with a negative and a positive meaning, concluding that industrial society is responsible for the estrangement of contemporary life, but, paradoxically, through the technique of estrangement artists can also recuperate a more authentic experience. Their analyses offer further insight into the intellectual milieu in which Agnetti’s work developed, and also the theoretical sophistication of his own exploration of estrangement.

Dorfles’ theoretical reference was to the Russian formalistViktor Shklovsky, whose work, *ostranenie* (“making strange”) refers to such literary strategies as using unusual or foreign terms; breaking of narrative order; and rupturing syntax. Such techniques surprise readers, throwing into question their expectations about how a poem, a story, or a novel is organized and creates meaning. Against such predictable perceptions, which for Shklovsky represented a form of enslavement, *ostranenie* made it possible to
becomes a fundamental anthropological ostranenie. Dorfles revised Shklovsky's theory, and in his analysis from their own alienated experiences. Art becomes the interfering strategies that distance the viewers introducing an art that seeks to escape from the situation and judge it from the outside. Rather than become isolated from society, artists must accept the fact that while communication that is bereft of ideology and manipulation is an illusion, it may be deployed critically. Altering the forms of communication, Eco insisted, art "eludes the situation and controls it.

Eco's article had a lasting influence on Italian art. Following Hegel and Karl Marx's notions of alienation to analyze contemporary forms of discourse. As noted at the beginning of this essay, Eco published "Form as Social Commitment" in 1962, and in it analyzed the task of the artist, who, he argued, is alienated by capitalistic consumer society. Following Hegel, Eco read alienation as an inevitable relation between humanity and its products, such that things always outpace the producer, making it difficult to identify one's own product. Yet Eco agreed with Marx that the pathological aspects of estrangement from machines, acceptance of the domination of the industry over humanity, and difficulty in establishing meaningful relationships, are more pronounced in capitalism.

Confronted with this situation, Eco observed that artists, writers, and musicians generally adopt one of two attitudes: like "beautiful souls," they choose complete isolation from the world of commodities, refusing to participate in relationships with things and human beings; or they pretend that there is still harmony between humanity, nature, and things. Resisting either position, Eco called for the artist to communicate in a comprehensible language, interacting with others while simultaneously distancing from language and denouncing the dominating effects of modern channels of communication. "To understand the world, avant-garde art delves into it and assumes its critical condition from within, adopting, to describe it, the same alienated language in which it expresses itself," Eco wrote. Then he added: "But by giving this language a descriptive function and laying it bare as a narrative form, avant-garde art also strips it of its alienating aspects and allows us to demystify it [...] the artist tries to dislocate language from within, in order to escape from the situation and judge it from the outside."

Thus, like Agnetti and Dorfles, Eco embraced aesthetic estrangement as a tool to denounce the oppressive effects of capitalistic ideology.

Eco's article had a lasting influence on Italian art of the 1960s and 1970s, so much so that the Italian critic and curator Germano Celant took up Eco's ideas in his famous 1967 manifesto "Arte Povera. Notes for a Guerrilla War." Celant denounced the contemporary art system for the ways in which it alienates artists, so that even when artists reject the values of consumer society they have to produce for the art market if they want to survive. Similarly, Agnetti aligned himself with the Art Povera, agreeing that the task of the artist is to denounce alienated consumer society through the use of unconventional means. However, according to Celant – and it is open to discussion whether his analysis adequately described the practice of Art Povera artists – "[Arte Povera] is a moment that tends towards deculturization, regression, primitiveness and repression, towards the pre-logical and pre-iconographic stage, towards elementary and spontaneous politics, a tendency towards the basic element in nature [...] and in life [...] and in behavior [...] to decrease intellectual control over experience." On the contrary, Agnetti aimed to criticize his epoch while being part of it, through a non-alienated usage of its language, technology, and practices, thus thematizing what the critic Maurizio Calvesi has described as "the reasonable panic of technology and mass culture, experienced from within."
promoting the expansion of the mass market. As Eco explained, “industrial power, by rendering our relationship to things and the world more pleasant, makes us forget that in fact we remain slaves.” Denouncing this situation, Eco explained: A paradoxical alternative project would be to devise instruments that would make our work as irksome as possible, so that we would never for a second forget that what we are producing is never going to be ours. Such an alternative, however, sounds more like the dream of a madman than like a viable solution.

Six years after Eco’s article, Agnetti put this suggestion in practice, modifying the very desirable machines produced by Olivetti and Brionvega, products that became icons of 1960s Italian design.

The Poetics of Zeroing

Through the zeroing of practices and disciplines, Agnetti interrupted the process of transmission of a message, obliging viewers to attend to the workings of language and machines, stating:

Feeding your neighbour with products made to measure for the hand, the wall, the tired mind means to continue the psychological blackmail, totemic blackmail of the mass tasting. Nothing else. To alter instead the consumer goods, or better yet to degenerate something that has contributed to the fixing of a language, of an agreement by now discontinued, associated, exploited, means something quite different. At least it makes it easier to think it over, the hesitation in the face of the mystifying process.

For Agnetti, hesitation, insecurity, and uncertainty were indispensable to become an autonomous, critically thinking subject. Interruption and hiatuses not only made viewers attend to their perceptions, but also assisted them in questioning current practices and in developing abilities to imagine alternatives.

Furthermore, Agnetti’s emphasis on gaps, breaks, and interruptions enabled him to distance himself from the poetics of the Azimuth group, for example the extremely meticulous and precise work of Castellani, as well as from the romanticism of Arte Povera, but, moreover, to align himself with the aims and practices of conceptual art.

Agnetti stressed how systems and programs operate, and he pushed machines to a breaking point to display how organization and order are not naturally given, but an ideological construction. By showing familiar objects functioning in unfamiliar ways, Agnetti’s artistic practice prevents blind confidence in the regular workings of systems and promotes critical active thinking. “Zeroing” erases those mechanisms that weight down creative, perhaps even revolutionary, thought. Agnetti’s conceptual machines necessitated selection and reflection. Charles Harrison, the English art historian and member of Art and Language, would write in 2001 that bourgeois art is that “which masked the material conditions of its production behind the seeming immaculateness and instaneousness of its surface.” On the contrary, Agnetti’s altered machines – ordinary appliances that he disrupted and made inefficient— make visible their ideological and productive context. If industrial design aesthetizes the relationship between machine and humanity, and thus anesthetizes the latter to the latent injustice of the economic system, Agnetti’s interrupted machines display the intrinsic violence of industrial alienation and are a step in the process of change.
ENDNOTES

1 An extended, but quite different version of this essay, was published as “Enthymema. Rivista internazionale di critica, teoria e filosofia della letteratura, no.7, 2012, 543-558. I am extremely grateful to Germana Agnetti and Bruna Soletti for sharing with me their unpublished material and memories of Vincenzo Agnetti in the summers of 2011 and 2012. I thank Professor Kristine Stiles for her invaluable comments on this manuscript.


5 Achille Bonito Oliva, and Giorgio Verzotti, Vincenzo Agnetti (Milano: Skira, 2008), 162.


7 While this use of the term is not common in English, in what follows I use “poetics” to refer to the “programmatic projects of creation” of a specific artist, the “operative criteria which preceded over [the artistic product’s] moment of inception,” following Umberto Eco’s terminology in “The Open Work,” The Open Work, p. 22. Eco opposes “poetics” to “aesthetics,” which “reveals the latent possibilities of a certain type of experience in every artistic product, independently of the poet’s” (Ibid., 22).

8 Interview of the author with Bruna Soletti.


14 Eco, “Form as Social Commitment,” 128.


20 Dorfles’s initial engagement with the notion of aesthetic estrangement appeared in his 1958 book Leoscillazioni del gusto e larte moderna, but he developed this concept in Artificio e natura (1968) and finally completed his theory in L’intervallo perduto (Torino: G. Einaudi, 1980).

21 Dorfles, L’intervallo perduto, 77.

22 Eco, “Form as Social Commitment,” 141.

23 Ibid.


26 Eco, “Form as Social Commitment,” 128.

27 Vincenzo Agnetti, Travestito, 18.

28 Castellani created repetitive patterns and used laborious incisions to realize relief paintings that activated a field of light and shade on the surface of the canvas.