

SIGN AND SPACE

Two workshops about Western and Eastern calligraphy and an exhibition at the MAO - Museum of Oriental Art - in Turin Italy, September 3-11, 2016.

This might have been my most successful attempt to create a dialogue between Western and Eastern calligraphy.

In Japan the word shodo means “the way of handwriting”, a discipline of body and mind with philosophical implications. In the West the word calligraphy simply means “fine/pretty handwriting”, and “calligraphic” is also used to define what is overly devoted to form, without contents, shallow. Now that we are losing our handwriting, we discover that ours too is a discipline of body and mind.

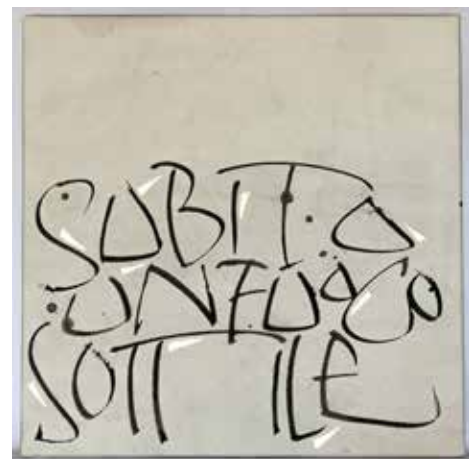
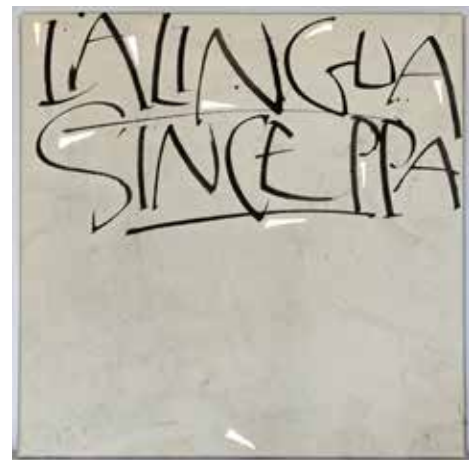
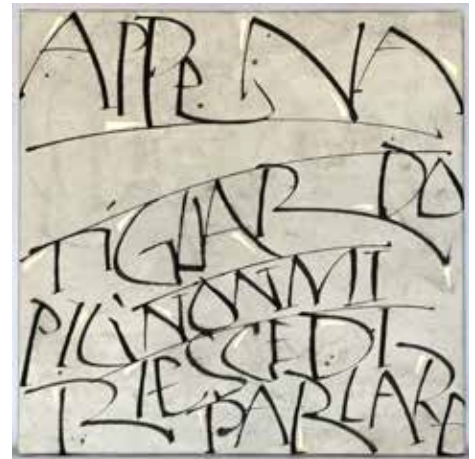
The arrangement for this event began more than a year ago, when I was contacted by Patricia Parpajola of Turin Educational Consortium. Thanks to Patricia, we’ve been able to organize a double workshop: three days with the Eastern calligrapher Norio Nagayama and three days with me, a Western calligrapher. Norio is Japanese and has studied calligraphy in Japan, but he has lived in Italy for a long time, therefore he knows the Italian language and culture.

One of the peculiarities of this workshop is that both me and Norio have been taking part for three days as teachers and for the other three days as students, in other words we have been each other’s student. This swap of position gave us the opportunity to understand each other’s work, and gave the students a chance to see the teacher taking part in the lessons as a student, the instructor being instructed.

During the first three days, Norio has been the teacher and we all have studied Eastern calligraphy. After having learnt the correct posture and the exact brush handling, we started

*Author: Monica Dengo
Text: Appena ti guardo più non mi riesce di parlare, la lingua
s’inceppa, subito un fuoco sottile scorre sotto la pelle.
Saffo, fragment 31, translated in Italian by Ilaria Dagnini.
4 pieces, each one 30x30cm.
Written with turkey quill and ink of paper,
gold leaf on vegetable resin. Year 2016.
In this artwork the elements in dialogue
with Japanese calligraphy are:
the gestural non-retouched strokes, a good level of
legibility, the non linear use of space and uneven letter-
spacing, which can be associated with breath, the variations
in form, measurement, dimension and letter- slant.*

The artworks in these pages have been exhibited at the Oriental Art Museum in Torino. In the captions you’ll find the specific artwork information and the elements that have contributed to the Eastern Western dialogue.





with simple horizontal and vertical strokes made with ink and brush. We slowly got to write logo-grams (commonly called characters), from the easiest ones to the more difficult. This allowed us to start visualizing strokes in relation to space and to began grasping the balance inherent in those symbols.

In the end, each of us made a big kanji (Japanese word for character), working on the floor with a huge brush. This allowed us to see the difference between a kanji correctly executed, and one that has been written with our entire body, which is full of energy.

In three days Norio gave us a general idea of Eastern calligraphy, a practice that requires many years of study to be mastered.

On the fourth day, after an half day break, we went to the MAO, the Museo d'Arte Orientale, where Norio and myself had exposed our works. This exhibition too, was an idea of mine: I wanted the students and the visitors to see our artworks compared.

Comparing two writing civilizations through the works of two calligraphy artists, in a 6x5 meters room, might seem ambitious and indeed it was, but in its own little way it revealed to be a useful and successful exhibition. The two of us had both presented a small selection of traditional and experimental works. We have showed readable writing, and I also exhibited some asemic writing. The comparison aimed to show a series

Author: Monica Dengo

Text: Lei è (She is)

5 pieces, each one 30x40cm.

Written with a self-made sponge-pen and ink on paper, gold leaf on vegetable resin.

Year 2016

In this artwork the presence of a few strong strokes is the element of the dialogue with the East. The letters have been made with a flat pen, but the emphasis is horizontal resulting in a composition that is seen much before it is read. Our eye is not used to the horizontal emphasis in writing, so the viewer has the time to appreciate the play of line and space before understanding the meaning of the forms.



of parallelisms, which demonstrated how East and West both have a prominent calligraphic culture.

The exhibition has been a good opportunity to understand how we perceive differently a stroke in which we recognize a semantic value and one that we don't know, a text that we read and one we only see as a set of abstract marks. For a Westerner, the risk is to look at Eastern calligraphy works only as abstract images, and at Western calligraphy works without being able to understand their abstract value, too influenced by the readable text.

With Norio we deepened this aspect: large size artworks, often made with a single kanji and written with a large brush, are very appreciated in the West because emotionally more engaging (Norio teaches almost always in Italy). In Japan, where people know the symbols and are used to observing well balanced kanji, the emotional aspect is inseparable from the correct balance of lines and spaces. For those of us used to observing calligraphy, even large Western artworks can appear unbalanced or disharmonious as a whole.

The gestural stroke was the common element in all of the works exhibited. This element, present in any handwriting, from any culture, tells the viewer much more than just the verbal

*Artwork on the left:
Author: Monica Dengo
Text: Afrodite ... sii mia alleata
Saffo fragment 1, traslation Ilaria Dagnini)
52x72cm
Written with aluminum self-made pen and
ink on paper, gold leaf on vegetable resin.
Year 2016*

*In this artwork the writing is almost all
asemic, reading is mainly abstract/visual.
As Westerners, we find ourself in a posi-
tion similar to that of being in front of an
Oriental piece of calligraphy which we
cannot read. The use of space is non-linear.*

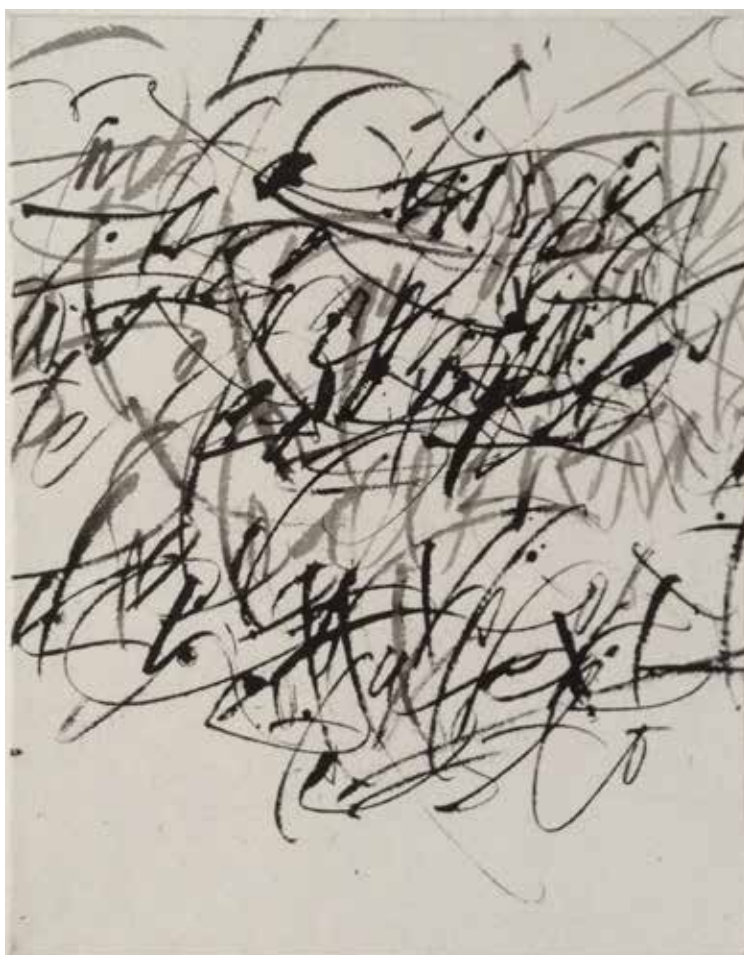
*Artwork on the right:
Author: Norio Nagayama
Text: Dou (movement)
150x250cm
Brush on fabric and sumi ink
Year 2015*

*The elents in dialogue are:
The legible writing, the gestural
non-ritouched strokes
the non linear use of space, here obtained
by writing only one large logo-gram.*



Artwork on top:
 Author: Norio Nagayama
 Text: LA MO RE CHE MO VE IL SO LE E LA L
 T RE S TE LLE
 "Divina Commedia" (Dante Alighieri)
 Brush and ink on Oriental paper 60x43cm

In this artwork the dialogue happens in the code: the text is in Italian, but it is written with the Japanese syllables (hiragana).



Artwork on the left:
 Author: Monica Dengo
 Text: Ti invito a fare tuo il testo.
 (I invite you to make the text your own)
 Ink on paper. Written with self-made
 aluminum pen.
 40x50cm

In this artwork the writing is almost all asemic, therefore legibility is mainly abstract. In this artwork, again, we experience a situation similar to the one we live in front of an Oriental artwork: we cannot read, but we know that something is written.

content. If we look at these pieces as contemporary artworks, written out in an era of great communications, in which we are all culturally mixed, we can say that handwriting is a “way” in the East as well as in the West.

In the second part I was the teacher and my program consisted in experimental Western calligraphy. I asked the students to use a self-made aluminum pen and Arches Velin, a very good and soft cotton paper. At first we compared the brush with the aluminum pen and found the latter much harder and stiffer, but as students proceeded and got more confident, they were able to obtain pressure variations, although these needed to be much more delicate.

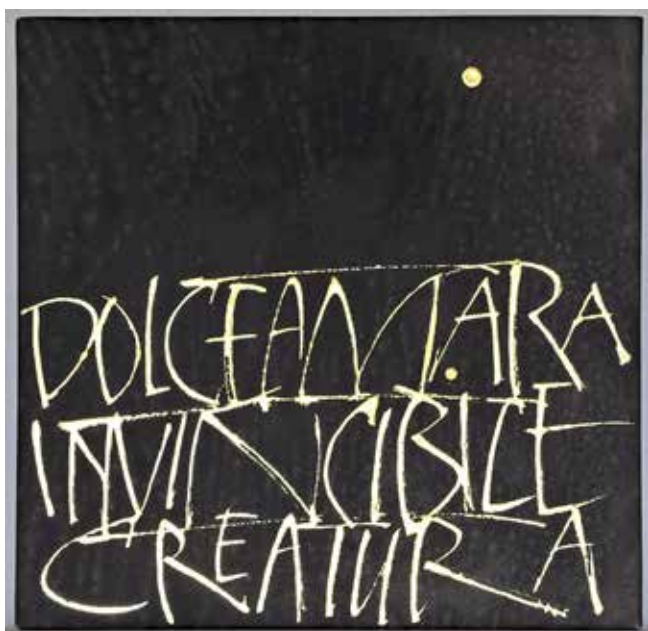
With the brush we had learned to keep steady both the hand and the forearm, and to move with the shoulder or even with the entire chest. With the aluminum pen, students discovered they often had to change the pen angle and therefore the arm and all the chest move, too.

However, what has been most surprising for all the students has been the journey which led them to live their handwriting as a cluster of abstract strokes and the act of writing as a dance between fullness and emptiness, between sign and space: I asked the students to write only in capital letters. I gradually told them to remove spacing between the letters, the lines and around the text. In this way we reached a texture made of letters. From then on, we began to modify forms, writing them light and heavy, big and small, tilted, thick and thin. Slowly the text became a means to execute signs, not any longer the signs a means express text.

This journey of text deconstruction has been a really private and intimate process for each student. Physically breaking the lines or coming out of the text grid can also mean, in a certain way, breaking the borders of an idea, of a relationship rigidly structured between thought and writing. The re-constructed text becomes a texture in which the position of the new stroke is suggested by the previous one in a dynamic relation between stroke and space. The logo becomes a composition in motion.

Francesca Colonnello, one of the students who participated in the workshop, writes:

When asked by Monica Dengo to jot down my impressions on the Sign & Space Calligraphy workshop I was happy at first. The workshop had offered so many new experiences that I felt lucky to have an opportunity



*Artwork on the left:
Author: Monica Dengo
Text: Dolceamara invincibile creatura
(Saffo, translation Ilaria Dagnini)
30x30cm, year 2016
Written with turkey quill and ink on paper,
and gold leaf on vegetable resin.
Legible artwork with gestural writing.
Note that all the details of the gestures are
emphasized by the gold leaf.*

Artwork below:
Author: Norio Nagayama
text: Lu Zhaolin (China 637-689)
70cm x 70cm

Legible text in gestural cursive, organized
in vertical columns.

The artwork reads vertically.
Note the movement given by the uneven
quantity of ink in each stroke, the varia-
tion of dimension and the asymmetrical
composition of each logo-gram.



to share them. However, now that I'm about to put those recollections on paper, I feel at a loss for words. I am just a beginner student of calligraphy and every new skill strikes me as a huge discovery, something that will sound very naïve to any expert. Therefore I apologize in advance if I will refer to dance from time to time as this is where I come from and might help me better describe my impressions.

During the first part of the workshop, Norio Nagayama taught us the basics of Japanese calligraphy. This phase was definitely challenging. The prompts to "not do anything" and to "let the brush trace the marks" sounded truly inspirational nevertheless proved awfully hard to obey. Keeping my arm parallel to the desk, holding the brush gently, moving the whole arm to trace the marks all the while breathing seemed impossible at first.

But then something clicked: during a conversation with our teachers, Norio mentioned discomfort as a vital component of learning. This wasn't foreign to me, it happens in dance too! Our mind grasps new information at quite a fast speed but it takes much longer for the body to digest such new data and re-define its movement patterns, be it on a sheet of paper or in a rehearsal room. Moreover, Norio's advice proved also extremely liberating: if we accept frustration as a vital part of the process, what else is left to fret about? Not much and this is when I just started enjoying the flow.

Gradually I started feeling how brush, body, paper and ink (not necessarily in this order) work as a close-knit team in tracing each mark. Little by little the subtleties in speed, pressure and friction when Norio guided my brush became more perceptible. Eventually I even started sensing the value of pauses between a stroke and the next one.

The second phase of the workshop, guided by Monica, was dedicated to experimenting with Latin calligraphy, with the aim of discovering relations between the Western and Eastern traditions. During this phase we switched to "latta pens" (the Italian word for "tin" has replaced "cola" for a more pleasing name) and to a heavier, rougher kind of paper. I had the impression that the different perspective acquired when using the brush had somehow affected my feel for these tools. In fact, the interaction of body, tool, ink and paper became clearer and I was utterly amazed by the improved sharpness of my marks.

A huge difference here was working on a phrase that we would repeat over and over during our explorations, as opposed to moving from one logogram to another. Although repetition is at

the core of both exercises, the action of tracing kanji seemed to me like a repetition of repertoires (vertical mark, horizontal mark, dot, entrance or exit mark). Whereas while weaving a texture out of the repeated phrase the direction of each new mark was imposed by the location of the previous one. Curiously, the first process reminded me of ballet where you are linking specific steps into a sequence and the second one of an improvisation where your main goal is to go to and fill the empty spaces.

Although during the first part of the workshop I had just scratched at the surface of Japanese calligraphy, during the second half I started feeling that trust and body memory were producing unexpected results. The balance between empty and full areas within each logogram that I had had trouble acknowledging, slowly started to surface when working with more familiar characters. Those dreaded pauses, so daunting at a first approach, now seemed to come more naturally. The concept of “ma” –span, blank, space between, gap to name just a few meanings– so deeply rooted in Japanese culture yet so elusive to a westerner was gradually taking shape through physical awareness.

This is what struck me as the more amazing and moving (if I may say so) discovery. That beneath layers of technical diversities and contrasts in aesthetics that of course do differentiate the two calligraphic traditions, there is indeed a common ground. It's open for dialogue, unassuming, resourceful: it's our body.