5. On Alberto Seassaro's Notational Sheets. The Texture of a Verbal-visual Writing

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5.1 The Perseverance of Annotation

There is a fine yet tenacious *thread* 1⃰ that links Alberto Seassaro's notational sheets to one another.

Different in origin and substance, these sheets of notes, research, and systematization, share above all a distinctive trait that marks them eloquently: they present themselves as signs proper to the culture of design, the symptom of a designing mind, of a meticulous perseverance in jotting down and fixing through graphic marks referable to the expressive style of the design drawing as well as to the written note of a stenographic and mental kind; a form proper to self-communication, through juxtapositions and mixtures of writing, figural, schematic, and verbal codes.

It should also be considered, in parallel, the substantial documentary mass of which they form a part, corresponding to an enormous production of written material and to the incessant accumulation of paper artifacts that characterized a

Note 1.
On the theme of the thread and the corresponding archaeology of a metaphor, see Catucci, 2024, p. 41: «The guiding thread makes it possible to bind together events that at first sight have no direct relations, so distant can they be not only with respect to the heart of an argument but also in time and space. […] Dealing with the heterogeneous may indeed give rise to the need to make a selection, to discard something in order to enhance something else, to extract from the whole only certain aspects, choosing them on the basis of a compositional strategy» (Catucci, 2024, p. 41).

daily working method: an oriented, contingent, yet purposeful accumulation, to be distinguished radically from the deliberate collecting of those who preserve traces for future remembrance 2⌄. By contrast, in this case it is an archive of the present for a near-term, at times immediate, destination: tools for communicating in short order, for clarifying oneself and making things clear, a contingent strategy for fixing and, if need be, subsequently transmitting in a transitive configuration.

No direct addressee is, in fact, discernible in these papers; rather, they are presumed to constitute a preliminary elaboration, the initial phase of a further mediation, a *first note* 3⌄ to be given voice, as needed, at a later stage for subsequent presentation. In this sense, they appear as provisional artifacts, not intended for publication, but as devices for a reflective act, a valuable anticipation, at the level of discursive intentions, of a course of study or a possible communicative project; a writing of intent, of projection, very rarely of offcuts or *marginalia*. Where fragmentariness is an index of an incessant exploration of connections 4⌄ and does not contradict the drive toward systematization.

Note 2.
Unlike the very nature of the archiving trace: by contrast, on the meaning of the archival intent and its consequent implications, see Derrida, 2005.

Note 3.
On the first note as a writing of anticipation, an auxiliary writing, of preparation, of preliminary analysis for other communicative forms, and lacking a compulsory form but freely drafted like all provisional annotations, see Baule, 2020.

Note 4.
On the figure of the explorer of connections and the principle of incompleteness, see Veca, 2011, p. 85 ff.

5.2 A Brilliant Verbo-visual Rhetoric

As confirmation of the unitary artefactual nature of these documents and of the idea of scriptive movement that underlies them, we can place them largely within those graphic-expressive systems that originally precede alphabetic writing (Cardona, 2009): a handwriting as a mingling of scriptive and visual codes, a writing that positions itself fully in the field of verbo-visual expression; and even in those cases where the mark seems to run along an apparently prescriptive plane, similar to technical-constructive drawing, it surpasses that rigidity while retaining its performative potential.

As Giovanni Anceschi, who has made this theme one of his principal objects of study, states:

> What is notational is usually seen as a restitutive mode of a rigid kind, whereas *technical reproduction* is seen as continuous,

analogical, [...]. Nothing could be more apparent: the very schematicity of annotation ends up being what enables the performer, indeed, what *generates* interpretation in the performer. [...] Notation is elastic, because in principle it is discontinuous, and in any case imprecise. Notation functions as a producer of interpretive variety [...] Whereas in the scientific domain it does not contain prescriptive aspects, [...] notation in technical and creative activities seems to have both functions. (Anceschi, 1992, p. 132)

The didactic exercise boards that, by virtue of their constructive instructions, most closely resemble the prescriptive go in this direction; apparently addressed to a direct addressee (the person who must carry out the exercise), they likely represent a preliminary elaboration. Exercises such as *Accendi una luce* [Switch on a light] (fig. 1) evoke a discursive-narrative suggestion and present themselves as scores for a series of possible performances. Taken as a whole, however, the articulation of the notes for the Course on *Lighting* represents a deployment of the entire span of the notational spectrum: from the sheets on the historical representation of light (fig. 2) to those on the etymology and the metaphor of light (fig. 3) there is a progression that moves from the purely verbal to verbal schematization and then to the introduction of the visual; from the symbolic-verbal, with representations of *seeing* (fig. 4), to the studies on concavity (fig. 5), where three-dimensional forms evolve in a generative play. In this case the design imperative clearly operates, and the mise en figure displays its full heuristic value: here, «representation is a support for invention, for the *trouvaille*. In this sphere, in short, images serve to discover and to invent» (Anceschi, 1992, p. 11). On the same theme, the synthesis board *Trigonon light – le parole della luce e la genesi della metafora* [Trigonon light – the words of light and the genesis of the metaphor] [1] records the writing of a *complex figural text* (Anceschi, 1992, p. 41) within a *mise-en-scène* that reconnects to triadic iconography.

The notes sheet relating to the course *Tecnologia dell'architettura* [Architectural Technology] (fig. 6) likewise includes, under the form of mixed schematizations, figures and caricatural traces that converge in a *manipolazione proiettiva* [projective manipulation] (Anceschi, 1992, p. 41): a synoptic view that comprises the perspective representation

1. Progetto non finito del Manifesto per il Corso di Culture della luce.
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Figure 1.
Exercise for Thursday 18.5.2017. Accendi una luce [Switch on a light].

Figure 2.
Notes on the history of light in artistic works.

Figure 3.
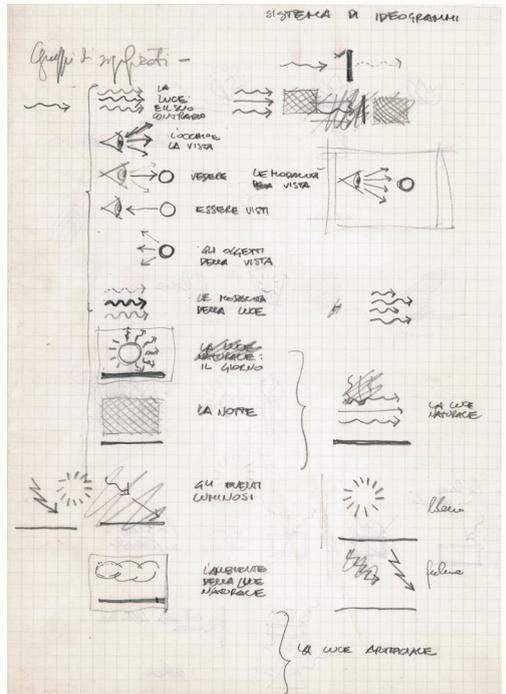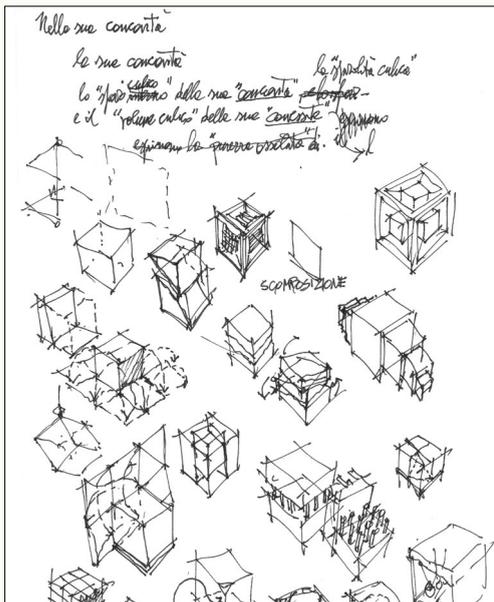Notes on the metaphor of light.
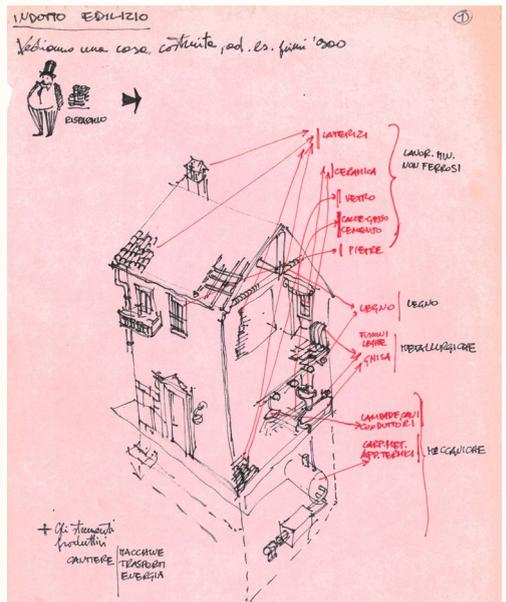

Figure 4.
Notes on vision.

Figure 5.
Notes on concavity.

Figure 6.
Notes for the course on Architectural Technology.

of the building with a transparency effect and an endoscopic view, the schematic-verbal annotation of structural elements, and, not least, the symbolic figure of the *saver*.

The illustrative-caricatural code adopted in this latter case recurs across most of the illustrative inserts present in the notes and traverses different themes; the sketchy, comic-style manner of these pictograms underscores a personal, confidential point of view. Up to the deliberate transgression of the sketches labeled *Supplemento al Supplemento al dizionario italiano di Munari* [Supplement to the Supplement to the Italian Dictionary by Munari] 5↘ (fig. 7), a provocative over-stepping of the bounds of the proper, albeit avowed, decorum of the Munari collection.

5.3 The Filter of Irony

The idea that, in order to safeguard an indisputable firmness of principles, as well as a convinced disciplinary dedication, it is also necessary to make room for playfulness, irony, the lesson of relativity, and open thinking is confirmed, for example, by the covers of the course booklets spanning the academic years of the 1970s decade (figs. 8, 9, 10). The graphic montage of illustrations, drawn by hand or taken from other sources, and inserted within the context of university research bears witness to a demystifying approach woven with ironic reversals (Jankélévitch, 1997, p. 61 ff.).

In the case of the booklets for study groups (figs. 8, 9), where disciplinary boundaries are swept away by free connections, the visual charge becomes more pronounced, happily irreverent and transgressive, assimilated from those countercultural languages that embrace montages of grainy photocopies, the provisional nature of handwritings, and the typewritten informality of the *mimeograph format* 6↘ 2↘ 3↘ 4↘.
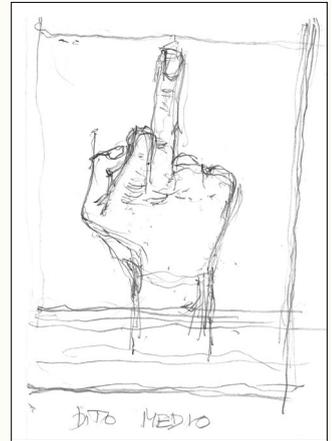
The wry gaze that frames the angularity of things, the mechanics of the system of powers faced with the tactics of play, the continual shifting of point of view: a step beyond the principle of otherness lies

Note 5.
«In this book the author examines the various ways of expressing oneself without speaking, not only with the hands. […] We considered it appropriate to collect as many as possible, omitting obscene and vulgar gestures, in order to provide the most accurate documentation possible for the use of foreigners. […] or as a supplement to the Italian dictionary» (Munari, 1999).

Figure 7.
Supplemento al Supplemento al dizionario italiano di Munari [Supplement to the Supplement to the Italian Dictionary by Munari].


Note 6.
On the mimeograph format and the epic of the mimeograph, see Baule, 2008, p. 15.

2. Alberto Seassaro, *La politica della ricerca in edilizia*, Facoltà di Architettura, A.A. 1972-73.
Document→

3. *Bollettino del Laboratorio di Produzione del Territorio*, giugno 1975, n. 3, Facoltà di Architettura, Politecnico di Milano.
Document→

4. *Bollettino del Laboratorio di Produzione del Territorio*, settembre 1975, n. 4, Facoltà di Architettura, Politecnico di Milano.
Document→

the exercise of a constant, radical critical relation with institutionalized knowledge; it is a matter of playing along, a game acknowledged as such, without granting respite to those who turn it, for their own ends, into an instrument of domination. Counterpoint to the filter of irony, born of a libertarian breath, is the meticulousness of the handwriting with which the analytical-descriptive, or prescriptive, notes are transcribed. *La grande tavola La ricerca morfologica – parte prima. L'approccio deduttivo* [Morphological research – part one. The deductive approach] (Seassaro, La Pietra, 1965) (fig. 10) is a bold textual map for the systematization of knowledge in the field of reference. We are in the realm of an encyclopedic project, where the system of contents is laid out within the ordering space of a tabular configuration, a device «addressed in the first instance to someone who, more than a spectator, is a user» (Anceschi, 1992, p. 101) 5↘. Tabular-diagrammatic in kind, in turn, are the ordering schemes of the Progetto di iter didattico per l'Indirizzo tecnologico ad Architettura [Didactic itinerary Project for the Technological Track in Architecture] 6↘, an organizational model intended for an institutional destination; with a peculiarity: the flow diagram (Bertin, 1967) identifies, with schematic skill, the planning of the pathways of the educational itinerary, unfolding them over the grid of the didactic structure and the temporal score.

5. Ugo La Pietra e Alberto Seassaro, *La Ricerca Morfologica*. Quadro della bibliografia di riferimento sulle culture della forma. Document→
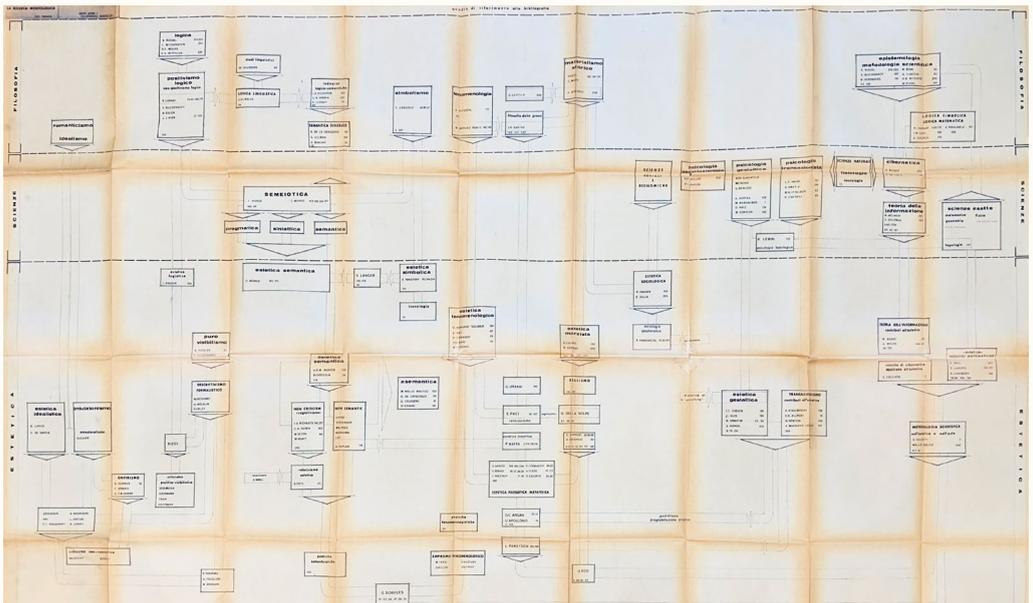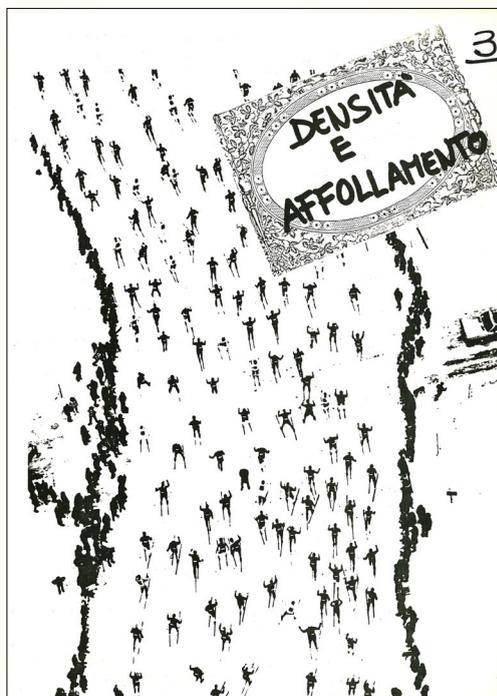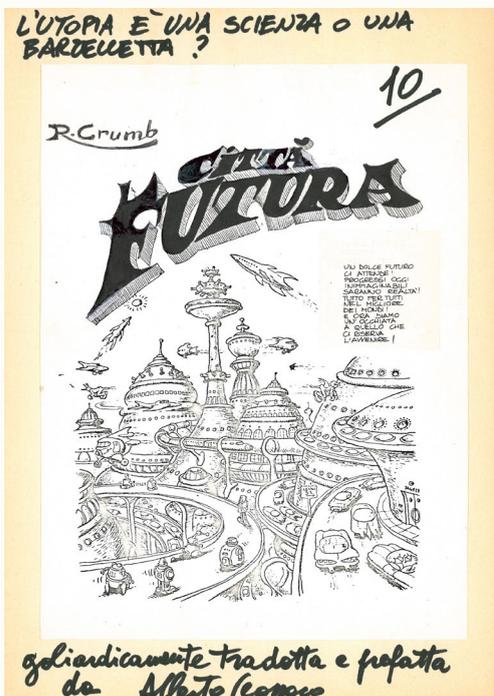
Figure 8.
L'utopia è una scienza o una barzelletta? Città futura
[Is utopia a science or a joke? Future city], booklet for study groups, cover.

Figure 9.
Densità e affollamento [Density and crowding], booklet for study groups, cover.
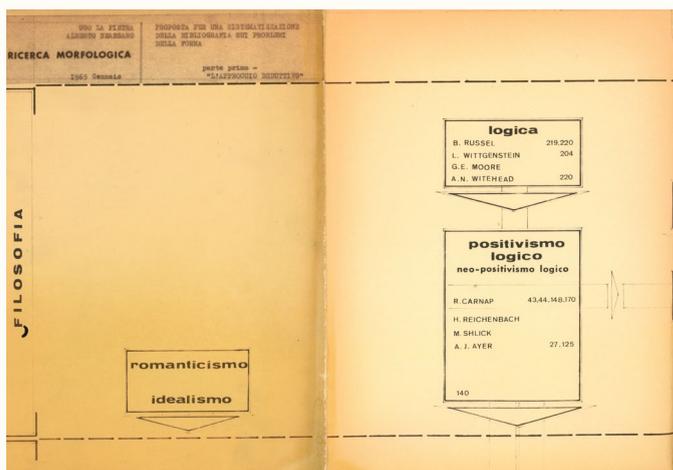
Figure 10.
La ricerca morfologica [Morphological research], board, January 1965.

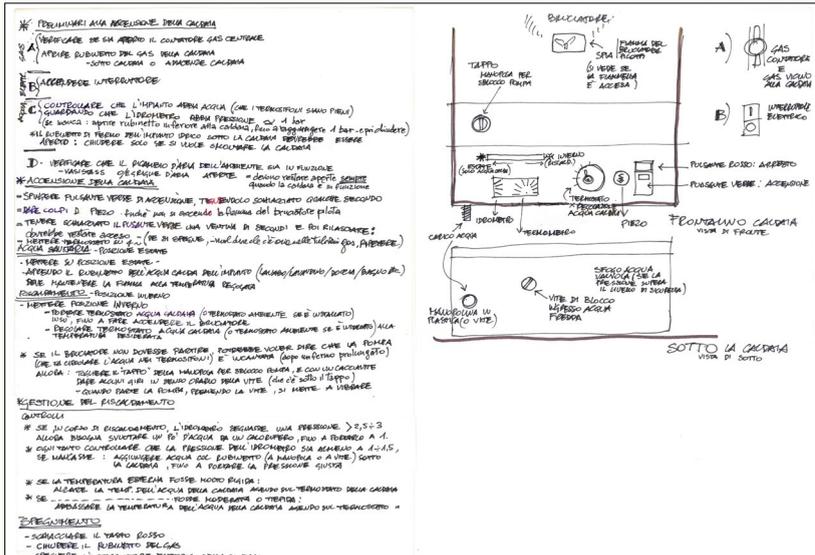6. Progetto di iter didattico per l'Indirizzo Tecnologico.
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Figure 11.
Boiler, instructions for use.

5.4 Leave Nothing to Chance

Of a different tenor, both graphic and thematic, yet the result of the same meticulousness, are the handwritten prescriptive notes, evidently for private use, which fall within the scope of instructions for use, as in the case of *Preliminari all'uso della caldaia* [Preliminaries for using the boiler] (fig. 11). Here the detail of the operational sequence describes a process and illustrates the corresponding technical apparatus, accompanying the performance of the necessary functions.

In the same domain one can include the collection of more than a hundred note-cards gathered under the title *Tradurre digitale/analogico. Decriptare il linguaggio tecnico* [Translating digital/analog. Decrypting technical language] 7↘. These are annotations derived from basic lessons on computer use and from self-learning trial exercises. Here too textual and visual notes alternate, recorded step by step, very much like a user manual written in-house, sometimes with topic labels: *Non riesco a spegnere* [I can't shut down], *Pagina della posta in arrivo* [Inbox page], *Scanner* [Scanner], [...] (fig. 12, 13).

Finally, a *storyboard* sequence, a draft intended for use in court, reconstructs the stages of a road accident (fig. 14), with an accentuated figural component and a narrative montage where, again, the comic-strip inflection does not undermine the credibility of the represented object but demonstratively schematizes the phases that constitute the event. Different registers and different centers of reflection, a vast arsenal of references across distinct techniques of representation and forms of systematization, together lead to a graphic form that implies a reiterated visual translation (Baule, Caratti, 2016). It is the intent to fix, in hybrid forms, annotations that cannot be reduced to the verbal. These are strategic devices whose performative value responds to a visionary, design-oriented spirit, to a utopian determination sustained by a subtle tenacity and directed toward creative indiscipline 8↘.
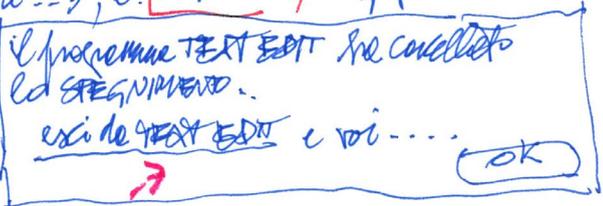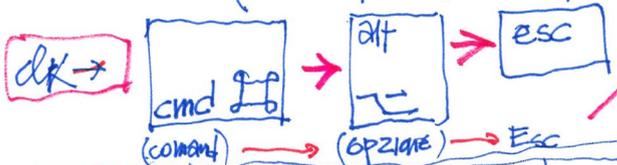
Figure 12.
Non riesco a spegnere [I can't shut down], learning card for computer use.
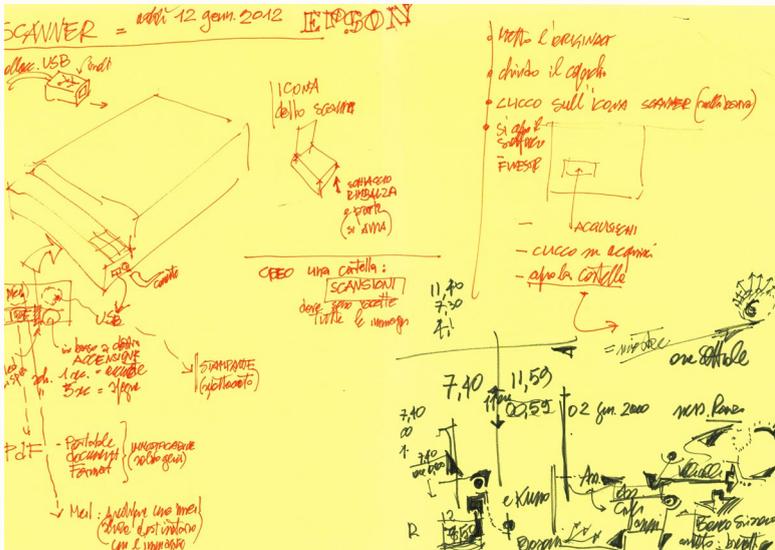
Figure 13.
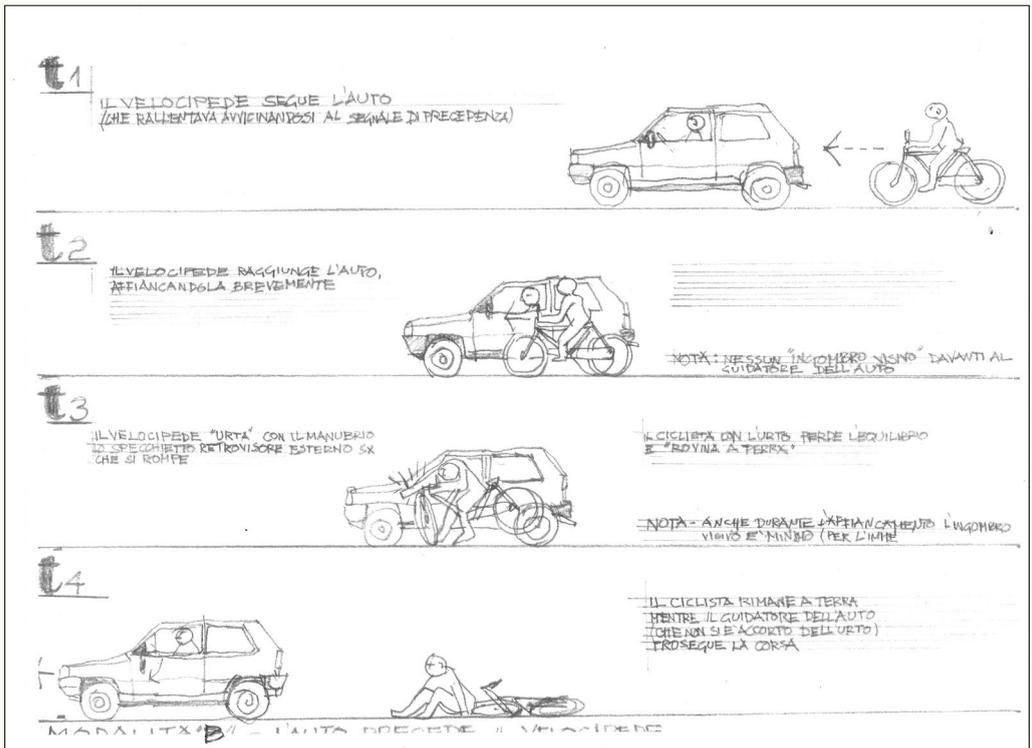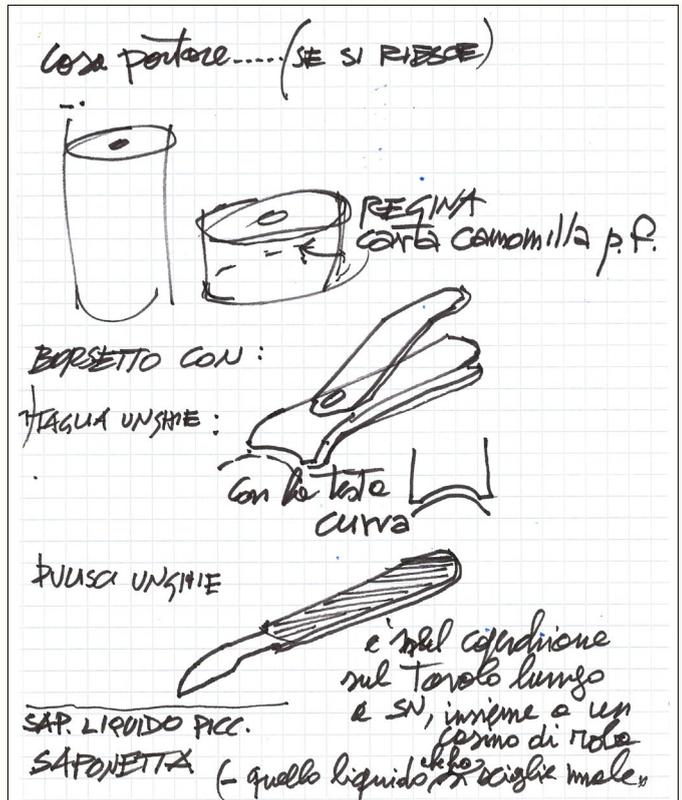*Scanner*, learning card for computer use.

Figure 14.
Reconstruction of the stages of a road accident.

5.5 The Visible Voice of Writing

Seassaro's writing-drawing is, certainly, a way of *reasoning on paper*, a form of lucid and constant reflexivity in search of mnemonic schemes. Yet, thanks to its calligraphic flow, it is also the expression of an intrinsic synaesthetic valence. This visual writing, in fact, suggests sonic traces, at times they are arrows: from deep within the grain of verbo-visual writings (Barthes, 1986, p. 6) the *grain of the voice* surfaces. This demonstrates that, even more than simple writing, which at times borders on *grado zero* [Writing Degree Zero] (Barthes, 1982), autographic verbo-visual writing can best restore a material and bodily dimension. These word-figure marks are vocal gestures, moreover indelible within polytechnic spaces.

If Saul Steimberg – among the very first Architecture students at Politecnico di Milano – himself an illustrator of voices (Barthes, 1998) – had by chance met Alberto Seassaro,

Figure 15.
Cosa portare… (se si riesce) [What to bring… (if possible)].

he would surely have known how to draw, with the speech bubbles of his characters, the movement of the voice: the scathing dialectic, the unbroken discursive weave, the labyrinthine progression, the dialoguing and persuasive monologue, the hieroglyphic synthesis, the low-vibrated timbre. Among these papers there are written figures (fig. 15) which, even when the voice was forcibly silenced, knew how to speak on their own; and, like all the other annotations, they continue to speak. This is the key that explains the voice of the marks in Seassaro's verbo-visual writing.

They speak, they speak to us, these papers, and they ask to be heard; inseparably bound together, they return both the trace of a writing and the grain of a voice.

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