Amelia Etlinger
From Can Do to Must Do

Prosopopoeia, Vienna
15 November 2025 – 10 January 2026
Opening: Friday, 14 November 2025

In collaboration with Gramma_Epsilon, Athens
With an exhibition display by Lukas Meßner

The visual design in Amelia Etlinger's work is not based on an interest in artistic forms. Amelia was not an artist and rejected the definition of her work as art—her compositions are rather based on words and letters: "The visual design is in connection with the word, without a doubt. If this is one visual design and not another, it's because of the particular word. Because the visual pattern of the word *earth* is very different to me from the visual pattern of the word *flower* or the word *rose* or the word *winter*. […] when I'm working on a piece, the words are going through my mind."[1]

When Amelia finished a piece, it was sent as a *pocket poem* to friends and acquaintances. These correspondences often developed into deep and long-lasting friendships. The works on display at Prosopopoeia, produced in the 1970s and early 80s, have an element in common: all come from the collection of Mirella Bentivoglio, an Italian artist and curator who has included Amelia's poems in her exhibitions on several occasions (amongst them the exhibition *Materializzazione del Linguaggio/Materialization of Language* curated by Mirella at the Venice Biennale in 1978). Beyond their shared interests in language, concrete poetry and the Italian Poesia Visiva movement, the poems sent to Mirella speak of the love and affection between the two.

Love and affection are the *driving forces*[2] behind Amelia"s work. Amelia's esteem for the recipients of her correspondence is revealed in her alphabet of threads and the use of expressions such as "My Dear Friend," "My Friend of Love," "With all my Love," or in the symbol of the heart, drawn or stitched using her beloved threads. She often cut out the signatures from letters addressed to her, included them in one of her pieces and sent them back. In this way, each work was created specifically for one person: "Without love all the threads, all the little hearts, all the silk can fall flat and be nothing. Now I must rest and wait for the love to be (in) me once again. I only say if the material wants me to feel for it, I will always do the best that I can do at the time of doing. I cannot do more. I only ask now to be allowed to learn."[3]

The delicacy and fragility of the materials helps to understand the essence of Amelia's poetry which, although it starts from a technique that has always been connected with a feminine activity such as needlework, is nevertheless one that we can all relate to since it speaks not only of poetry, love, beauty, freedom and dreams, but also of pain and suffering. In one of the rare press releases on Amelia's work, an unnamed 'expert on Amelia's work' describes them as follows: "Etlinger's sheets are flowered shrouds in which the tears are tassels and fringes and organza threads."[4]

For Amelia, working with threads creates order out of chaos: "For me the work is a driving force that makes me mad (crazy) and also sane. I must every day be working. It is out of the chaos and insanity I try to create an order. We know in our hearts and minds that in each of us there are all

[1] Amelia Etlinger, Interview with Ellen Marie Bissert & June Rook, 13th Moon, Winter 1975, p.55.
[2] Ibid. p.62.
[3] Ibid.
[4] https://www.meer.com/en/55083-amelia-etlinger

these threads, but most times they are entangled. To untangle them is to create order. How order is put together is the poetry–the poem."[5]

The artist Lukas Meßner made a display specifically for the exhibition of Amelia Etlinger's poems at Prosopopoeia. In our conversations about the presentation of the work, we spoke a lot about how Amelia seemed rather opposed to certain principles in the art world. She sent her *pocket poems* to friends and colleagues and seemed to have chosen to work in private in the house she shared with her husband and her three children in Clifton Park, New York.

Since Amelia died at the age of 54, and her work hasn't been widely known while she was alive, there isn't much to hold on to when thinking about the "right way" to display her poems. Lukas decided to build four cases with rather modest materials, leftovers from other displays. Particle board, MDF board, and plexiglass were assembled into containers that give the works as much space as possible while still holding and framing them carefully. We didn't want to add or take away too much from the works, and keep in mind the few but significant words recorded in writing by Amelia in her interview in the feminist magazine 13th Moon in 1975. The envelopes are shown besides the poems when there is something written on them that is directly related to their contents.



[5] Amelia Etlinger, Interview with Ellen Marie Bissert & June Rook, 13th Moon, Winter 1975, p.58.