

DESIGNED WORDS FOR A DESIGNED WORLD: THE INTERNATIONAL  
CONCRETE POETRY MOVEMENT, 1955-1971

by

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B.A., The University of British Columbia, 2000  
M.A., Simon Fraser University, 2002

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(English)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
(Vancouver)

September 2010  
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## **Abstract**

This dissertation positions the International Concrete Poetry movement within its historical moment and links it to the emergence of a new global imaginary around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It makes the argument that contemporaneous social and technological shifts directly influenced the compositional strategies of a group of poets who aimed to transform poetry's communicative power in a rapidly shifting media environment. By positioning primary materials – poems, manifestos, and statements by the poets themselves – against contemporaneous cultural phenomena across various disciplines, I perform a critical examination that allows for new strategies for engaging work that has historically frustrated readers. I identify in a series of permutational poems the influence of rudimentary computer technology and the implications that technology has for poetic subjectivity. I locate the international character of the movement in modernization projects such as Brasília, and in technologies that held significance for the entire globe, such as reinforced concrete, satellite photography, and nuclear weapons. As concrete poetry takes shape in both books and galleries, I investigate the spatial implications of the work in its various forms, and analyse its often fraught relationship with Conceptual Art, which also presented language in innovative ways though in pursuit of different purposes. Across this terrain my methodological approach oscillates between art history and literary and cultural studies, paying close attention to how the poetry circulated within and imagined global spaces at a time that predated but in some ways initiated the trends we now see more fully developed in current concepts of globalization.

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## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank, for their financial support during the preparation of this study, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Department of English at the University of British Columbia. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Canada – U.S. Fulbright Program, who made it possible for me to spend a year at Stanford University studying with the incredibly intelligent, generous, and kind Johanna Drucker. Her indefatigable pursuit of knowledge across disciplines is the horizon to which my eyes will always return.

For their tremendous urge to collect, which is matched only by their urge to give, I would like to thank Dr. Marvin and Ruth Sackner, who allowed me invaluable access to their Archive of Visual and Concrete Poetry in August of 2008. To Scott Watson, at the Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery, I owe thanks for his willingness to investigate concrete poetry across various forms and geographies, and for inviting me along for the ride. I would like to express my deep gratitude to my dissertation committee: Adam Frank, for his comments, and for his advice as a practitioner in parallel modes; Jeff Derksen, for embodying a model of praxis, and whose critical breadcrumbs I will continue to use as navigational aids; and most importantly, to my supervisor, Richard Cavell, whose patience always seems to return when tested, and whose conversation, erudition, and friendship I will never forget. The countless hours of arguing mixed with laughter have made the experience of writing this dissertation far less stressful than I was led to believe it would be.

I would also like to extend thanks to both Clint Burnham and Peter Dickinson for offering a running critique of my ideas over the past four years. And finally, I would like to acknowledge my closest friends – Ian, Sunja, and Andy – who never made me talk about my work, and Julia, most of all, for keeping her eyes from glazing over when I did.

*For Andrew Herfst*

## – Chapter 1: Introduction –

Problems appear as soon as one attempts to introduce concrete visual poetry, problems of chronology and category. Although most histories of the genre point to the 1955 meeting in Ulm, Germany, between Eugen Gomringer, the Bolivian-Swiss secretary to Max Bill, and Decio Pignatari, the Brazilian poet and co-founder of the Noigandres group, as the moment the term *concrete poetry* was coined (*konkrete poesie* in German, *poesia concreta* in Portuguese), the phrase *concrete poetry* had appeared previously. Öyvind Fahlström, the Swedish<sup>1</sup> concrete poet, used the term in 1953, in his “Hatila Rägulpr på Fätsklikaben, Manifesto för Concrete Poetry,” although his ideas expressed there owe more to *musique concrète* than to what would later be understood as concrete poetry. “Concreta” was used to describe Augusto de Campos’s “Poetemenos” in *Noigandres 2*, published in 1952 (Gumpel 38). And the Austrian concrete poet Reinhold Döhl pushes the term’s beginnings back still further, quoting a 1951 essay by Hans Arp, “Kandinsky, le Poète”: “in the year of dada, poems by [Wassily] kandinsky were read for the first time in cabaret voltaire in zürich (...). the dadaists were fervent protagonists of concrete poetry” (Döhl n. pag.; lower case in the original). Arp’s usage of ‘concrete poetry,’ however, owes more to the sense by which ‘concrete’ had come to refer to techniques in visual art than in literature, specifically the tradition that flows from the publication of Theo van Doesburg’s “Manifesto of Concrete Art” in the first and only issue of *Art Concret* in 1930, through to figures such as Max Bill, the painter, sculptor, designer, architect, and critic whose exhibition of concrete art in São Paulo in 1956 had such a profound influence on the Brazilian concrete poets.

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<sup>1</sup> Fahlström was born in São Paulo and lived in Brazil until he was ten, but I have never come across a reference to him as a Brazilian-Swedish poet. Eugen Gomringer, however, is often referred to as Bolivian-Swiss, which likely has to do with the amount of time he spent as a child in Bolivia as well as his practice of composing poems in Spanish as well as German and English.

Stretching back even further, the American orientalist Ernest Fenollosa uses the term as early as 1906, in his essay “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry.” He describes the Chinese ideogram for the verb “to be” as an amalgam of symbols which together represent the idea of grabbing the moon with a hand, and comments: “Here the baldest symbol of prosaic analysis is transformed by magic into a splendid flash of concrete poetry” (Fenollosa and Pound 89). This is likely the first time the term “concrete poetry” appears in print, and although it might not describe what I argue is now the primary referent of the phrase “concrete poetry” - what was concrete poetry in 1906 is no longer concrete poetry in 1955, or 2010 – it is nonetheless significant for the understanding of the visual character of language that would later become central to the International Concrete Poetry movement.

Although Fenollosa's understanding of the Chinese language has been largely discredited by linguists,<sup>2</sup> his essay's role in the development of twentieth century poetics is immeasurable. Ezra Pound, who edited and annotated Fenollosa's essay before publishing it in 1918, was also heavily influenced by the text. Chinese ideograms appear in various places within the *Cantos*, and Pound's ideas about Imagism exhibit a desire to strip poetry down to an *arrangement* of meaning that operates in much the same way as an ideogram. Besides Pound's obvious admiration, Charles Olson designated the essay as “the damned best piece on language since when,” and Haroldo de Campos locates in Fenollosa's statement that “relations are more real and more important than the things which they relate” a “structuralist credo before the letter” (Olson 169; Saussy 22). Fenollosa identifies a *material* superiority in the ideogram over the word:

There is little or nothing in a phonetic word to exhibit the embryonic stages of its growth. It does not bear its metaphor on its face. [...] In this Chinese shows its

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<sup>2</sup> Saussy provides a list of critiques of Pound and Fenollosa's approach: “for an account of the 'ideogram' that classes it among fallacies of translation, see [Jean] Paulhan, *La preuve par l'étymologie*; for a thorough-going polemic against the idea of ideography, see [John] DeFrancis, *The Chinese Language*. For an overall (if partisan) account of Pound's 'invention of Chinese,” see [Hugh] Kenner, *The Pound Era*” (Saussy, 177n)

advantage. Its etymology is constantly visible. It retains the creative impulse and process, visible and at work. After thousands of years the lines of metaphoric advance are still shown, and in many cases actually retained in the meaning.

(Pound and Fenollosa 55)

The ideogram's potential to accentuate its *source* made it particularly attractive to poets who meant to mark a shift in signifying practice around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Decio Pignatari's "New Poetry" (1956) holds up the ideogram as an ideal fusion of form and content: "a general art of language. advertising, the press, radio, television, cinema. a popular art. the importance of the eye in this more rapid communication: from neon signs to comic strips. the need for movement. dynamic structure. the ideogram as basic idea" (86) (all lower case in original). Words in their conventional modalities could no longer suffice.

In spite of its possible meanings, historically and categorically the phrase *concrete poetry* has largely come to refer to the type of poetry Gomringer and Pignatari and the poets around them were producing, initially independently from and unaware of each other, in the period leading up to and then following their 1955 meeting. As both Gomringer and the Noigandres group would eventually explain in various manifestos and critical articles, concrete poetry was a movement sought to communicate a spatial, rather than a discursive, syntax. This reflects the fact that, from its beginnings, practitioners of concrete poetry aimed for a supranational, supralinguistic poetry, one that would strive for a fusion of form and content by foregrounding the visual character of words and letters over their semantic or phonetic functions. In his 1956 introduction to the anthology he and Pignatari planned to publish, but which never came about, Gomringer writes:

Concrete poetry is founded upon the contemporary scientific-technical view of the world and will come into its own in the synthetic-rationalistic world of tomorrow.

If concrete poetry is still considered strange (aesthetically meagre or overly-

simplified) this is probably due to a lack of insight into the new directions in which our society is developing in thought and action which in essence contain a new total view of the world. [...]

I am therefore convinced that concrete poetry is in the process of realizing the idea of a universal poetry. (Gomringer, "Concrete Poetry" 68)

This emphasis on the technological imperatives of mid-century, which were to be met by the development of a new poetry, and consequently a new type of reader, distinguishes concrete poetry of the mid-1950s and onward from the work that previously carried the label, and ties it to modernist ideas of progress. The Noigandres group supports these ideas in their major manifesto, "Plano-Pilôto Para Poesia Concreta" (Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry) (1958):

Concrete Poetry aims at the least common multiple of language. Hence its tendency to nounising and verbification. [...]

Renouncing the struggle for the 'absolute,' Concrete Poetry remains in the magnetic field of perennial relativeness. Chronomicro-metering of hazard. Control. Cybernetics. The poem as a mechanism regulating itself: feed-back. [...]

Concrete Poetry: total responsibility before language. Thorough realism. Against a poetry of expression, subjective and hedonistic. To create precise problems and to solve them in terms of sensible language. A general art of the word. (A. de Campos, H. de Campos, and Pignatari 70)

These excerpts redefine the concept of concrete, distinguishing it from those that came before: an updated concrete that accounted for the new organization of everyday life in the post-war west and rapidly modernizing Brazil. It was van Doesburg's frustration with the application of the term *abstract* to his paintings that prompted him to develop his idea of concrete, which he used to describe work that was meant only to refer to itself as form: a line, therefore, would never stand in for a greater idea, but would strive to simply be a line. The same goes for a

colour.<sup>3</sup> This is also the usage Arp earlier applied to the poetry of Kandinsky, whose poetry, like that of Tzara and Ball, was non-referential, and which strived for a negation of semantic communication. Conversely, the concrete poets following the examples of Gomringer and the Noigandres Group were engaged in a positive project, a fact that Liselotte Gumpel argues is a result of their development out of a post-war milieu. Gumpel attributes the tendency of dada to engage in nihilistic, destructive negativism to its development during the middle of the First World War, when artists could not help but witness the horror of the technologies of mass killing. Postwar concrete poetry, conversely, “remained curiously positive, to the point of appearing positivistic at times, particularly when the givens of technology were overly stressed.[...] It was this optimism that led the concretists to do positively what Dada had attempted negatively in the way of identifying directly with occurrences in the world of experience” (Gumpel 48-9). Despite the strong connection between concrete poetry and the ideas of the De Stijl group, it is difficult, when reading the second de Stijl manifesto (1920), to recognize any of the concrete poets’ attitudes in a statement such as: “The organism of contemporary literature feeds on the sentimentality of an enfeebled generation” (van Doesburg et al, qtd. in Weaver 124). To begin with, the language of the concrete poets favoured metaphors of mechanisms over organisms, and even after witnessing the horrors of the Second World War, they never thought so little of their publics as to insult them as “enfeebled.” More often than not they admired their readers, and it was the shift in the organization of everyday life (and perception) that demanded a new type of poetry, not the other way around. Gone is the nihilistic, negative impulse of the avant-gardes of the first half of the twentieth century. In the de Stijl project, there is an urge to destroy the conventional descriptive character of poetry. In concrete

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<sup>3</sup> “Van Doesburg’s 1930 publication ‘Numero d’Introduction du Groupe et de la Revue Art Concret’ had defined the concerns of concretism: a search for a universal formal language which had no relation to nature, emotional life or sensory data, and the pursuit of works which were completely void of lyrical, symbolic, or dramatic expression (Drucker, *Figuring* 116).

poetry the emphasis is not on destruction but progression. The poets are not battling something that has become irrelevant, but hoping to keep pace. Witnessing a generation transformed by electronic media and advancements in image-making, the concrete poets adapted traditional conceptions of line and the page in order to interpellate poetry into an aesthetic order that was still fascinated with the possibilities of the “new.”

The distinctions between concrete poetry and the literary and artistic experiments that preceded it are valuable for delimiting a type of poetry that has yet to be adequately studied within its historical context, or approached through a reading of its explicitly stated concerns and motivations. Concrete goes out of its way to announce its temporality. Emmett Williams writes in the introduction to his influential *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967): “[concrete poetry] was born of the times, as a way of knowing and saying something about the world of *now*, with the techniques and insights of *now*” (Williams vi). One year later, in the introduction to her large-format and full-colour anthology, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, Mary Ellen Solt echoes Williams while acknowledging the increased commodification and spectacularization of everyday life and its spaces: “the visual poem is a word design in a designed world” (Solt 60). Richard Kostelanetz drives home this point in his 1970 anthology *Imaged Words & Worded Images*, which includes, as a ‘poem,’ a photograph by John Hinde of London’s Piccadilly Circus which looks more like a pop-art collage than a city block<sup>4</sup>. The facades of the buildings are covered with advertisements for everything from Coca-Cola to the Beatles’ movie *A Hard Day’s Night*, from gin, gum, and cigarettes to travel packages and jewellery. In addition, three double-decker buses act as billboards on wheels (Kostelanetz 9). The connections between the explosion of advertising post-World War II and poetry here become eminently clear. Concrete poetry emerged from this milieu, and the work demands readings that take into account cultural shifts

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<sup>4</sup> Kostelanetz actually includes two different Hinde photographs of Piccadilly Circus, each equally full of advertising, on pages nine and thirty-four. The one described here is on page nine.

that stretch beyond the literary and artistic.<sup>5</sup> Juxtaposing the poems and critical writing of the time against social and technological advances of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century on a global scale – of which there were many – serves to breath new life into a historically deflated field.

The question that arises from statements like Williams’ and Solt’s, however, is: when is now no longer now? When does now become ‘then’? Kostelanetz’s introduction, in which he opts to replace the term *concrete poetry* with *word imagery*, is significantly dated January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1970, marking the beginning of a new decade, and the year many feel marks the termination of the International Concrete Poetry movement. Stephen Scobie argues that the movement’s demise can be located in, “ironically, 1967-8, the years of its apparent triumph, with the publication of the three major anthologies edited by Emmett Williams, Stephen Bann, and Mary Ellen Solt. The very definitiveness of these collections ‘froze’ Concrete Poetry in its historical moment” (Scobie, *Earthquakes* 146). Scobie might be guilty of an Anglo-American bias here, however, as Solt defers the pinnacle to November, 1970, and the opening of the massive concrete poetry exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (Solt, “Concrete Steps” 351). This exhibition, which would travel to Stuttgart, Nürnberg, Liverpool and Oxford in 1971, has a retrospective quality to it, made clear by a reference in curator Liesbeth Crommelin’s catalogue essay to Nicholas Zurbrugg, who in the spring of 1970 collected and published in his magazine *Stereo Headphones* “a number of sta[t]ements on the death of concrete poetry, as voiced by various well-known poets in this field” (Crommelin n. pag.).

Kostelanetz astutely recognized the need for a new adjective to describe the work that was being produced in the wake of concrete poetry. Photography, in particular, as well as collage

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<sup>5</sup> It is necessary here, though, to distinguish between concrete poetry and the general display of language in advertising or public spaces. John Hinde is not a concrete poet; he is a photographer who made a career out of making postcard photographs of pleasant, commercialized landscapes. It is only the editorial impulse of Richard Kostelanetz that places Hinde’s photograph within the discourse of visual poetry. This is not to denigrate Kostelanetz’s decision in anyway. Hinde’s artistic production, which is tied to the rise in postcard popularity resulting from increased international tourism is a salient commentary on the commercialization of space that the concrete poets often addressed in their style and subject matter.

and happenings, were playing a much larger role in work poets and artists made in the late 50s and early 60s. However, much of this work is better categorized as *poesia visiva*, a term that retains its Italian origin due to the history and popularity of similar work in Italy dating back to Marinetti and the Futurists' *Parole in libertà*. Despite the 1970s being seen as the decade of decline for concrete poetry, it was a time in which concrete poets developed highly personalized styles against the dominant idea of the negation of the subject present in the critical writings and manifestos of the movement. Scobie points to the Scottish poet and artist Ian Hamilton Finlay and the Canadian bpNichol as two figures who adopted a distinctive style in the decade following the Stedelijk exhibition, and I would add to these the Canadian Bill Bissett and the British Tom Phillips, whose poem project *A Humument* has been in continuous composition since the late 1960s.

Figures like Ian Hamilton Finlay or Tom Phillips, inasmuch as both are considered artists as well as poets, present a difficulty for disciplinary critics, a predictable difficulty when dealing with a genre which aims to fuse the linguistic and the visual. Poets such as the Romanian-Swiss Daniel Spoerri, or the German Ferdinand Kriwet, both of whom had contemporaneous careers in visual art alongside their concrete poetry activity, impede the determination of where their poetic work ends and their visual art work begins, and challenge the very logic behind such a separation.<sup>6</sup> But there is a strong argument against treating language-based visual art and visual poetry as equivalent, as each practice functions within distinct yet overlapping discursive histories. For instance, the emphasis on language in the conceptual art movement in the 1960s sought to utilize language as a transparent mode of communication, in opposition to what they considered the fetishized products of painting and sculpture. But a series of instructions by

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<sup>6</sup> In the anthology of German language concrete poetry Gomringer edited in 1972/3, *konkrete poesie: deutschsprachige autoren*, Ferdinand Kriwet is notably absent, leading Gumpel to conclude that he fits into Gomringer's category of "'also poets' (auch-Dichter) which [Gomringer] established in his introduction to pinpoint those poets who functioned more as artists. Because so many fell in this category, it was probably necessary to eliminate them all [from the anthology]" (Gumpel 207).

Lawrence Weiner, or a black and white Photostat print of a dictionary definition by Joseph Kosuth, should not be read as or considered concrete poetry, for the simple reason that they do not aim for nor produce the same result in their audience. While conceptual art utilized language to critique a system of referentiality within the institution of art, concrete poetry drew the reader's attention to the materiality of language, to its physicality, and its changing role within global communication. The dematerialization of the art object mirrored the rematerialization of the word: the canvas became a page and the page became a canvas.

Based on this distinction, a figure like Ed Ruscha, who was making word paintings in the mid-60s, would not be considered a concrete poet. Although his work was concerned with the altered presence of language in the modern landscape, as shown by his book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, as well as his series of paintings depicting gas stations as heroic architecture, his language-centred work does not qualify as concrete poetry for three reasons: (1) he did not consider himself a concrete poet, nor was he involved in any of the international anthologies, nor did he ever communicate with any concrete poet about his work; (2) his work was primarily on canvas, and painted, and the backgrounds on which the words were placed were as carefully produced as the words themselves; and (3) following from number two, his work was done by hand, whereas the concrete poets largely preferred work created by mechanical means, either by typewriter or letterpress.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, even though his poetic work was not anthologized until mid-way through the 70s, Carl Andre, best known for his minimalist sculpture, was producing typewriter

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<sup>7</sup> There are exceptions to this rule. Figures such as the East German poet Carlfriedrich Claus developed a very distinctive, handwritten style that was widely anthologized, and the American Carl Fernbach-Flarsheim often used handwriting in his poems, but for the most part the concrete poetry is produced mechanically. Canadian concrete poets like bill bissett and bpNichol, who largely operated outside the scope of the International Concrete Poetry movement, and who were prolific in the 1970s, also composed much of their work by hand.

poems in the late 60s that fit formally within the critical discourse of concrete poetry.<sup>8</sup> The same is true for the aleatoric poetic composition of John Cage and Jackson Mac Low, each of whom is better known for work outside of concrete poetry, and closely linked to the multi-disciplinary Fluxus movement. Both Cage and Mac Low experimented with the rejection of the poetic subject in ways that complimented the ideas of the early concrete poets, which explains why they are more likely to appear in histories of both poetry and visual art of the time than those figures who are more specifically linked to visual art.

Another figure who often becomes tangled with the history of concrete poetry is Isidore Isou, the founder and lead practitioner of the Lettriste movement, but he belongs more to a history of the twentieth century avant-gardes than to the history of poetic experimentation. Because the Lettristes' project was framed as a stripping away, or rejection of meaning, because they operate below the level of the word – at the letter – and because they make an explicit connection between the linguistic and the visual, critics and historians often pair it with concrete poetry's mid-century output. The pairing is, however, only superficial. Isou's project self-consciously mimicked an avant-garde, which resulted not in the intellectual and artistic legacy he imagined, but, rather, in the repetition of history as farce. Isou staged scandals, decried the dead poetry of the day, and attempted to destroy film and poetry in order that they might be built up again. He had devised a theory that recognized two stages in the cycle of an art form: the *Amplique* (*amplique*), in which the art swells, and its function is integral to society; and the *Chiseling* (*ciselant*), in which a medium is reduced to its form alone, and is separated from daily life. Isou placed himself and his fellow Lettristes at the very end of the *Amplique* phase, through which all poetry must pass before it can begin anew. He saw the salvation of poetry in the new alphabets and compositional techniques created (and generally only understood) by Lettristes. Like some

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<sup>8</sup> According to Kathleen McCullough's nearly exhaustive bibliography of concrete poetry, Andre was not published as a poet until 1978, in Alberto Pimenta's *Il silenzio dei poeti* (McCullough 15).

concrete poetry, the work of the Lettristes emphasized the structure and shape of letters, but the letters of Isou and the Lettristes were often not conventional letters at all, but symbols. The rebus was a common compositional tool, which allowed them to maintain the mystery of the surrealist tradition they were mimicking without having to confront the ways in which the world had changed in the interim. However skilled a thinker Isou was, he could not escape the fact that he had adopted an avant-garde formula that, in the face of its near complete collapse in Breton's surrealist movement, could no longer maintain the same optimism in its social efficacy in the present or the future. Isou even attempted to avoid the fates of Tzara and Breton, whose movements were both plagued by infighting and pettiness, by imposing fines and censures on members of the group for transgressions. He never allowed his leadership to be questioned, claiming ownership, as a result, of much of the credit for the group's shortfalls.

Concrete poetry, on the other hand, functions in the role of an *arrière-garde*, a category William Marx has applied to movements which compliment previous avant-gardes, which take up their concerns as well as those who acknowledge them as influences. It would be incorrect to argue concrete poetry, in spite of its radical formal experiments, functioned as an avant-garde. It had none of the nihilism, activism, antagonism, or agonism Renato Poggioli described in his *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1968), nor did it position itself against the institution of the bourgeois art market in the manner required by Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974). It did, however, take up many of the issues that remained after avant-gardes had disappeared. In their "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry," the Noigandres group – whose very name is taken from Pound's *Cantos* – provides a litany of historically radical artistic figures, including Fenollosa and Pound but also Guillaume Apollinaire, Sergei Eisenstein, Stéphane Mallarmé, James Joyce, Oswald de Andrade, João Cabral de Melo Neto, Anton Webern, Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Max Bill, Josef Albers, and Piet Mondrian (A. de Campos, H. de Campos, and Pignatari 71-2). As Marjorie Perloff explains:

In military terms, the rearguard of the army is the part that protects and consolidates the troop movement in question; often the army's best generals are used for this purpose. When, in other words, an avant-garde movement is no longer a novelty, it is the role of the arrière-garde to complete its mission, to insure its success. The term arrière-garde, then, is synonymous neither with reaction nor with nostalgia for a lost and more desirable artistic era; it is, on the contrary, 'the hidden face of modernity.' (Perloff, "Writing as Re-Writing")

Keeping this definition in mind, connecting concrete poetry to Pound's engagement with Fenollosa's ideas of the ideogram, an engagement which some critics believe the concrete poets simply mimicked, or came to later (being from less developed countries than those which provided the bases for avant-gardes, those arguments would imply), does not contradict my position that concrete poetry is set apart from the poetic experiments of the early twentieth century avant-gardes. Rather, it supports my argument that concrete poetry needs to be re-examined and re-formulated outside of the categories and critical methods that have for so long impeded its positioning as one of the major poetic movements of the twentieth century.

Lamenting the pejorative tone applied to movements which look backwards, Marx argues that "there is a blind spot in our history of philosophy and art: the attention legitimately devoted to the avant-garde has made us forget the rest, and risks distorting our perception of history and unbalancing our point of view"<sup>9</sup> (Marx 5) (my translation).

Recognizing the centrality of international exchange to poetry at mid-century, Henri Chopin places the failure of the Lettriste movement squarely at the feet of its founder, noting that in spite of Isou's stated desire to create an international poetry movement, he was only ever concerned with French writing and philosophy, a nationalistic impulse that distinguishes his

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<sup>9</sup> "Il y a comme un point aveugle de notre histoire des idées et des arts : l'attention légitimement portée sur les avant-gardes fait oublier tout le reste, au risque de fausser notre perception historique en déséquilibrant le point de vue" (Marx 5).

project from concrete poetry. After arriving in Paris knowing very little French, he mastered the language quickly but then settled into it for good, missing the opportunity, like his compatriot Spoerri, to mine the condition of physico-linguistic displacement for its poetic potential. Chopin also notes Isou's reticence to embrace the new technology of the tape recorder, or even the typewriter as a tool for composition, opting to remain in the realm of painting and, strangely, the cinema (Zurbrugg 64).<sup>10</sup> But while Isou's myopia and stubborn cultural nationalism were obvious impediments to the success of the Lettristes, the fact that they were so obviously trying to revive a project that belonged to a history that was rapidly becoming more foreign to a modern age was the most likely reason for the movement's drawn out failure and collapse

The concrete poetry movement, in its role of *arrière-garde*, avoided the militant egoism of such terminology in preference for the more commercially attractive mantle of the 'new' and up-to-date. Considering the time out of which the concrete poets developed, this rejection is significant in that it marks the end of an optimism traditionally associated with the historical *avant-garde*. Coming in the wake of a second, greater war, which had produced the twin traumas of the A-Bomb and the Holocaust, an art or poetry to change the world would have been ridiculed and dismissed, much in the way Isou and the Lettristes were. Marjorie Perloff begins her book *The Futurist Moment* by asserting "This book was conceived as an exploration of – and elegy for – that short-lived period when the possibilities for an *avant-garde* – an *avant-garde* that would transform not only art but society itself – seemed all but limitless" (Perloff, *The Futurist* xxi). The possibilities that concrete poetry practitioners outlined for their project were far less grandiose.

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<sup>10</sup> Isou was never opposed to technology per se, simply those that Chopin saw as inextricable from the experimental sound and visual poetry of the time. Isou even presented a telex sculpture at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1963: "a telex machine churning out news from all over the planet" (Curtay 33). In 1969, Hans Haacke would install a similar project in Düsseldorf, called <News>.

The difficulty in defining what, exactly, concrete poetry is, and what it is not, is represented in the general lack of criticism addressing it as a movement. In his preface to *Visual Literature*, which he edited in 1979, Kostelanetz claims that “This is, as far as I can discern, the first symposium of *criticism* of visual literature in English” (Kostelanetz, *Visual* 9). It was twenty-seven years until another symposium of English-language criticism was to appear, *Experimental – Visual – Concrete: Avant-Garde Poetry Since the 1960s*, which collected material from a conference held at Yale University in 1994. Both these texts, however, as can be gathered from their titles, did not concentrate on either the poetry or the international character of the International Concrete Poetry movement.

There have been only three book-length studies of concrete poetry published to date in English: Liselotte Gumpel’s “*Concrete*” *Poetry from East and West Germany: The Language of Exemplarism and Experimentalism* (1976), David Seaman’s *Concrete Poetry in France* (1981), and Caroline Bayard’s *The New Poetics in Canada and Quebec: From Concretism to Post-Modernism* (1989). Beyond these there have been chapters devoted to concrete poetry, specifically in Johanna Drucker’s *Figuring the Word* and Marjorie Perloff’s *Radical Artifice: Writing in the Age of Media*.<sup>11</sup> While much of this work does well to connect concrete poetry with historical poetic experimentation, it stops short of addressing the work in a wider context. The earliest attempts at analyzing concrete poetry often rely on identifying the *techniques* of the poem: a mirroring of the formalist strategy of locating literary devices like irony, rhyme, meter, genre, and mood. These readings, though interesting and valid, and exciting for the departure they offer from readings of conventional poetry, do not go far enough in presenting concrete poetry as a critical movement in the history of experimental poetics. No criticism focuses on the movement’s flight from national languages (or, in some cases, the alphabet), or the fact that this

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<sup>11</sup> The chapter in Drucker’s *Figuring the Word*, “Experimental – Visual – Concrete,” is the central essay in the critical collection of the same name that Drucker would co-edit with Kenneth David Jackson and Eric Vos in 1996.

flight from language takes place predominantly within the Roman alphabet, completely eliding Cyrillic, Arabic, and most of the Asian ideogrammatic languages and thus making the work ideologically Modern and inextricable from certain cultural, economic, and military infrastructures.

I argue that the critical gaps in concrete poetry criticism, both contemporaneous and subsequent to the concrete poetry movement, have fallen into (1) *the national fallacy*: the attempt to read an international movement within a national framework; (2) *the ancient fallacy*: the attempt to link concrete poetry with visual poetry and word imagery dating back to ancient cultures; (3) *the theoretical fallacy*: the attempt retrospectively to read onto concrete poetry the post-structuralist theories of language that became popular shortly following the end of the period I have outlined; and (4) *the disciplinary fallacy*: the hesitancy of critics to allow for the influence of visual art and other developments outside of literary culture in interpreting the poems and manifestos.

The national fallacy has persisted in concrete poetry criticism in spite of the fact that the movement had no geographical centre. Unlike earlier twentieth century movements such as dada, Surrealism, or Futurism (or, more recently, Lettrisme), which seemed to nest in major cosmopolitan centres such as New York, Paris, Berlin, Zurich, and Milan, concrete poetry grew out of Bern, Ulm, Darmstadt, Sao Paulo, Stonypath, Bloomington, and Stuttgart. Yet the national approach persists, against Gomringer's 1956 manifesto:

International-supranational. It is a significant characteristic of the existential necessity of concrete poetry that creations such as those brought together in this volume began to appear almost simultaneously in Europe and South America and that the attitude which made the creation and defense of such structures possible manifested itself here as it did there. (Gomringer, "Concrete" 68)

Even Mary Ellen Solt, who published Gomringer's manifesto in her anthology, organizes the poetry in her text according to its national origin, and goes so far as to state: "We hope to show by this limited selection [of poems] that, despite its international outlook, concrete poetry displays both distinctively national characteristics and individuality, personal style" (Solt, *A World View* 14). Her lengthy introduction is divided into sections by nation<sup>12</sup>, giving three pages each to Switzerland and Brazil, the putative birthplaces of concrete poetry, four to Germany, four to France, and ten to the United States.<sup>13</sup> Her apparatus does not allow for the dual nationalities of the Bolivian-Swiss Gomringer, or the Romanian-Swiss Spoerri, or even the fact that Emmett Williams was a member of the *Materialgruppe* in Darmstadt in the 50s, and produced much of his work in close contact with Spoerri and the Swiss-German poet Diter Rot, who were also members. This fact does not serve to negate Williams' American-ness but, rather, to problematize a characteristic that Solt and various other critics present as natural.<sup>14</sup>

The titles of the three book-length studies of concrete poetry clearly demonstrate that the nation proved a popular conceptual approach for critics. Caroline Bayard makes a strong case for her decision to isolate Canadian poetry from the international network that laid the foundations on which it thrived, but this has less to do with her knowledge of the mechanisms of concrete poetry in general than it does with the specific character of Canadian concrete poetry, both during the 1960s and after. Bayard describes the 1970 publication of *The Cosmic Chef: An Evening of Concrete Poetry*, a collection edited by bpNichol, as "Canada's first [concrete]

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<sup>12</sup> Canada warrants three lines, devoted to the single Canadian participant, bpNichol: "Canada's leading concrete poet is B. P. Nichol [sic], one of the editors of GRONK. From his text we learn that 'love' is also a beautiful word to look at" (Solt 47).

<sup>13</sup> Of the four major anthologies in English – Stephen Bann's, Emmett Williams', Eugene Wildman's, and Solt's – only Solt's maintains a rigid nationalist division. Bann's is divided into three sections based on language, the Brazilian and the German (including in it the Swiss and the Austrian) poems representing the first wave, and the English (including British and American) representing the second wave. Williams' is organized alphabetically by poet, and Wildman's seems to be organized by the aesthetics of the editor.

<sup>14</sup> In subsequent chapters I suggest this American emphasis on nationalism is significant at a time of the cold war bifurcation of the world, and how much the idea of individuality contributes to that stance.

moment,” appearing significantly in the same year as the Stedelijk Museum exhibition which marked the end of the international movement (Bayard 140). Through his small presses, first Ganglia Press and then, in 1967, Gronk, Nichol had been in contact with and had published work by Pierre Garnier, Hansjörg Mayer, Jiří Valoch, Pedro Xisto, Jean-François Bory, and Henri Chopin, and Nichol’s first visual poems were published by Bob Cobbing in England, which would seem to argue for the inclusion of Nichol’s work in a study of the international movement.<sup>15</sup> But the expressionistic qualities of Nichol, Bill Bissett, and Earle Birney all seem to contradict the styles of the European and South American concrete poetry, often utilizing techniques of drawing over typewritten texts, or doing away with the mechanical altogether. Bayard does well to explain this divergence, pointing to “a typographical deficiency among [Canadian poets]. If one analyses the most successful constructivist explorations in Europe, one notices that they were almost always the product of extremely sophisticated typographers, writers (particularly in Germany) who were also printers and graphic artists” (148). She points to another factor contributing to the difference between Canadian and other concrete poetry – note that she consolidates European concrete poetry in her discussion, implicitly recognizing the internationalism of the movement – when she explains her use of constructivism to describe European concrete poetry:

Constructivism was also related to a specific history, to the propaganda experiments of early revolutionary Russia and to media-related communication skills which necessarily took place in a context where the individual (poet/artist) wishes to communicate with a mass audience of listeners and viewers. Such sociological conditions, while very much real in the Soviet Union of the 1920s or

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<sup>15</sup> Bayard notes that Nichol was introduced to Cobbing by George Bowering, who had refused Nichol’s work for publication in his magazine *Imago*. Bowering and the other poets who were affiliated with the TISH journal on the west coast of Canada in the 60s were followers of the New American Poetry as practised by poets like Charles Olson, Warren Tallman, and Robert Duncan, all of whom emphasized an experience of the local through the proprioceptive body in their poetic composition (105-6)

even in the Germany of the 1950s and 1960s and Brazil of the 1960s and 1970s, were not present in Canada. Concrete discourse [in Canada] did not address a mass audience, nor did it see itself as potentially capable of doing so. (148)

This passage seems not so much a defence of a distinctly Canadian concrete poetry as an explanation for why it never really integrated into the international movement, coming as it did nearer the end of the genre and rejecting the explicit concerns of the earlier practitioners in favour of a more expressionistic, spiritual approach to visual language.

Gumpel's study of concrete poetry from East and West Germany argues less for an isolation of a national tradition than for a comparison of how meaning is created and maintained under different economic and ideological systems. It is the habit of many contemporary, post-unification thinkers to consider the differences between West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany) and East Germany (the German Democratic Republic) as minor, but Gumpel's 1976 study begins with the acknowledgement that not only were the two regions politically different, but linguistically different as well. As both nations were only created in 1949, Gumpel's study necessarily avoids the trap of many concrete poetry critics whose instincts push them to link the work to earlier poetic eras and to focus on how each contributed to the development of a national character.<sup>16</sup> The history of her nations coincides with the history of concrete poetry, and she bases her study on the ways that the term concrete poetry (*konkrete poesie*) grew within each nation.

The last joint edition of the German *Duden* (dictionary) was published in 1947, after which each nation started publishing its own, a fact which supports Gumpel's claim for distinctive linguistic nationalisms within the German language. In the seventeen years following there were one hundred and eighty-two coinages in the GDR, as opposed to just twenty-two in

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<sup>16</sup> The FRG was officially recognized in September, 1949 but did not achieve full sovereignty until 1954. The GDR was created in October, 1949 (Gumpel 3).

the FRG, evidence which points to the East Germans' concern over the power of language to alter material consciousness.<sup>17</sup> This concern spills over into the East's use of 'concrete,' which, based on an idea of socialist realism, demanded that "informing about a fixed socio-political setting must supersede the forming of esthetic objects" (Gumpel 16). In the West, the opposite was true: "When the environment does enter into the picture, it is mainly a question of concrete literary design emulating the commercial display of advertisements that surround the poet in everyday life. Poem and poster thus come to complement one another, regardless of their difference in essence" (16). She demonstrates the techniques of western concrete by citing an example from the writings of German concrete poet Max Bense, who places a Gomringer poem against a text found on an advertisement for the French apéritif Dubonnet to show how each utilizes permutation of syllables as linguistic material, although obviously with different intentions:

Dubo	americans and apricots
Dubon	american apricot
Dubonnet	apricot americans
	apricot and americans (16)

In citing this example Gumpel acknowledges two things: first, that concrete poetry is affected by the language and shifts in everyday life of its time, and second, that it did not develop in isolation, and is aware of the work done by poets and artists in other nations (even if the poet in this example does often work within the German language). Indeed, Gumpel recognizes the supranational character of Western concretism throughout her study, and significantly recognizes

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<sup>17</sup> Gumpel also notes that "every fortieth word in the East *Duden* registered some morphological change, be this one of the innumerable plurals or dual genitive forms (e)s/en. Some of the change was no doubt caused by the shift in regional balance and a new stress on the indigenous preferences of the "Volk" (12).

that, in contrast to the Eastern usage, it carries in its capitalist alignment an ideological residue. Such geo-political inflection demands attention from contemporary readers.

David Seaman's *Concrete Poetry in France* is an example of the inefficacy of the nation as an organizing principal in the study of concrete poetry. The opening sentence of his book, under the chapter heading "The Place of Concrete Poetry among the Arts," reads: "Visual poetry must first be distinguished from auditory poetry" (1). This conflation of concrete poetry and visual poetry allows Seaman to read the shaped poems of Rabelais beside those of Apollinaire, and both alongside those of concrete poets like Pierre Garnier and Henri Chopin.<sup>18</sup> Seaman is aware of the movement's internationalist beginnings and motivations; he draws lines between the poetic output of Garnier and that of Gomringer, and even categorizes concrete poetry as rationalistic, consisting of those poets who follow in the wake of Gomringer and the Noigandres group, and as mystical, more interested in the fusion of word and image, consisting of poets such as Dom Sylvester Houedard and John Furnival in England, and bpNichol and bill bissett in Canada. His methodological structure gets in the way when dealing with Garnier's international concerns, frustrating a deeper analysis of Garnier's idea that "people are less and less conditioned by their nation, their class, their national language, and more by their function in society and the universe, by the presences, motivations, energies" (243). Even if Seaman wants to place Garnier in the mystical category, and thus remove him from his time, there is evidence in the quotation that will not allow it. Words like "presences," "energies," and "motivations," though they function within a discussion of the mystical, also carry with them the character of their age as a result of their proximity to terms like "nation," "class," and "universe," all of which have meanings vastly different than those they would have had in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when Robert Agnot

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<sup>18</sup> Although he is correct in distinguishing visual from auditory poetry, I would go further to say that concrete sound poetry should be distinguished from auditory poetry in order that can distinguish the sound experiments of bpNichol, Paul de Vree, and Bob Cobbing from the dadaist sound poems of Hugo Ball and Kurt Schwitters.

was producing his visual poems. Mysticism, for all its emphasis on the pure and eternal, is likewise tied to its age, and any critic of the spiritual in concrete poetry must ask her/himself why poets became interested in addressing the ineffable at that time in history, shortly following World War II, and why they did it mostly through mechanical means.

Early on in his text, by way of clarification, Seaman writes that “‘Concrete poetry’ is the name given to a movement which developed in the 1950s and 60s; the products of this school are full-fledged visual poems. Yet certain aspects of earlier poetry in the visual tradition can also be called ‘concrete’” (2).<sup>19</sup> But this is a false syllogism inasmuch as it sets up the argument: if concrete poems are visual, then visual poems must be concrete. This is akin to placing Jean Dubuffet’s *art brut* alongside the cave paintings of Lascaux and attempting to extract an aesthetic affinity. Such exercises only serve to undercut any useful critique of the work within its moment by exiling it to the rarefied sphere of pure form. This is what I refer to as the “ancient fallacy.” Dick Higgins, whose Something Else Press published Emmett Williams’ *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, admits that he became curious about shaped poems around the same time that he discovered concrete poetry. He knew that many concrete poets were aware of the visual elements in the work of Stéphane Mallarmé, Guillaume Apollinaire, and F. T. Marinetti, but that very few were aware of the tradition of visual poetry and word imagery stretching back to ancient civilizations. His 1987 book, *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature*, is the culmination of twenty years of research into pattern poetry stretching from the Greek to the Hebrew, Indian and Asian cultures (iv). But even he, perhaps anticipating a conflict, refuses to include in his text any work by concrete poets, or even the dadaists or futurists. He sets 1900 as a cut-off date for his collection, and explicitly states in his introduction that the term “concrete

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<sup>19</sup> This conflation continues in the remainder of the quotation: “Such poetry reflects a consciousness of concrete qualities and has played a role in the more or less continuous tradition leading from the origins of writing to the sort of poetry which this book is about. The term ‘concrete’ will thus be used, from time to time here, to refer to aspects of earlier work within the tradition” (2).

poetry” “should really be reserved for works from the 1950s and 1960s which use the alphabet” (vii). It is a short and insufficient definition, of course, but it supports the argument that concrete poetry is limited to a specific time period, one that adheres to the chronology of the 1955 meeting in Ulm and the 1970 Stedelijk Museum exhibition.

Concrete poets have also been complicit in perpetuating the “ancient fallacy.” These poets often were working towards the end of the movement, and were more interested in the spiritual experience of visual word imagery than the constructivist tradition. Jean-François Bory was perhaps the first to collect ancient and mediæval visual poetry alongside the work of his own and that of his contemporaries in *Once Again* (1968). Published by New Directions in the United States, the title is both a reference to the persistence of visual language throughout history as well as a recognition of the proliferation of concrete poetry anthologies. The collection chides the concrete poetry movement for taking its cues from posters and other para-literary linguistic phenomenon without recognizing what Bory sees as the tradition that has been maintained “from the code of Hammurabi through the manuscripts of the master calligraphers of the Middle Ages and on down to the “Follies” of Nicolas Cirier (5-7). But to contextualize concrete poetry in this way is to decontextualize it. Bory includes in his text a poem by Vladimir Burda which is simply a fingerprint with the German first person “ich,” underneath it (Burda 79). Bory holds this up as an example of real writing, primitive and connected to the impulses of the body: writing as marking. But what this reading elides is far more pressing, and far more interesting. First of all, the fingerprint is a relatively recent and sophisticated mark of identity, requiring tools of collection and magnification that are far from primitive. A handprint might carry the impression of Homo sapiens, as distinguished from a paw or hoof, but a fingerprint made from ink is in a different category. On top of that, Burda was Czechoslovakian, which means he lived in a country that was first occupied by German and then Soviet forces, both of which were totalitarian and suppressed cultural and political dissent. The poem is less about physical,

primitive writing than a reference to the idea of an occupied consciousness, one in which identification papers, perhaps marked with fingerprints, form a document which can stand in for a human being, and which can be used to both imprison and set free. The inclusion of the German “ich” for “I” is therefore also problematic, as it is unclear whether or not Burda is a native German speaker, or a Czech speaker who is concerned about the linguistic dominance of invading forces.

Another example of a text that is often presented as an inheritor of the visual tradition in poetry is Ian Hamilton Finlay’s “Au Pair Girl” (Bann, *Concrete* 151; see fig. 1.1). But even this



**Figure 1.1.**  
**Ian Hamilton Finlay. “Au Pair Girl.”**

poem, which refers directly to those poems in which the subject determines the shape of the lines, and perhaps specifically to a poem published in France which presents a prose caricature of King Louis Philippe (who was known for his pear shape) should not be read solely for its form, but rather for its relationship to its time. Finlay famously wrote, in a letter to Pierre Garnier in 1963, that if he were asked why he liked concrete poetry, he could truthfully answer,

“Because it is beautiful” (Finlay 84). But

“Au Pair Girl” does not simply strive for a purity of form; it takes a term recently

developed to describe a new shift in family economics, and aestheticizes it, much in the same way that concrete poetry adapts the styles of advertising and shifts in linguistic practice to create

a poetry which is appropriate and applicable to its moment. The poem is not, after all, shaped like an au pair girl.<sup>20</sup>

Berjouhi Bowler's 1970 anthology *The Word as Image* is another text that falls into the trap of the "ancient fallacy," made explicit in the first sentence of her introduction, where she outlines a methodology that is deeply affected by its historical position at the end of the 1960s:

The researches into the material for this anthology were begun without a guiding thesis, without a single preconception. Odd doors were knocked on and chance inquiries made into the possibility of locating shaped writing in various cultures. As the material accumulated it became apparent that many of these early picture-texts were in some way connected with magic, ritual, religion or superstition, and that they had urgency evocative of the LOGOS itself – the incarnated word. (7)

Her text is broken down geographically, as in Higgins's, but she concludes with a chapter devoted to the "International Concrete Poetry Movement," citing Gomringer's call for a universal poetry, but misinterpreting it to mean across time as well as geography.<sup>21</sup> Her critical approach is reproduced in subsequent anthologies of visual language, specifically Massin's *Letter and Image* which appeared in the same year, and Klaus Peter Dencker's *Text-Bilder*:

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<sup>20</sup> The figure of the au pair girl began to appear just after World War II. Women who had become accustomed to working outside of the home maintained their economic independence by continuing to work, and the demand for childcare was filled by the au pair program. The au pair program matched young women with host families in participating nations, allowing for the proliferation of cross-cultural exchange. "Au pair" is French for "on par," indicating not only an equal economic exchange between the au pair and her hosts - work for room and board - but also the absence of traditional class structures associated with live-in servants. There is also a potential reading of the poem that implies looking through a keyhole at the au pair, which sexualizes it. The au pair program has always had that element to it, the fantasy of the impressionable young girl staying with the father of a young child, and the au pair was a figure in many sex comedies in Europe in the 60s and 70s. There was also a popular TV show set in Brighton in England in the 60s that might be a more direct reference.

<sup>21</sup> She cites Gomringer's statement that concrete poetry is supranational, and his proof that it developed simultaneously in Switzerland and Brazil, and then quotes his statement "I am therefore convinced that concrete poetry is in the process of realizing the idea of a universal poetry" (12). But she attributes this to his 1954 manifesto "From Line to Constellation," when, in fact, Gomringer did not apply the term concrete to his poems until 1955, and that the text she is actually quoting from is his 1956 manifesto "Concrete Poetry."

*Visuelle Poesie international* and Milton Klonsky's *Speaking Pictures: A Gallery of Pictorial Poetry from the Sixteenth Century to the Present*, which appeared in 1972 and 1975, respectively; all of these texts place concrete poetry at the end of a long trajectory of word imagery.

Though I do not deny there were poets affiliated with the concrete movement who sought a spiritual experience via the merging of logos and imago, this work should not be read as exemplary within the movement. Describing his poetic Constellations, which would be the basis for his concrete work, Gomringer writes in 1954:

Our languages today are in a process of formal simplification. A reduced number of minimal forms are developing. The content of a sentence is often carried by a single word, while longer statements may be broken down to groups of letters. Instead of many languages we are learning to work with a handful that is more or less universal. [...] Headlines, advertisements & other groupings of sounds & letters that could serve as patterns for a new poetry, are only waiting to be discovered & meaningfully applied. (*The Book of n.* pag; lower case in the original)

This articulation of the condition of language at mid-century in no way forecasts or lays the foundation for the alchemical work which would come later in the movement, or explains why the creators of which would point to Gomringer as their priestly father. The only reason for linking concrete poetry to the shaped and visual poetry of past epochs is one based on history, not form, and is proposed by Geoffrey Cook in his short essay "Visual Poetry as a Molting" (1979). He identifies visual poetry in three epochs preceding the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century: the Alexandrine period, the Carolingian renaissance, and the Baroque period. He suggests all three possess a character of decadence, noting that visual poetry in each emerged at the death of one cultural epoch and the beginning of another, functioning as a "visual statement that nothing more

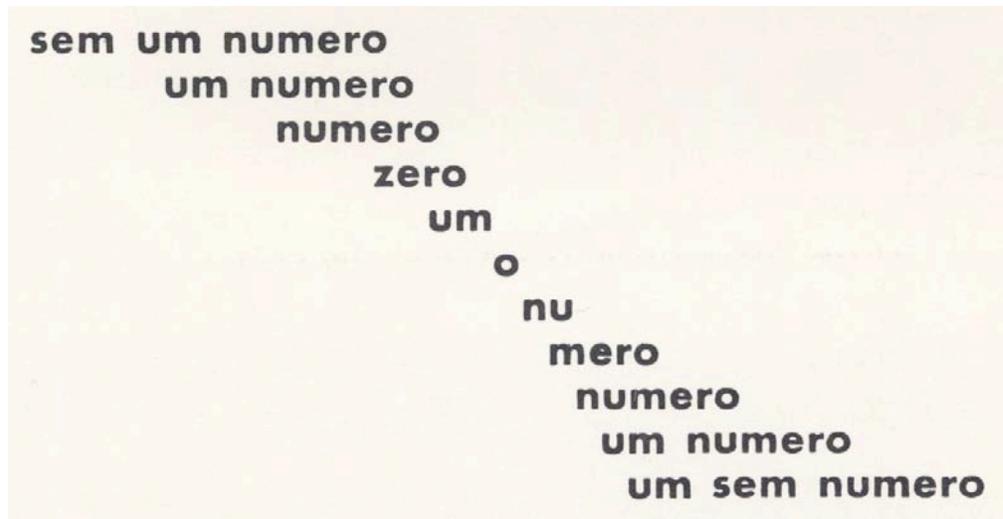
meaningful can be said till we can restructure the basic vision that is an historical culture” (141). This critique supports those critics who have positioned concrete poetry in the space between modernism and post-modernism, as a hinge, but requires a study that moves beyond the simply formal toward the historical.

I recognize that certain methodologies sacrifice specific terrain in order to emphasize others, but the historical placement of concrete poetry within its global context seems to have been sacrificed too often. In a telling passage from her introductory chapter, Bayard writes:

It did not escape my attention that the texts I was dealing with took place and developed within a specific historical context and that there language was irretrievably part of that history. I realized that it would be misguided fallacy to suggest that avant-garde and post-modern texts [...] appeared strictly within the precincts of a literary canon and were unrelated to the large fabric of a general interdiscursivity. [...] I realize the necessity to situate texts within a linguistic as well as civilization context. But, because I was looking at language constructs and because these experiments were situated within the precincts of language, I determined that my first and primary responsibility was to the prosodic and linguistic components of the texts in question. (6-7)

This passage comes shortly after Bayard’s litany of theoretical influences and a placement of her theoretical subjectivity, a passage that solidly roots her work in the theoretical context of late 1980s literary scholarship. Shortly after, Bayard notes she feels regret for the limits of her study, but decides to put off the other questions for the future in favour of an examination of concrete poetry in relation to a debate about language that flows from Plato’s account of Socrates’ dialogue with Kratylus about the relation between words and their referents, and then through the writings of Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida. This is what I refer to as the “theoretical fallacy,” a critical approach to concrete poetry that, just as much as the “ancient fallacy,”

considers the work in a rarefied sphere, in this instance that of pure theory, reading backwards onto the poetry the linguistic theory that played such a strong role in the scholarly literary theory of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>22</sup> The privileging of theory over historical function is evident in Bayard's critique of a poem by Augusto de Campos, whom she does not bother to name, for its apparent failure to adequately fuse form and content (25; see fig 1.2). Her reading of “sem o numero”



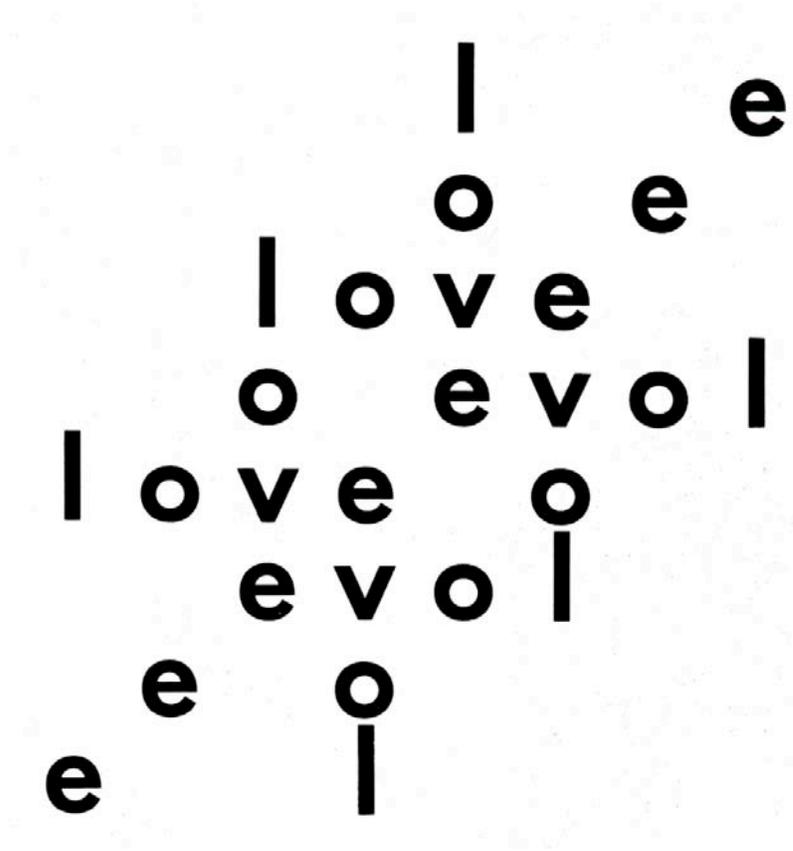
**Figure 1.2.**  
**Augusto de Campos. “Sem um numero.”**

focuses on the form of the central “o” in the poem and its link to the concept of zero without ever linking the poem to its subject: the

difficult practice of enumerating the peasant population of northern Brazil in the national census of 1962. The poem is explicitly about the conflict between the rapid modernization of Brazil and its traditional character, a fact that can be gathered from even the most rudimentary research into the concrete poetry tradition (Weaver 101; Solt 254). Her reading of bpNichol’s “Blues” falls prey to a similar impulse. The poem, which plays with the word “love” and its backwards form, “evol,” serves as a prompt for Bayard to discuss the relationship between love and evolution, which she then links to “a wide spectrum of interpretive references (from Plato to Christian

<sup>22</sup> Bayard misses the opportunity to defend her position as it relates directly to Canadian concrete poetry, much of which was developed with such language-centered, or to use Bayard’s terminology, post-modern theory in mind, coming as it did in the 1970s, and much of it out of bpNichol and Steve McCaffery’s Toronto Research Group (TRG), a collaboration known for its engagement with contemporary theoretical (often continental) texts.

theology, if one wishes to limit oneself to Western master codes, and from the Gnostics to other Middle Eastern spiritual traditions if one refuses to be restricted within Graeco-Judeo-Christian perimeters)” (146; see fig 1.3). Her reading overlooks the title of the poem, printed on the same page – “Blues” – which alludes to a tradition of lyrics within the music genre, one that ties love to pain and the eventual downfall of the singer. And bpNichol, who is known for both his playful poetics and his emphasis on the sound of texts, was most certainly aware of the irony that “love” read backwards sounds like “evil.” Her evolution reading is not to be discarded, but by no means is it exclusive, or even primary, and it is telling that her default critical impulse is to place concrete poems within a decontextualized, pan-historic frame of philosophical writings on



**Figure 1.3**  
**bpNichol. “Blues.”**

language.

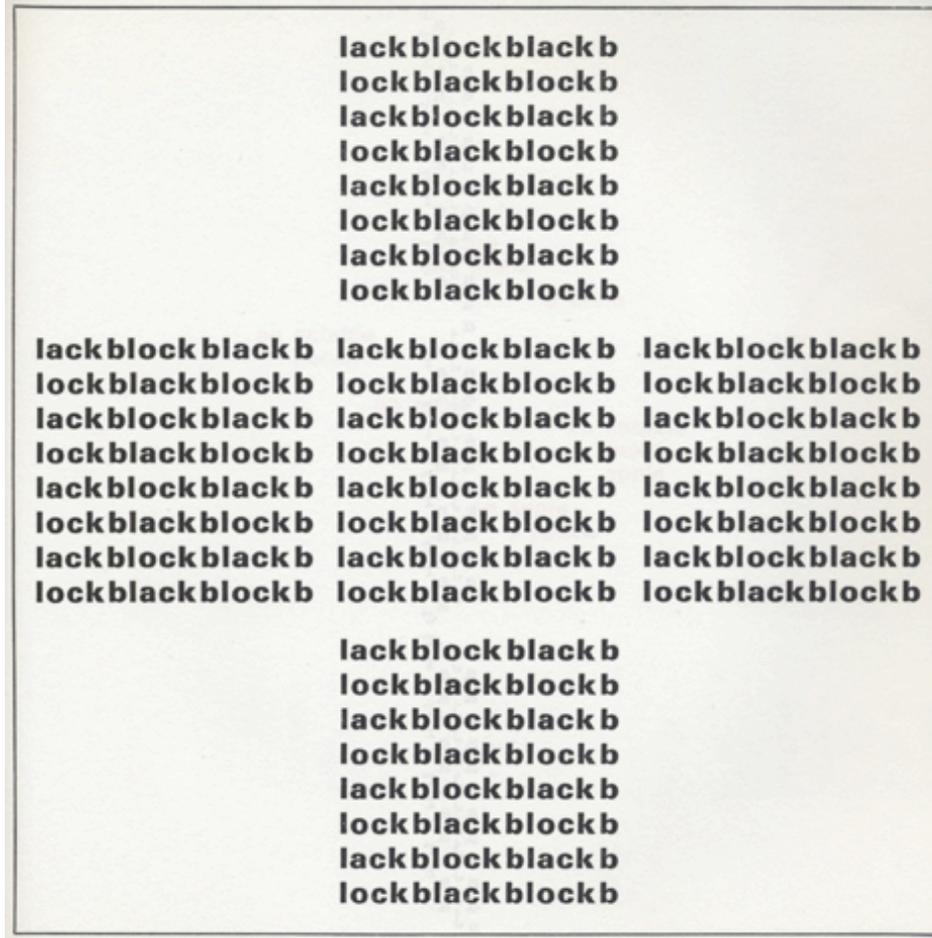
Other critics’ attempts to place concrete poetry within a language-based theoretical frame have also contributed to its peripheral position in the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century poetics. Lorris Essary, in her essay “On Language and Visual Language,” attempts to match the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure with those of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to describe how humans

experience language, but she assumes that all humans experience language in the same way across time and geography. Stephen Scobie, in *Earthquake and Explorations*, begins his chapter

on concrete poetry with an epigraph from Jacques Derrida, and then refers to Roman Jakobson and Claude Levi-Strauss in order to situate concrete poetry within the history of structuralist examinations of language. I do not mean to discourage or devalue investigations of the theoretical structures of language and the discourses inherent in poetic or literary production: the shift from formalist literary analysis to theoretical engagement within the textual turn has been an immensely productive and integral one for literary and cultural criticism. But I want to point out that concrete poetry did not benefit from such an approach as completely as other sites of investigation. For example, neither Essary nor Scobie makes any real attempt to engage with the information theory that informed the concrete poets. The German Max Bense was a professor of Information Sciences in Stuttgart, as was Pignatari in Brazil, and Bense engaged often with the information theory of Claude Shannon. Eugen Gomringer began one of his collections with an epigraph from communication theorist Colin Cherry, but no attempt has been made to follow up on that line of investigation. Stephen Bann mentions the Gomringer epigraph in the introduction to his anthology but does not provide it; Johanna Drucker mentions Gomringer's affinity for machine languages that were popular at mid-century, but adds in a footnote, "Precisely what Gomringer was reading is unclear – Frege, early Wittgenstein, or Claude Shannon are possibilities" (*Figuring* 135). This resistance to examinations of concrete poetry that go beyond the dominant post-structural theories of language that developed within literary criticism since the 1970s is a widespread problem in the critical reception of the movement, and what I refer to as the "disciplinary fallacy."

The visual character and various modes of display of concrete poetry have generally impeded its popularity amongst literary critics, and its linguistic and often ephemeral character have largely kept art historians from examining it in depth, exiling it to its current position as the "other of post war writing," a putatively formal eccentricity whose historical poetic / artistic impact never matched up to its scandalous avant-garde cousins: dada, Futurism, and Surrealism

(Drucker, *The Visible* 227). The strongest criticism to date is by those who acknowledge the literary and visual art traditions that meet in concrete poetry. The critic Mike Weaver early on identified an expressionistic character in poems whose shapes mimic natural phenomena (typical



**Figure 1.4.**  
**Ian Hamilton Finlay, "Homage to Malevich"**

of work by John  
 Furnival and Mary  
 Ellen Solt). Later  
 critics counterposed  
 the category of  
 constructivist,  
 which applied to  
 poems that  
 implemented  
 geometric or  
 mechanical  
 compositional  
 strategies. This is  
 not necessarily a  
 difficult connection

to make, as there are many works by concrete poets that refer directly to the history of visual art. Jiří Kolář's poems mimicking sculptures by Constantin Brancusi and Jean Tinguely are two examples, as is Ian Hamilton Finlay's "Homage to Malevich," a grid of the words "black" and "block" which evoke the Suprematist paintings of Kazimir Malevich (see fig 1.4). Weaver offers a close reading of Finlay's poem, going so far as to diagram its lexical permutations, but leaves out its historical and cross-disciplinary character. As a result the reading is counter-productive in its ostentatious comprehension of the supposedly incomprehensible: poetry that is not meant to

be read. No explanation is offered for a Scottish poet's reference in the 1960s to a Russian artist from the time of the revolution, or how such a poem fits into the larger domain of visual poetry.

Stephen Scobie, a later critic of Finlay's work, goes beyond the simple recognition of the superficial links between visual art and concrete poetry, situating concrete poetry in a wider context as a hinge between modernism and postmodernism, and explaining how the desire to apply the lexicon of painting to poetry is rooted in the modernist tradition. He argues that modernist poetry, unlike symbolist and Victorian poetry, which strove for the quality of music in its verse, aims to achieve a painterly ideal. He refers to Roger Shattuck's "ultimate term" for all modernist art and poetry, "simultanism," a term which fits with most readings of concrete poetry, and which comes from a painter, Robert Delaunay (*Earthquakes* 147-148). But in a reading of Finlay's "An Homage to Watteau," Scobie misses an opportunity to perform a historical reading beyond a formal or theoretical boundary. This work by Finlay, which consists of a folder, on which the title is printed, and then, inside, a single "sheet of high-quality blue green paper marked with its trade name, 'Antique Wove,'" is described by Scobie as "beautiful," and placed within a history of not only 18<sup>th</sup> century French painting, but also within a history of Finlay's previous work ("An Homage" 108). I have no doubt that the work is, in fact, beautiful, or that Finlay himself invites such readings. But might there not be a more productive way of reading this work, one which does not serve primarily to elucidate an artistic lineage, or the work of a single poet / artist, an approach that the early concrete poets would have wanted to stymie? By offering a standard coloured sheet of paper with its non-referential trade name, Finlay seems to suggest that the aesthetics of mass consumption have replaced the high culture of the salon while at the same time laying claim to its sentiments. There is nothing "antique" nor "woven" about the sheet of paper Finlay includes. It is a mid-heavy stock, but it is certainly not a linen paper. The poem functions more in the discourse surrounding the wondrous possibilities of an industrial, mechanized, spectacular society for design and consumption than it does within the history of

painting or poetry. Scobie's methodological position leaves such questions aside, and it is exactly that terrain my investigation seeks to inhabit.

Although they are in the minority, there are examples of historical, material readings made by critics of concrete poetry. Gumpel's work is valuable for the links it draws between concrete poetry and the geo-political ramifications of a divided Germany. Her discussion of the histories of form does not stop at a disciplinary limit; she discusses Kurt Schwitters's Merz project as being inextricable from *kommerz*, the German word for commerce, and expands this into an idea of an "environmental constructionism" that she then applies to the concrete techniques practiced by both the East and West German poets. Marjorie Perloff writes about how American poetry follows the shift in advertising from the text-heavy to the iconographic and illustrates her point via references to work by Gomringer and the Noigandres group, although she neglects to expand her insights beyond the territory of the United States, against the evidence of an emerging global culture. In her study of the experimental typography of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and its influence on modern art, Drucker also does well to draw a connecting line between journals printed for the advertising trade and the appearance of dada and Futurist texts, but she does not apply a similar method in her analyses of concrete poetry. Despite these examples, however, the problem is that the bulk of writing about concrete poetry is locked within disciplinary boundaries, removing it from its historical motivations and promoting a critical disjuncture between culture and history, a separation that impedes understanding of how cultural production influences and shapes our everyday lives, and how shifts in our everyday lives, conversely, influence our cultural production.

What is required in order to avoid the national, ancient, theoretical and disciplinary fallacies is the type of critical approach Peter Bürger calls for in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Opposed to dogmatic criticism on either side of the theory / formalist divide, which he sees as a type of negative critique that attempts to prove its worth by proving alternate theories false,

Bürger imagines the value of a “dialectical criticism [which], by contrast, proceeds immanently. It enters into the substance of theory to be criticized and derives decisive stimuli from its gaps and contradictions” (liv). Out of this type of criticism, Bürger sees the responsibility and potential social contribution of the literary or art critic as equal to that of the artist. It is an optimistic pose he assumes, but one that should not be as foreign as it sounds. Combining this theoretical approach with a recognition of the *situatedness* of concrete poetry provides an entrance into concrete poetry that previous criticism has opted to circumvent.

The study of ways in which concrete poetry in the middle part of the twentieth century permeated both physical and linguistic borders seems especially salient in today’s political environment, when issues around security have led to a hardening of borders, either through surveillance, documentation policies, or physical walls and fences, while global capital moves with fewer restrictions than ever before. What is at stake, therefore, is an understanding of the ways in which culture moved within and imagined global spaces at a time that predated, but in some ways initiated, the trends we now see more fully developed in current theories of globalization. Recent critical developments offer a methodological reasoning for avoiding the nation as the dominant mode of cultural organization. Arjun Appadurai, in his essay “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination,” makes a valuable distinction between the knowledge of globalization and the globalization of knowledge, identifying in the latter phrase a neo-colonial project of cultural and intellectual dominion (4). He points out that the geographies which area studies have traditionally depended on are unstable and heuristically problematical (7). Geographies based on processes, rather than traits such as location, language, and social customs, appear to be more productive. James Clifford, for example, describes “a modern ‘ethnography’ of conjunctures, constantly moving between cultures, [which] does not [...] aspire to the full range of human diversity or development. It is perpetually displaced, both regionally focused and broadly comparative, a form both of dwelling and of travel in a world where the two

experiences are less and less distinct” (9). This investigative shift from the national to the global is what Cindi Katz advocates, as well, in her formulation of topographical social critique: “Topography is associated not just with description of place but also with measurements of elevation, distance, and other structural attributes that enable the examination of relationships across spaces and between places” (128-9). Using what she calls “contour lines,” which connect disparate elevations across geographies, she provides a convincing rationale for making connections where disciplinary, national, and economic boundaries have long been in the habit of claiming there are none.

The legacy of cultural studies proposes an equally responsible treatment of the International Concrete Poetry movement. It provides an apparatus for studying cultural material outside of disciplinary restrictions with an eye to how such knowledge can be instrumentalized. It is also adept at reading the gaps within culture, a skill integral to any reading of concrete poetry, which has for so long existed in the interstices of literary and visual art criticism. Cultural studies, like concrete poetry, grew out of post-war Americanization and modernization, specifically in Britain but also in any of the other countries where the poetry was produced, as well as the “rationalization, capitalization, and technologization of the mass media” (Grossberg 195). Richard Johnson describes the dominant characteristics of cultural studies as being “its openness and theoretical versatility, its reflexive, even self-conscious mood, and, especially, the importance of *critique*,” a term he defines as involving the “stealing away of the more useful elements and rejecting the rest.... [It is] a kind of alchemy for producing useful knowledge” (138; emphasis added). This is a productive basis for the study of concrete poetry proposed here, which consciously moves against formalist approaches that too often emphasize technique without any reference to technology. More categories of concrete poetry are not useful, as is shown by the relative obscurity to which the previous criticism has assigned the movement since its demise in the 1970s.

What all concrete poets have in common between 1955 and 1970 is that they were producing concrete poetry between 1955 and 1970. Beyond the redundancy of this statement, it is possible to assert that even those poets who were not explicitly engaged in technological innovation, those who wanted to create a national poetry, and those who saw themselves outside of poetry or inside of a spiritual tradition investigating the link between logos and imago, were all participating in a discourse that was defined in large part by networks of communication and artistic exchange that were impossible before the war. In that way, even the poets whose work resists the readings I promote are viable sites for investigation for the simple reason that they functioned within this discourse, and their resistance is therefore a valid point of critique.

Why concrete poetry? Why then?

## – Chapter 2: A Poetics of the Global –

Concrete poetry is founded upon the contemporary scientific-technical view of the world and will come into its own in the synthetic-rationalistic world of tomorrow. If concrete poetry is still considered strange (aesthetically meager or overly-simplified) this is probably due to a lack of insight into the new directions in which our society is developing in thought and action, which in essence contain a new total view of the world.

International-supranational. It is a significant characteristic of the existential necessity of concrete poetry that creations such as those brought together in this volume began to appear almost simultaneously in Europe and South America and that the attitude which made the creation and defense of such structures possible manifested itself here as it did there.

– Eugen Gomringer, “Concrete Poetry”  
[introduction to a planned anthology] (1956)

### **Global Poetics**

Eugen Gomringer’s 1960 manifesto “The Poem as a Functional Object” articulates concrete poetry’s intention to compose poetry a global scale. His text matches its title’s modernist, industrial character by outlining a rational approach to poetic production, claiming that the purpose of concrete visual poetry is not the “reduction of language itself but that of greater flexibility and freedom of communication.” Linking the poetry to the everyday experience of travel and circulation, he argues that poems should strive to be “as easily understood as signs in an airport[,] or traffic signs” (70). He rejects readings which function within a national scale, exemplifying a position within concrete poetry that parallels contemporary debates over the relationship between the global and the local, and how that dynamic might provide a new space for understanding culture. The juxtaposition of the radical formal experiments of the concrete poets against the development of technologies that altered the scale of the globe for its citizens grounds concrete poetry within its historical context, but also opens up questions of which methodologies are most effective for negotiating world literature.

Two poems by Decio Pignatari, a co-founder of the Brazilian Noigandres group, serve as the ground for an initial investigation. Pignatari's "Beba Coca Cola" (1957), as published in



Mary Ellen Solt's anthology, provides a critical record of the emerging global imaginary that concrete poetry sought to engage. Printed in Coca-Cola red and white, the Portuguese slogan "beba coca cola" permutes into "babe cola", "beba coca," "babe cola caco," "caco," "cola," and finally, simply "cloaca"(108; see figure 2.1). The English translation, by Solt and Maria José Quieroz, which reverses the colour scheme – red ink on a white background – appears at the bottom of the page, and although it expresses the basic

**Figure 2.1.**

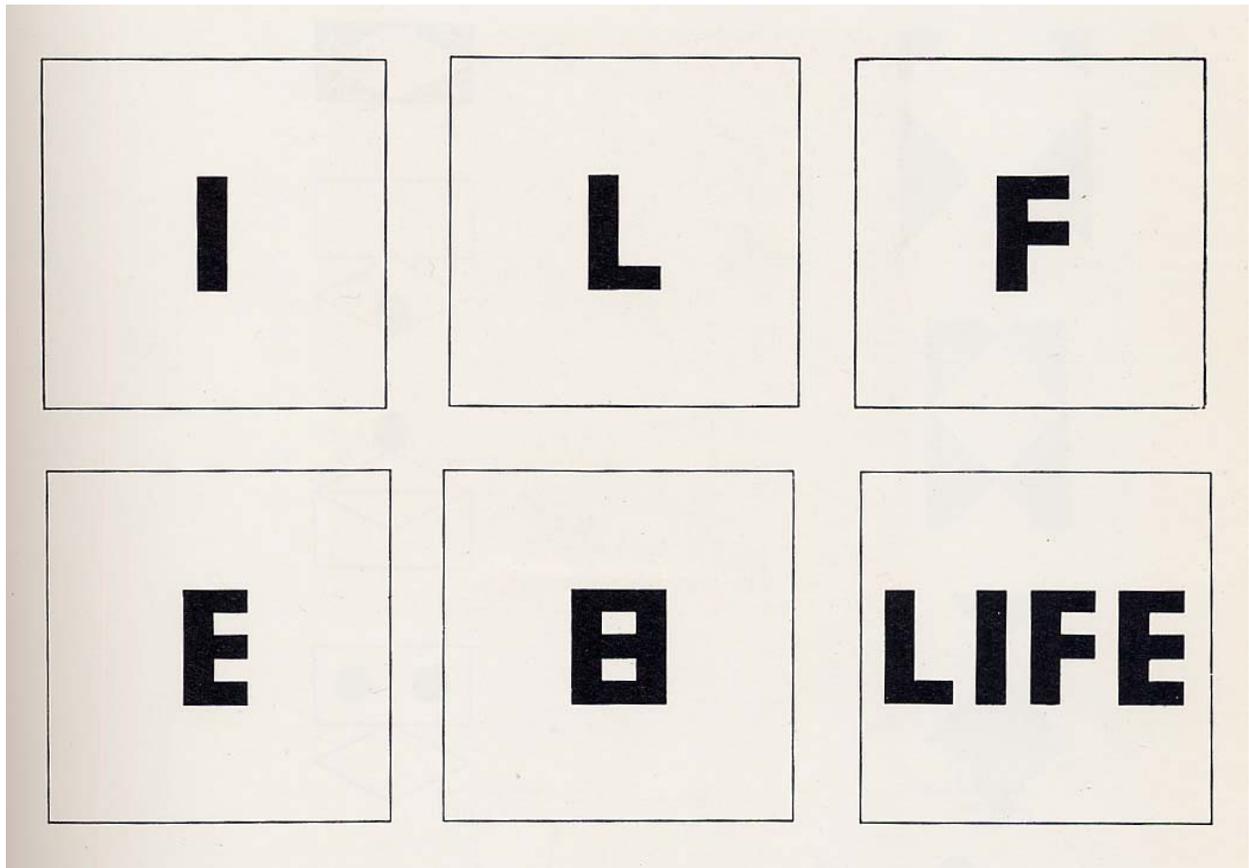
**Decio Pignatari. "Beba coca cola."**

anti-advertisement status of the poem, it is problematic for what it leaves out. It cannot, for example, express the linguistic shifts and overlaps between Spanish and Portuguese that occur in the poem. And it neglects, in its attempt to faithfully reproduce the form of the poem, to include

the multiple meanings of some of the words. Cola doesn't just mean 'glue,' but can mean 'tail'; caco can mean 'thief'; and cloaca can mean 'sewer pipe,' but can also refer to a 'digestive tract.' What Solt and Quiroz diminish, in their emphasis on the physical (drink, drool, glass, shard), and what Marjorie Perloff elides in her treatment of the poem as a strictly formal example of concrete poetry in *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*, is the anti-imperialist stance of the poem. It is not a poem against advertising, but a poem against the advertisement of a specific economic and ideological position, one that might have been better expressed by the translation of caco as 'thief,' or 'cola' as a perhaps more explicit term for 'tail.' Coca-Cola was, after all, a powerful cultural image of the United States' aggressive economic colonization. Describing the political force the soft-drink possessed in the reconstruction of France under the Marshall Plan, Irwin M. Hall writes that “Coca-Cola was 'the most American thing in America,' a product marketed by mass advertising, symbolic of high consumption, and tributary to the success of free enterprise; for its president, James Farley, a politically powerful anti-Communist, it contained the 'essence of capitalism' in every bottle” (65). Possessing such a full symbolic value on an international scale, Coca-Cola iconography could function as an immediate signifier of the American cultural and political project in the post-war period. Its continued significance to the Brazilian context is evident in Cildo Meireles's 1970 conceptual art project, *Insertion - Coca-Cola*, in which the artist printed texts critical of the Brazilian government on empty Coca-Cola bottles and then returned them to the bottling plant, where Coca-Cola's commercial distribution network then circulated them within a wide public audience.

Pignatari's “LIFE,” published in *Noigandres* 4 (1958), is a kinetic poem, with one large letter on the first four pages, forcing the reader to experience the simplified letters “I,” “L,” “F,” and “E,” as an accumulation of intersecting lines (see fig. 2.2). The vertical line that comprises

the “I” has a slightly thinner line attached to its base to create the “L,” then another line, identical to that attached to the foot in “L,” is added to the centre of the thicker, vertical line, and the whole letter is rotated 180 degrees on its horizontal axis. A third line in the dimensions of the



**Figure 2.2.**

**Decio Pignatari. “LIFE.”**

previous two horizontal lines is added to make the “E,” to which is then added another line the size and thickness of the original “I,” enclosing the figure in what appears to be an eight, but which is a representation of the ancient Chinese calligraphic symbol for the sun. The final panel has the four letters arranged into the word “LIFE,” at first glance suggesting a natural relationship between the Chinese and English representations of a common terrestrial phenomenon: the life-giving capabilities of the sun. This poem would be relatively uninteresting if it were limited to the formal coherence which allows such a reading, however. What sets it up

as an important cultural index for an examination of a global identity is not the fact that it is a poem written by a Brazilian in English, nor that it refers to an ideographic language that previous critics of concrete and visual poetry have been only too eager to embrace as metaphor, following the path of Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa. The significance of the poem comes from its choice of font, and its final panel, where “LIFE” is printed as it would appear on the cover of LIFE magazine, an international, glossy mechanism for the dissemination of American ideas and desires, paralleling it with the ancient concept of the sun, that which provides light, warmth, and the possibility of life.<sup>1</sup> The contemporaneous global implications of Chinese and American iconography placed within their respective ideological conditions – America under Dwight Eisenhower, China under Mao Zedong – and the position of a Brazilian poet with a socialist, anti-imperialist perspective provides the terrain for understanding concrete poetry’s position in the production of a new global cultural imaginary. Although the idea of the “global” is not specific to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I argue that concrete poetry, in its compositional techniques and attention to distribution across various, disparate geographies, provides a record of a qualitative shift in the understanding of what comprised globality in the wake of World War II.

### **Bombs and Bombes**

There are a number of historical forces that position Pignatari’s two poems within a politically charged context. The first is the Hydrogen bomb, whose globalizing power is easy to

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1 In her introduction, after recognizing the anti-advertisement quality of “Beba Coca-Cola,” Solt misses the point of “LIFE” (despite printing the glossed explanation of the font choice in the appendix): “Pignatari’s kinetic or cinempoem LIFE also affirms life in a visual succession based upon the architectural structure of the letters of the word LIFE (out of usual order) culminating by the kind of happy accident possible in concrete poetry in the Chinese ideogram for the sun out of which the word LIFE radiates” (15).

understand. Nuclear fallout does not recognize national borders, and although the Cold War is popularly recognized as hardening those borders, its constant threat of terrestrial annihilation forced nations to recognize structures beyond themselves. The vehicle by which that threat was delivered was often the large format pages of LIFE magazine, which chronicled the American nuclear tests from Operation Crossroads in 1946 through the 1960s. That the Americans developed and used the most devastating technology of destruction, and then continued to develop and test even more destructive technology, is not a trauma limited to the United States and Japan alone. In the 1950s, tests of nuclear weapons were being held by France, the Soviet Union, and Britain, and the proliferation of weapons had reached a point where the Earth could be destroyed several times over. The cultural output of the time speaks to the centrality of nuclear weapons in the global consciousness. Before Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), in which a breakdown in the chain of command and a communication malfunction lead to a mechanically unavoidable mutually assured destruction of the United States and the Soviet Union, there was the British-Australian author Nevil Shute's book, *On the Beach* (1957). Adapted for film in 1959, with a cast of Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, Anthony Perkins, and Fred Astaire, the plot of the film centres around a group of American military personnel stationed in Australia and their Australian counterparts who are waiting for the fallout from an unexplained nuclear holocaust in the Northern Hemisphere to drift south and kill them. Perkins and his on-screen wife, Donna Anderson, are pictured in *LIFE Magazine* as they prepare to commit suicide together; the title above the image reads "Ways of facing the inevitable" ("Dire Drama" 94). The film's impact on American audiences was such that the U.S. Information Agency was prompted to create a file called "Possible Questions and Suggested Answers on the Film '*On the Beach*,' and it is the

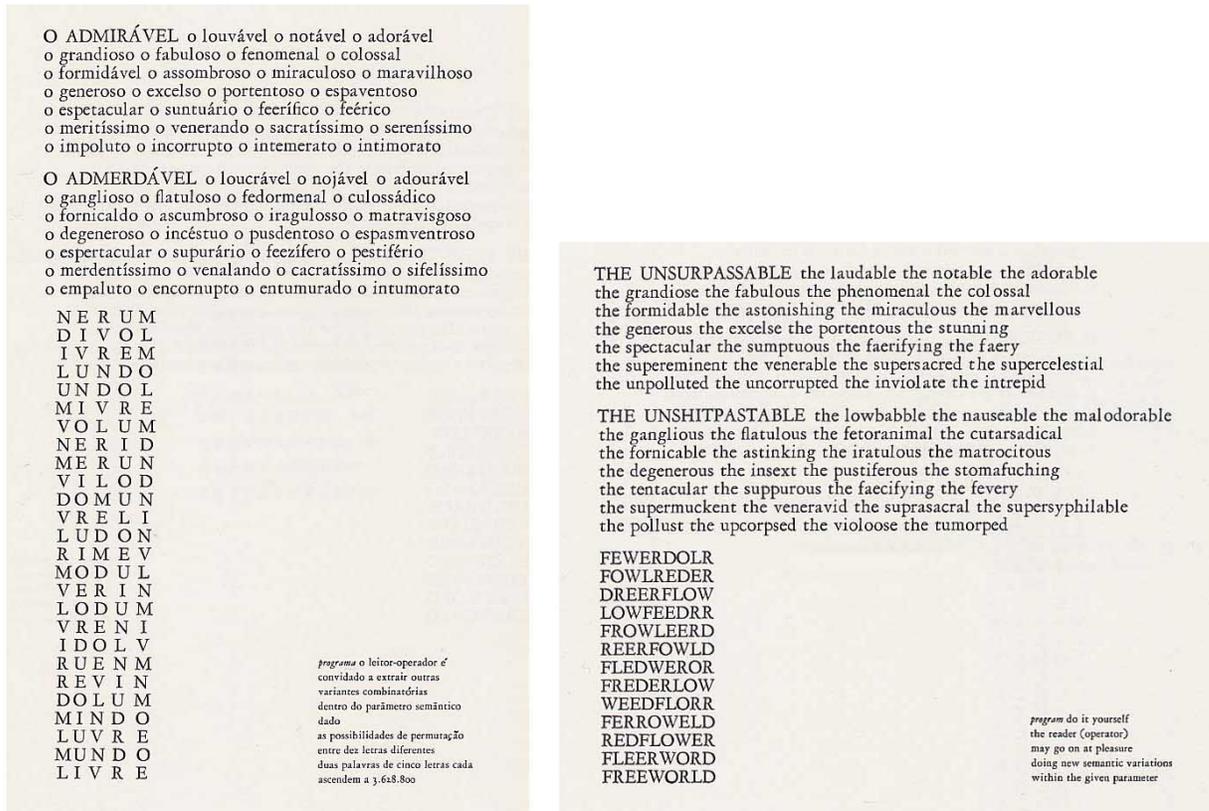
power of that collective anxiety that I argue made possible, in part, a new imagining of global relations (Rose 43).

There was another “bomb” that is similarly absent from examinations of concrete poetry, one which both highlights the globality of the work and has implications for the formal qualities of the poems. It is Alan Turing's Bombe, the rudimentary computer designed by the British mathematician and his group to crack the Nazi's Enigma code by mechanically sifting through millions of potential word combinations obtained from intercepted Nazi radio transmissions. The Enigma machine encrypted messages by a mechanism that used three to four rotors in a fixed position, which meant that if one did not have the key for that particular message, there were seventeen thousand, five hundred and seventy-five settings that would result in completely unintelligible language, and one which might make sense as a military command. The number of combinations swelled to close to half a million potential messages when the Nazi's switched to the five rotor model later in the campaign. Turing's Bombe was able to mechanically read all the potential messages and would stop on any that mathematically adhered to German phrases, at which point a translator would check to see if it was significant. This mathematical approach to language comprehension and *deciphering* would, just over a decade later, find an aesthetic parallel in the work of the German concrete poet Max Bense, as well as in the aspirations for a universally recognizable poetry expressed by Gomringer. The effect of the mechanical or statistical treatment of language appears in many concrete poems whose composition adopts a permutational strategy of composition, linking process to form in a manner that recognizes the diminished communication involved commercialized or propagandistic discourse. In Haroldo de Campos's “ALEA I – VARIACÕES SEMANTICAS (Uma Epicomédia de Bôlso)” (1967), a list of positive words are presented above a nearly identical list of negative words, the only

difference between the two being the substitution of one or two letters per word (see fig. 2.3).<sup>2</sup>

“O ADMIRÁVEL” in the first list, which British concrete poet Edwin Morgan translates as

“THE UNSURPASSABLE,” becomes “O ADMERDÁVEL,” or “THE UNSHITPASTABLE,”



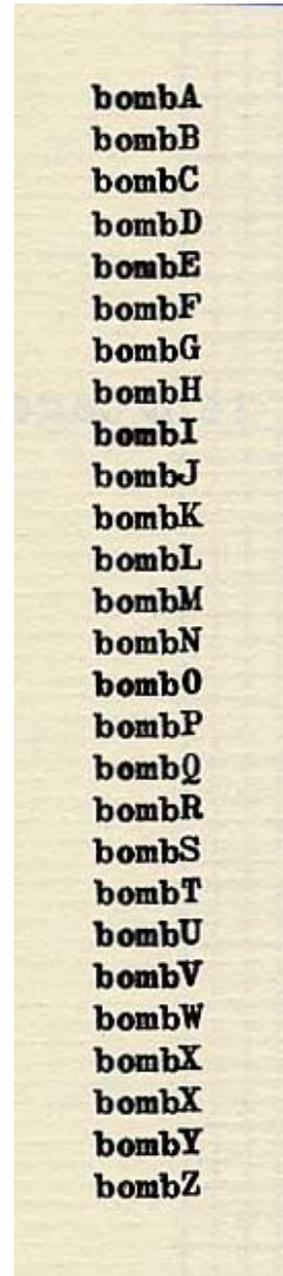
**Figure 2.3.**  
**Haroldo de Campos. “ALEA I – Variações Semánticas.”**

in the second. The bottom section of the poem begins with two nonsense words, “NERUM / DIVOL,” which shift and combine with each other until the end of the poem, when they re-order into “MUNDO / LIVRE,” or “FREEWORLD.” Morgan translates a note by de Campos printed on the same page as the poem as “*program do it yourself / the reader (operator) / may go on at pleasure / doing new semantic variations / within the given parameter,*” but because he chooses

2 Translated by Edwin Morgan as ALEA I – SEMANTIC VARIATIONS (A Mock-Pocket-Epic) (de Campos 106).

to translate “MUNDO LIVRE” as a single word, “FREEWORLD,” he leaves out the rest of the note, which translates as “The possible permutations of the different letters of two five letter words add up to 3 628 800” (105-106).<sup>3</sup> Similar compositional strategies were given explicit emphasis by Jasia Reichardt, whose 1968 exhibition at the Institute for Contemporary Art in London, *Cybernetic Serendipity*, included work by engineers, artists, scientists, and poets in a manner that refused to identify which work belonged to which field. In her introduction to the exhibition catalogue she brings into focus both the influence of mechanical modes of communication on concrete poetry and the new, international spaces these modes had created: “One thing that foreigners, computers and poets have in common is that they make unexpected linguistic associations” (“Cybernetics” 11). In another essay in the catalogue, the German poet Max Bense, one of the leading theorists of the concrete poetry movement and a professor of the philosophy of technology, scientific theory, and mathematical logic at the Technical University of Stuttgart, points out:

Today we have not only mathematical logic and a mathematical linguistics, but also a gradually evolving mathematical aesthetics. It distinguishes between the 'material carrier' of a work of art and the 'aesthetic state'



**Figure 2.4.**  
**Henri Chopin.**  
**“Poem to be Read Aloud.”**

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<sup>3</sup> “As possibilidades de permutação entre dez letras diferentes das palavras de cinco letras cada ascendem a 3.628.800” (de Campos 105).

achieved by means of the carrier. The process is devoid of subjective interpretation and deals objectively with specific elements of the 'aesthetic state' or as one might say the specific elements of the 'aesthetic reality'. ("Projects" 57)

This idea of a diminished or absent subject position recurs in several of the poets' writings. The Noigandres group addresses it in the "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry": "Concrete poetry: total responsibility before language. Thorough realism. Against a poetry of expression, subjective and hedonistic. To create precise problems and to solve them in terms of sensible language" (A. de Campos, H. de Campos, and Pignatari 72). The concrete poets were interested in subjectivities beyond those created by national language. The subject they required, and which are implicit in their refutation of the traditional poetic subject, is, in fact, a new collective consciousness, created by a common emphasis on the visual experience of language in an internationalized social sphere. The barriers of nuanced semantic meaning crumble under a reduced, and therefore more accessible, visual sign system that aimed for a base understanding across geographies: a kind of poetic Esperanto.

In Henri Chopin's "Poem to Be Read Aloud," the concept of both the H-Bomb and Turing's machine meet in a permutational poem which is simply a column repeating the pattern "bombA / bombB / bombC/...." There is no variation on the pattern until "bombX," which it repeats before moving on to "bombY / bombZ" (79; see fig. 2.4). The experience of looking at the poem is deceiving, as the eye assumes it recognizes the pattern of the alphabet in this list of bombs, or bomb targets if "bomb" is read as an imperative verb, and only really catches the stutter at "bombX" when reading it aloud, following the instruction of the title. It is at this point that the reader sees and feels the poem differently. Is it a mechanical failure on the part of the poet that has produced this error, or does the double "X" represent death, in the way that

cartoons or comics place “X”s over the eyes of corpses? Or does it reflect an anxiety over the increased mechanization of communication, as in Kubrick’s film? There is a critique of both bombs in this poem through the violence of the proliferation of bomb as weapon as well as the disrupted pattern of a mechanical presentation. Chopin was a vocal critic of the ideology of the word, as he described it in his 1967 manifesto “Why I am the Author of Sound Poetry and Free Poetry”:

It is impossible, one cannot continue with the all-powerful Word, the Word that reigns over all. One cannot continue to admit it to every house, and listen to it everywhere describe us and describe events, tell us how to vote, and whom we should obey.

I, personally, would prefer [sic] the chaos and disorder which each of us would strive to master, in terms of his [sic] own ingenuousness, to the order imposed by the Word which everybody uses indiscriminately, always for the benefit of a capitol, of a church, of a socialism, etc...

No one has ever tried to establish chaos as a system, or to let it come. Perhaps there would be more dead among the weak constitutions, but certainly there could be fewer than there are in that order which defends the Word, from the socialisms to the capitalisms. Undoubtedly there would be more alive beings and fewer dead beings, such as employees, bureaucrats, business and government executives, who are all dead and who forget the essential thing: to be alive....

The Word today serves no one except to say to the grocer: give me a pound of lentils. (80)

There is a politics here, but it is one of disengagement, or of disaffiliation. The denigration of the

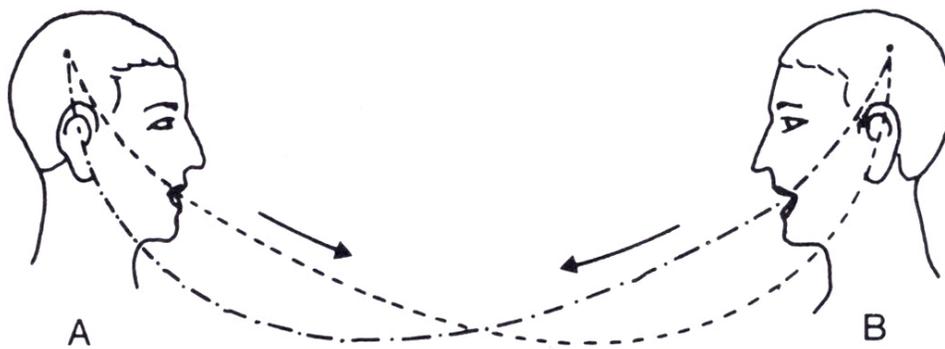
social order is one that at the time was quite popular, especially in France, with the critique of the society of the spectacle that comes from Guy Debord and the Situationists, but Chopin's stance is less social than artistic. His protest is directed against the dead forms of poetry, and their corollaries in the social order, and the answer he provides is the reinvigoration of an aesthetic poetic project. The word as he sees it, influenced by mechanical communication and instrumentalized, utilitarian expression – slogans, advertisements, commercial exchange – has become automatic. For these reasons he prefers his audiopoems, despite producing many concrete visual poems over the span of his literary career.

### **Language Machines**

The idea of mechanical language or communication grows out of the rise in communication studies during the post-war period, and an explanation of exactly how information was understood at the time will provide a context for how the permutational compositional strategies of concrete poetry operated within the promise of advancements in communication networks and the contemporaneous theory. Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver's *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, first published in 1949 in *Scientific American*, as a condensed explanation of a 1948 study commissioned by the Bell Telephone Laboratories, and Norbert Wiener's work on cybernetics were both central to the development of new attitudes towards communication networks and the role of technology in everyday life. Weaver carefully defines communication, as a term, early in his explanation of Shannon's more technical text as less an exchange of language than a description of "all the procedures by which one mind may affect another." This very broad definition, which implies a shift from human language to machine language, is made even broader shortly after, through a significant and eerie expansion to the "procedures by means of which one mechanism (say automatic equipment to

track an airplane and to compute its probable future positions) affects another mechanism (say a guided missile chasing this airplane)” (Shannon and Weaver 3). Shannon and Weaver’s scientific approach was a search for the quantifiable in a field where only the qualitative had previously been measured. They concerned themselves with how much information could be communicated in a place and how well messages could be understood. Information was therefore separated from meaning: “Two messages, one of which is heavily loaded with meaning and the other which is pure nonsense, can be exactly equivalent, from the present viewpoint, as regards information.... To be sure, this word information in communication theory relates not so much to what you *do* say, as to what you *could* say” (8). The semantic and material aspects become irrelevant; what is of primary concern is how accurately, or cleanly, a signal is received from a transmitter.

The move away from human communication toward a more general, mechanical communication replaced the Saussurean diagram of two faces whose minds are connected via



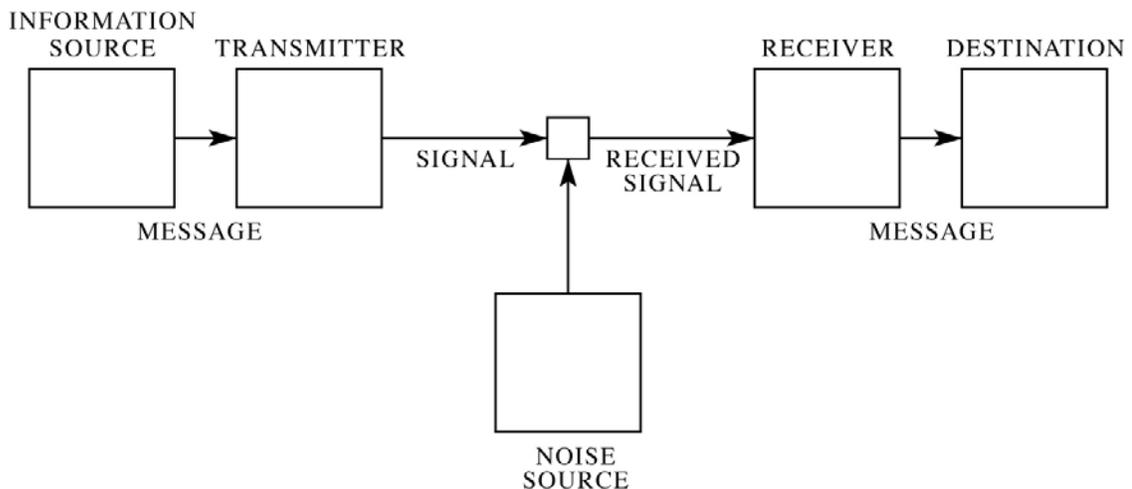
**Figure 2.5.**  
**Ferdinand de Saussure. Diagram of communication model.**

mouths and ears, with a series of boxes and arrows representing on one side the information source and

transmitter, and on the other the receiver and destination. In the middle is a noise source, which is responsible for any degradation of the message in the process of transmission. What is new to

this pattern are the transmitter and the receiver, two stages which structural linguistic analysis had no reason to identify, being satisfied with one human brain as the information source and the other as the destination. But what happens when those two brains are communicating over a telephone, or a telegraph, or via radio waves? The brains are joined by exterior devices that are susceptible to noise or interruption, or, in the case of mechanical communication, are replaced altogether. This is a system of communication which does not require face-to-face explanation or dialogue; messages are consequently pared down to be quickly comprehended, a technique concrete poets would implement in order to expand their potential audience across barriers of time – as simultaneously present instead of linear – and language – in a reduced and easily glossed vocabulary (see fig. 2.5-6).

The mathematical segment of Shannon’s work comes in the statistical analysis of information. As Weaver points out, “That there are probabilities which exert a certain degree of



**Figure 2.6.**

**Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver. Diagram of communication model**

control over the English language [...] becomes obvious if one thinks, for example, of the fact that in our language the dictionary contains no words whatsoever in which the initial letter j is

followed by b, c, d, f, g, j, k, l, q, r, t, v, w, x, or z; so that the probability is actually zero that an initial j be followed by any of these letters” (11). The measure of uncertainty which exists within a system of communication comprises for Weaver the concept of entropy: “a measure of the degree of randomness, or of ‘shuffledness’ if you will, in the situation; and the tendency of physical systems to become less and less organized, to become more and more perfectly shuffled” (12). Information, then, in any system, increases as the ability to predict a message decreases; entropy and information are in this way positively linked.

The concept of noise in a communication channel – the measure of degradation, disruption, or error in any transmission – can only result in increased uncertainty of a message, which according to the logic of Shannon and Weaver’s entropy = increased information formula, means that increased noise results in an increase in information. Weaver is aware of the contradiction:

This is a situation which beautifully illustrates the semantic trap into which one can fall if he [sic] does not remember that ‘information’ is used here with a special meaning that measures freedom of choice and hence uncertainty as to what choice has been made. [...] Uncertainty which arises by virtue of freedom of choice on the part of the sender is desirable uncertainty. Uncertainty which arises because of errors or because of the influence of noise is undesirable uncertainty.

(19)

This idea of a desirable uncertainty, as it relates to the concept of entropy, is a curious one throughout Weaver’s text, as if the discovery of entropy within a theory of communication, as opposed to a theory of heat or energy transfer, has unlocked the scientific possibilities of linguistic analysis, and opened a frontier of mechanical thought.

Wiener's work for a general audience – *Human Use of Human Beings* (1954) and *Cybernetics* (1961), in particular – is less technical in its approach than Shannon, or even Weaver's popularizing summation of Shannon. While Weaver might pause in order to explain a scientific concept, for example, Wiener would do the same, but simultaneously place that concept in a history of thought that stretches beyond the scientific disciplines, positioning himself in the realm of a social philosopher. At the very beginning of the preface to *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*, which is titled “The Idea of a Contingent Universe,” Wiener notes that the shift from the nineteenth century,<sup>4</sup> a century dominated by peace, to the twentieth, whose first half was marked by two world wars, was a schism felt equally intensely by science as well as the arts and literature, though he neglects to offer any examples.

Part of the shift in science was the introduction of statistical analysis into the field of physics, which offered a new approach to an area of research that could match the growth of scientific discovery. The crystalline laws of Newton, which governed much of the advancement in physics in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, were beginning to crack. The application of statistical analysis of particle movement, for example, resulted in a recognition of the impossibility of complete accuracy. This turn, according to Wiener, had the effect that “physics now no longer claims to deal with what will always happen, but rather with what will happen with an overwhelming probability” (Wiener 10).

The idea of probability links Wiener’s work to Shannon and Weaver’s, but Wiener’s concerns move beyond the quantifiable and into the socio-cultural. The term cybernetics, with

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<sup>4</sup> This designation is certainly debatable, and characteristic of Wiener’s tone throughout *Human Use of Human Beings*.

which his name is synonymous, refers to the pairing of communication and control. Its etymology is Greek, for ‘steersman,’ or ‘governor,’ and was adopted by Wiener to apply to “the study of messages as a means of controlling machinery and society, the development of computing machines and other such automata, certain reflections upon psychology and the nervous system, and a tentative new theory of scientific method” (15). He claims that the thesis of his book is that “society can only be understood through a study of the messages and the communication facilities which belong to it,” which highlights the socio-cultural, as opposed to technical, analysis of communication. This approach allows the fusion of the scientific and the social, and Wiener enthusiastically embraces that freedom. While discussing the natural tendency for entropy to increase, and the analogues between communication apparatuses and the human body, he points out that “modern life” – “our press, our museums, our scientific laboratories, our universities, our libraries and textbooks” – creates a greater demand on the body’s information processing capabilities, to the extent that they define the “modern experience”: “To live effectively is to live with adequate information” (18). Instead of resorting to the dictionary to explain linguistic probability, as Weaver does, Wiener points out that “the more probable the message, the less information it gives. Clichés, for example, are less illuminating than great poems” (21). And when he laments the delay of the world in embracing the beauty of the contingent, he couches his critique in the politics of Enlightenment thought, and its legacy of blind faith in progress.

### **Leibnitz's Machine**

Wiener’s social theory is determined by his observations of recent advances in mechanical behaviour. He offers the example of Gottfried Leibnitz’s automata, exemplified in the figure of a clock or music box:

Let us consider the activity of the little figures which dance on the top of a music box. They move in accordance with a pattern, but it's a pattern which is set in advance, and in which the past activity of the figures has practically nothing to do with the pattern of their future activity. The probability that they will diverge from this pattern is nil. There is a message, indeed, but it goes from the machinery of the music box to the figures, and stops there. The figures themselves have no trace of communication with the outer world, except this one-way stage of communication with the pre-established mechanism of the music box. They are blind, deaf, and dumb, and cannot vary their activity in the least from the conventionalized pattern. (21-2)

Leibnitz's machine operates within an idea of perfect harmony, one that is linked to the idea of a balanced world created by an omniscient, omnipresent god. Wiener, when faced with machines that no longer function like clocks, but which use feedback mechanisms to learn and adapt, rejects the idea of harmony in favour of one of entropy, and replaces the certain and simple with the contingent and complex.

He extends the metaphor of automata to explain the problems with post-war American society, which he sees as too rigid and controlling, citing both "businessmen" – those "worshippers of efficiency" – and "white supremacists" as those who would prefer to have a society in which humans functioned as ants, which, as Wiener points out, are far inferior organisms, mechanically speaking.<sup>5</sup> He argues for a greater reliance on feedback mechanisms, and for greater communication between strata, be it at a local, military, governmental, or

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5 "Cybernetics takes the view that the structure of the machine or of the organism is an index of the performance that may be expected of it" (57).

business level. He is by no means an enemy of efficiency; he simply believes that chains of command are too often the site of one-way communication, modelled after Leibnitz's music box.

Wiener recognizes the trend toward hyper-commodification in America, at one point identifying the American zeal for the market value of commodities as potentially damaging to his concept of flows of communication, and information in general. He uses information here as a measure of order to be contrasted with but operating similarly to entropy. At the same time, he points out that information is unsuitable as a commodity, being essentially unstable, and constantly in flux. This constant instability, Wiener puts forth, was difficult for America to embrace, or believe in. In America, "questions of information will be evaluated according to a standard American criterion: a thing is valuable as a commodity for what it will bring in the open market. [...] The fate of information in the typically American world is to become something which can be bought or sold" (113). Out of this logic, in which uncertainty is un-American, he links the rise in communication networks, both national and international, to the increased paranoia and secrecy of American culture in the post-war environment, personified for Wiener in the "blind and excessive classification of military information" at the heart of Senator Joseph McCarthy's House Committee on Un-American Activities (114).

Colin Cherry, a British contemporary of Shannon and Weaver and Wiener, also connects increased communication to decreased information. In one of his later texts, *World Communication: Threat or Promise* (1971), he mourns the lost opportunities for global communications networks: "It will be argued that the preoccupation with the many emotional values of national and global communication systems can divert our attention from the real, concrete values which our media offer for *organizing* new forms of social institution" (Cherry, *World...* xiii). He makes it clear, however, that these forms of social organization – which will

remove impediments not only to trade and finance, but to law and health as well – will not result in greater intimacy between global citizens, but will keep them at a distance from each other. He distinguishes his idea of a connected world from Marshall McLuhan’s formulation of the “global village,” though Cherry tends to oversimplify and degrade McLuhan’s idea by pointing out that increased communications networks do not result in a more connected global citizenry: “The world can never be my village,” he writes, offering as evidence the fact that it is impossible for a human to know that many people (xiii).

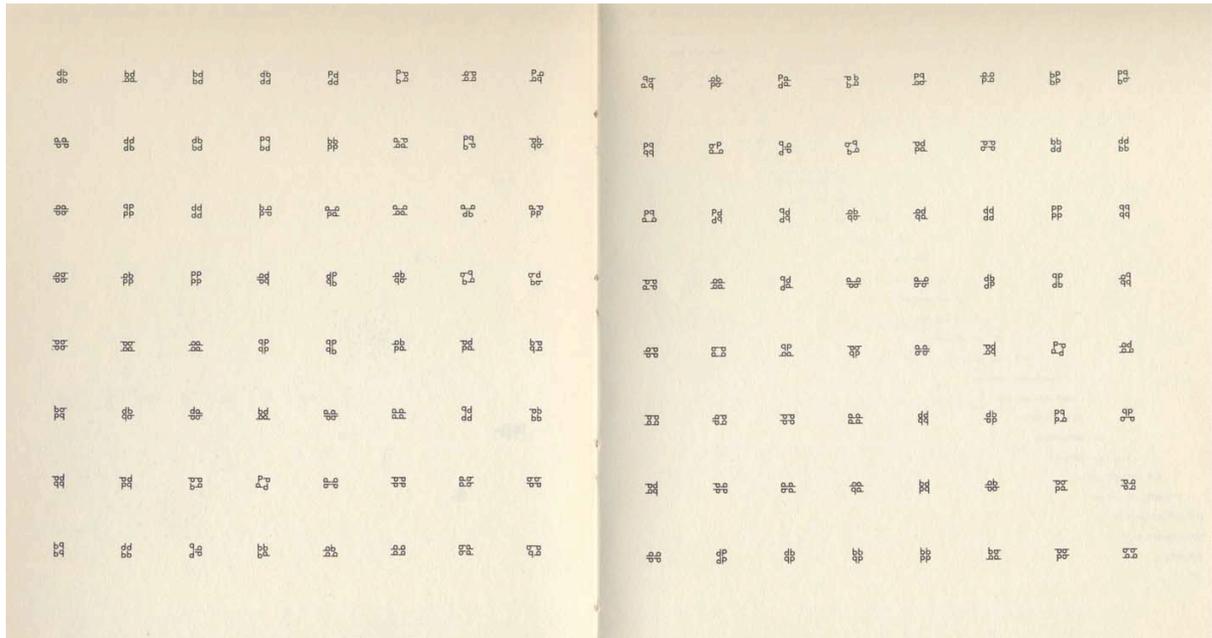
Although Cherry never mentions McLuhan by name, he is obviously familiar with his work. At one point he goes so far to argue that illiterate (read: aural) humans are more connected to the world than the industrialized, literate masses, whose emphasis on print has increased their loneliness. He then offers the idea that the television medium is returning the literate masses to a more connected, oral / aural society, which is an argument McLuhan makes in great detail in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962). But the point where Cherry stops is the point that McLuhan's ideas take off, dealing closely with the effects that shifts in media and the development of communication networks have on the organization of daily life. Following *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), in which McLuhan coined the phrase “the medium is the message,” McLuhan collaborated with graphic designer Quentin Fiore<sup>6</sup> to produce *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (1967), a text which, like concrete poetry, tries to match its form to its epoch by pairing words with images. The text is laden with photographs, some captioned and some left on their own, with short texts interspersed. The authors explain their strategy:

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6 It is significant that Fiore was a student of the German artist George Grosz, who, along with John Heartfield was one of the first practitioners of photomontage, and who used the technique to great effect in criticizing the political environment in Germany under the National Socialists (Cavell 127).

The medium, or process of our time – electronic technology – is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social life. It is forcing us to reconsider and re-evaluate practically every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted. Everything is changing – you, your family, your neighborhood, your education, your job, your government, your relation to 'the others.' And they're changing dramatically.[...] It is impossible to understand social and cultural changes without a knowledge of the workings of media. (8)

The traditional book, with its pages of unbroken text, had become insufficient in a time of



**Figure 2.7.**

**Diter Rot. “Some Variations on 4<sup>4</sup>.”**

electronic media. The concrete poets felt the same way about the line, and the idea of the poetic subject: it was outdated, impotent. The opening lines of Pierre Garnier's “Position I of the International Movement” (1963) read: “If the poem has changed / It is that I have changed / It is that we all have changed / It is that the universe has changed” (Garnier 78). McLuhan and Fiore

embrace a return to pre-Gutenberg subjectivity: “Ours is a brand-new world of allatonceness. 'Time' has ceased, 'space' has vanished. We now live in a global village... a simultaneous happening. We are back in acoustic space. We have begun again to structure the primordial feeling, the tribal emotions from which a few centuries of literacy divorced us” (63).<sup>7</sup> Garnier welcomes a similar shift:

These kinds of poetry in their diversity as well as in their shared tendencies are driving forces, they are man come back, liberated from a pre-established language imposed from childhood on with its burden of ideas and moralities, at the root of the forces and working there aided by the most modern techniques and consciousness, like the cosmonaut in space – the ethics residing in the audacity of change. Joy in the absence of narrow certainties, joy in the world open as it is, joy of creation in creation infinitely spacious, these kinds of poetry are not 'fixed,' they are constantly becoming. (“Position I” 80)<sup>8</sup>

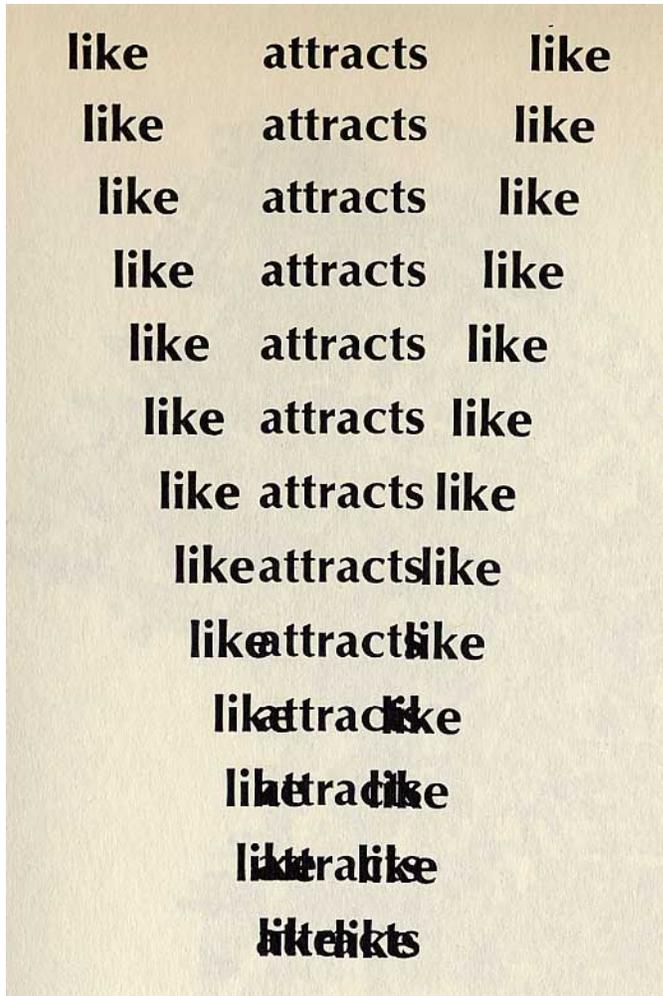
Both the concrete poets and McLuhan and Fiore implement similar techniques to evoke these recent perceptual shifts. The concrete poets emphasized the materiality of language: “Today 'Concrete Poetry' is the general term which includes [sic] a large number of poetic-linguistic experiments characterized [...] by conscious study of the material and its structure [...]: material means the sum of all the signs with which we make poems” (Gomringer, “The Poem...” 69). Illustrating this point, Diter Rot's “Some Variations on 4<sup>4</sup>” (1957) is simply an arrangement of

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<sup>7</sup> For an in-depth analysis of how time and space have changed with advances in industrial and economic organization since the early modern period, see Part III of David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*.

<sup>8</sup> Henri Chopin is sympathetic to the position of Garnier and McLuhan and Fiore: “In short, the Word is responsible because instead of making it a way of life we've made it an end. Prisoner of the Word is the child, and so will he be all his adult life” (Chopin, “Why I Am” 81).

“b”s, “d”s, “p”s, and “q”s in ways that emphasize their shapes over their sound referents, so that they become purely visual information (n. pag.; see fig 2.7). Emmett Williams, who, with Rot and the Romanian Daniel Spoerri was a member of the Darmstadt circle of concrete poets in the latter half of the 1950s, provides a different, more literal treatment of language as material in “Like Attracts Like” (1958), which repeats the title phrase vertically until the two “like”s meet in



**Figure 2.8.**  
**Emmett Williams. “Like attracts Like.”**

the middle, making them and “attracts” illegible. (Williams n. pag.; see fig. 2.8).

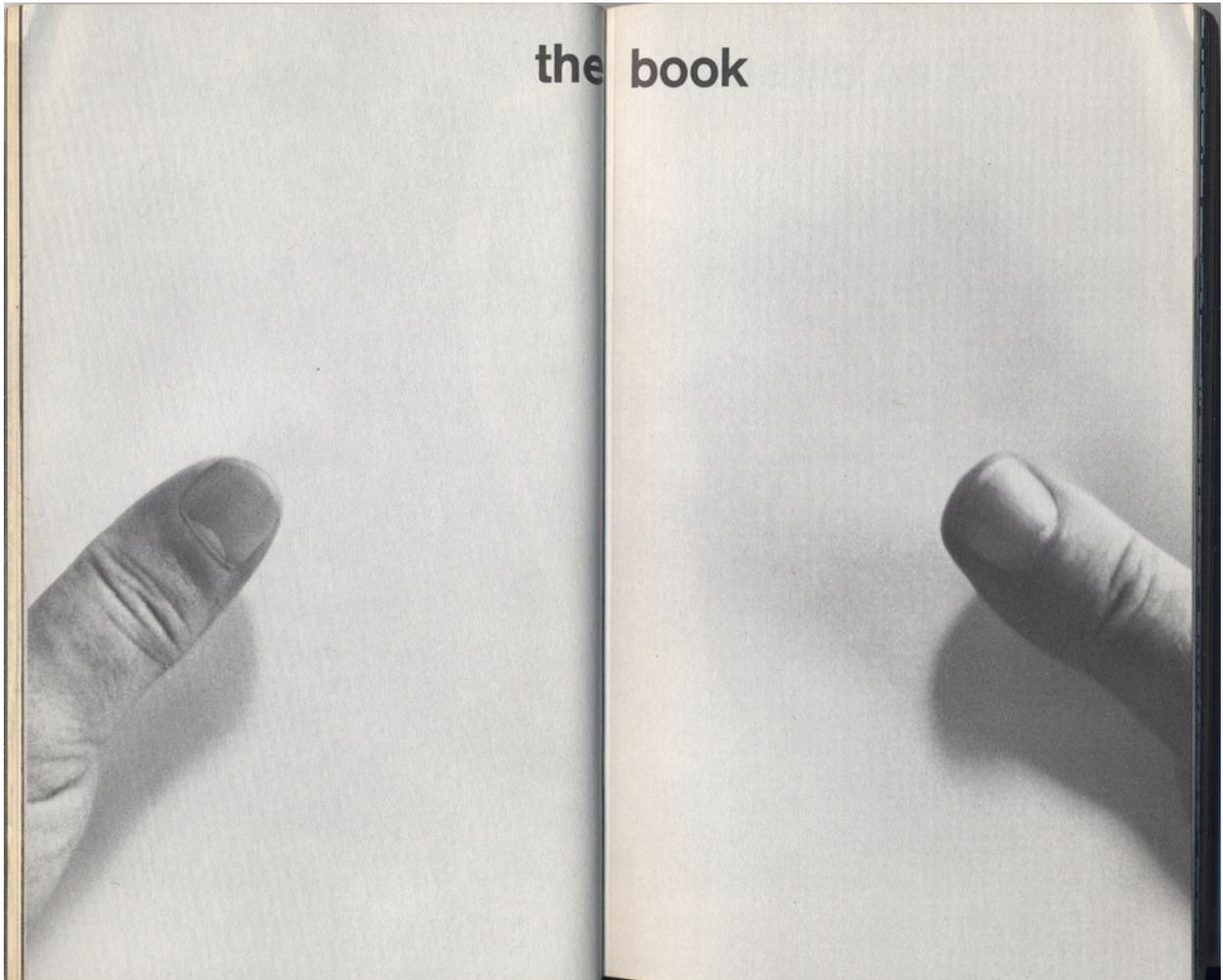
McLuhan and Fiore's text is less interested in foregrounding the materiality of language than the materiality of the book. Across two pages there is simply a photograph of two thumbs holding open a page as if they were the reader's, with “The Book” printed at the top (34-35; see fig. 2.9).<sup>9</sup> Text is printed backwards on two pages, forcing the reader to hold the book in front of a mirror to read it, and as a consequence to view an image of themselves in the corporeal act of reading.

On the next two pages the text is printed

9 Canadian concrete poets bpNichol and Steve McCaffery, in their collaborative form as the Toronto Research Group, reproduced Quentin and Fiore’s thumb photographs in their “TRG Report 2: Narrative Part 1 – The Book as Machine,” published in *Open Letter*, second series, no. 6 (fall 1973), 113-20 (McCaffery and Nichol 80-1).

upside down, forcing the reader to confront the order with which s/he is used to receiving information in the book form by disrupting it (54-7).

Both McLuhan and Fiore, as well as the concrete poets, are also aware of the materiality



**Figure 2.9.**

**Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore. [excerpt from *The Medium is the Massage*].**

of language and its implications for the body in an increasingly mediated sensory environment, and use similar techniques to argue their position. In illustrating the phrase “clothing, an extension of the skin,” McLuhan and Fiore choose to picture a naked woman's torso, the page fold running through the woman's face and obscuring it, leaving her breasts in the centre of the

page. Jean-Francois Bory's poem "Femme" (1968) utilizes a similar technique; it is simply the shape of the Chinese ideographic character for "woman" cut out of a photograph of a woman's breast, with a single drop of sweat resting just below a nipple (175; see fig. 2.10). Other similarities include a fascination with the fingerprint: an example of how the body is written as well as how, by even the most basic interaction with a mark and surface, it writes, and is physically interpellated into an order of signification. An enlarged fingerprint on one page of *The Medium is the Massage* is repeated in mirrored form and reduced on the following, beside the paragraph heading "You" (10-11). Bory matches their style in his anthology *Once Again* (1968), where the Czechoslovakian poet Victor Burda's (presumably) fingerprint is printed as a poem, accompanied by the German word for "I," "ich," as well as Fluxus artist Alison Knowles' "Poem," which is a fingerprint repeated until the ink no longer registers, moving from an illegibly white to an illegibly black record of bodily information (Burda 79; Knowles 96; see fig. 2.11-12). The traditional poetic, thinking subject is replaced by a material record of the bodily, feeling subject, as the signifying order is disrupted and readers and viewers are required to abandon their techniques of comprehension and to open up to new structures of communication, be they visual or tactile.

### **Mapping the Transnational**

The increased role electronic media played in everyday life across various geographies had tremendous historical ramifications for cultural production and social organization. Where Cherry and Wiener might feel that speculation about the social effects of world communication is sufficient, the historian Eric Hobsbawm places the shifts in everyday life and global understanding within their socio-political context. In his immodestly titled book *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914 – 1991*, Hobsbawm skilfully negotiates a space between

argument and statistics. Like his contemporary, the media theorist Friedrich Kittler, who links communication technologies and war,<sup>10</sup> Hobsbawm parallels the development of major social trends with the practices of the wars that marked the first half of the twentieth century. He points out that “twentieth century wars were mass wars in the sense that they used, and destroyed, hitherto inconceivable quantities of products in the course of fighting. Hence the German phrase *materialschlacht* to describe the western battles of 1914-1918 – battles of materials” (Hobsbawm 45). The infrastructure for war production was then integrated into a global market that produced and consumed increasing amounts of goods in a modernization project unprecedented in world history in its scale and rapidity.

As a historian, Hobsbawm focuses less on communication apparatuses than a media theorist like Cherry, but the new networks still play a major role in his examination of the short twentieth century, especially his formulation of “The Golden Age,” which he locates between 1945 and 1970. Hobsbawm notes that already in Britain in the late 1930s, for every person who purchased a daily newspaper, two people bought tickets to see a film; the transistor, invented in 1947, allowed radio to reach even the most remote locations; and television, the long playing record, and magnetic recording tape irreversibly transformed the mediascape (193; 264; 265). But where Cherry was satisfied to let his reader’s awareness of such technology speak for itself, Hobsbawm draws connections between technological and social development.

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10 Kittler introduces his book *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (originally published in German in 1986) with a discussion of the at the time rather new technology of fiber optic cable networks, which he notes are impervious to the electromagnetic interference which would result from a nuclear explosion, and which he also notes is of major concern for the Pentagon, who count on such networks for reliable communication during wartime (1). Strengthening the link between the H-Bomb and Turing's Bombe, Kittler goes on to discuss the development of computer technology by Turing and his group in their attempt to crack the Enigma code.

Mass war demanded mass production, which, after the war, demanded mass labour, and mass consumption: “World output of manufactures quadrupled between the early 1950s and the

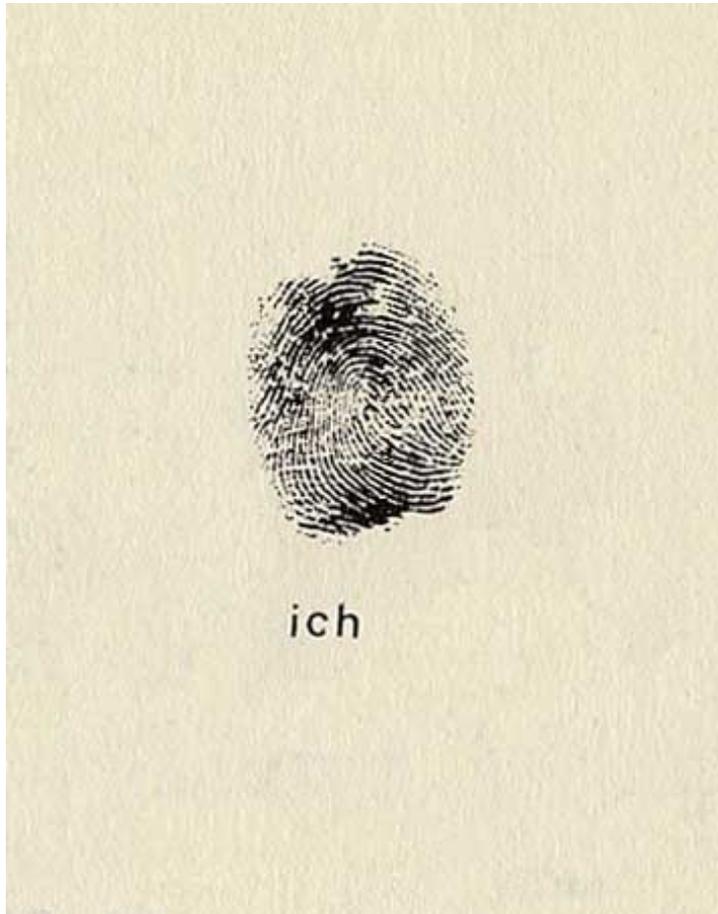


**Figure 2.10.**  
**Jean-François Bory. “Femme.”**

early 1970s and, what is even more impressive, world trade in manufactured products grew tenfold” (261). Hobsbawm links this drastic increase in production to rapid urbanization across the globe – “For 80 per cent of humanity the Middle Ages ended suddenly in the 1950s; or perhaps better still, they were *felt* to end in the 1960s” – but also to a triumphant phase of capitalism. Posed against the stagnating economies of communist nations, which were lagging behind in technology, the

visible wealth of the middle classes and the generous welfare states created by the influence of Keynesian economic policies in developed nations were the most effective strategy for the containment of communism. It is out of this period, Hobsbawm argues, that the transnational economy emerged. He makes a clear distinction between the transnational and the international economies, however, noting that the latter was not a new development – nations had been exchanging goods for as long as there were nations to trade with – although it was increasing rapidly, as a result of expanding markets and wealth. The transnational, Hobsbawm argues,

began to appear in the 1960s and then developed more fully in the 1970s, and can be defined as “a system of economic activities for which state territories and state frontiers are not the basic



**Figure 2.11.**  
**Victor Burda. “[Ich].”**

framework, but merely complicating factors” (277). David Harvey provides some nuance to this process, locating it, in part, in the breakdown of the Bretton Woods System, which regulated international trade and currency exchange, beginning in 1968. What changed, Harvey argues, was not that national economies disappeared, but that the influence of one national economy in particular – the United States’ – became diminished. A global system in which the United States wielded a great deal of power gave way to a different global system “that

was more decentralized, coordinated through the market, and [that] made the financial conditions of capitalism far more volatile” (Harvey, *Spaces* 61). The rhetoric that accompanied this shift emphasized its flexibility, consequently shifting the spatial understanding of the centralized *nation* to the more dispersed concept of the *globe*.

This supranational level of activity, for Immanuel Wallerstein, centres on the concept of a world-system, which he developed in the early 1970s as a way to contest the increasing

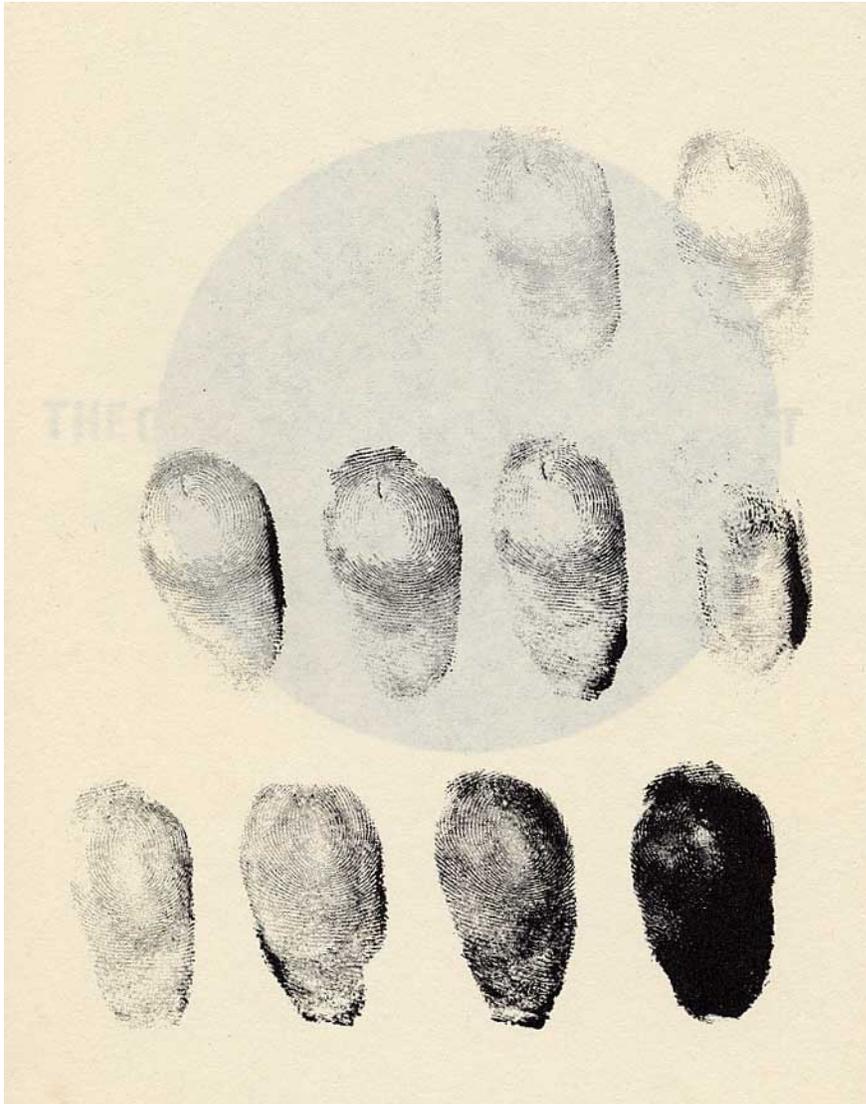
compartmentalization of knowledge. He explains his critical approach to the transformed geography of the period as

first of all the substitution of a unit of analysis called the 'world system' for the standard unit of analysis, which was the national state. On the whole, historians had been analyzing national histories, economists national economies, political scientists national political structures, [literary critics national literatures], and sociologists national societies. World-systems analysis raised a skeptical eyebrow, questioning whether any of these objects of study really existed, and in any case whether they were the most useful loci of analysis. (Wallerstein 16)

The world-system is not necessarily a globe-system; world-systems analysis can be and often is applied to regions of the earth, such as Europe, Asia, and Africa, without discussing their connection to other regions. But importantly even these regional approaches strive to operate on a supranational level. When dealing with cultural production, for example, it is not necessary to connect all output from one region to that of another, but where connections can be made that might elucidate the relationships between social and artistic contexts, the lack of a cohesive national or linguistic background should not impede investigations that increase the understanding of how culture moves between global spaces. As such, it proves an extremely valuable source for theorizing a method of reading concrete poetry beyond national, linguistic and disciplinary borders.

The world-system Wallerstein theorizes rose out of the emergence of capitalism in the long 16<sup>th</sup> century, which was solidified by the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, an agreement that granted a level of sovereignty to specific nations in Europe; was developed further by the 1789 French Revolution, which was a bourgeois revolution, and which marked the beginning of

radical, anti-systemic movements; and reached its current stage only the “world revolution of 1968” (Wallerstein x). Like Hobsbawm, Wallerstein places strong emphasis on the sharp rise in production and wealth that took place in the post-war years in most Western European and North American countries, but he accentuates the increasingly central role of the United States in that process. The Marshall Plan in Europe and the aggressive economic policies of containment



**Figure 2.12.**  
**Allison Knowles. “Poem”**

during the Cold War had tremendous influence on global culture. In “Hollywood’s Imperialism and Coca-Colanization,” Irwin M. Hall chronicles the battle between the French film industry and the representatives of Hollywood during the years of France’s reconstruction, as France did its best to stem the tide of America’s influence. Frederic Jameson, in his essay “Notes on Globalization as a

Philosophical Issue,” addresses the role that international trade agreements have on the

production of culture, pointing out that the General Agreement on Trades and Tariffs (GATT) attempted to disqualify as unfair the subsidies granted to cultural workers in countries like Britain, Canada (through Telefilm or the Canada Council for the Arts, for example) and France because they separate cultural production from the logic of the market. He traces this tendency back to the Marshall Plan, whose provisions in regard to the number of American films that must be submitted to foreign theatres nearly destroyed the film industries of England, Germany, and Italy.

Arjun Appadurai, a cultural anthropologist who was active in the emergence of globalization studies, particularly as it took shape within the journal *Public Culture* in the 1990s, early on recognized the importance of addressing culture on a global scale. His book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996) outlines a method for approaching transnational culture as it has been shaped by the rise of mass media and the effects of late capitalism. His writing in this text is optimistic, recognizing agency in the act of consumption of mass media, and countering the claims he attributes to “many modernity theorists” that mass media is the opiate of the global masses (*Modernity* 6-7). He distinguishes himself from other modernity theorists by refusing to predict the outcome of mass mediatization and migration, and by replacing the idea of the nation state in favour of a more fluid, transnational imagining. In this way he provides an update of Benedict Anderson’s influential 1983 text, *Imagined Communities*, which linked the development of nations to the rise of print capitalism. Appadurai argues that electronic media, which can function outside the skills of reading and writing central to Anderson’s argument, are the current instigators of what will become a global, postnational imaginary (*Modernity* 22). In this he falls in step with the project of the concrete poets who placed similar emphasis on the potential for the global reach of culture to create new

communities, and who would use technological advancements to reach beyond the spatial limitations of the nation or national language. Gomerlinger's writing, in particular, expresses a parallel desire for transformation through connectivity.

In his subsequent book, *Fear of Small Numbers* (2006), Appadurai tempers some of the optimism of his previous text, describing its approach as "too harsh in its criticisms of the modern nation-state and naively cheerful about the benefits of global flows" (*Fear of 3*). He re-spatializes his concept of globalization, identifying vertebrate – nations, international banking infrastructure, etc. – and cellular – Al Qaeda, non-governmental organization, activist groups – systems of organization, and addresses the negative impact globalization can have on marginalized people within national, economic, ethnic, and global structures. In this he approaches the idea of cosmopolitanism, a discourse that has grown within globalization studies over the past decade, and which Bruce Robbins describes as a "fundamental devotion to the interests of humanity as a whole... [which] has often seemed to claim universality by virtue of its independence, its detachment from the bonds, commitments, and affiliations that constrain ordinary nation-bound lives" (Robbins 1). In simplified terms, globalization studies approaches the material conditions that arise from the interaction of global and local forces, while cosmopolitanism, or "cosmopolitics," as some theorists refer to it, is a reaction to certain kinds of globalization processes, and is concerned with developing a cross-national political solidarity to counter the exploitation that arises from the new, accelerated shifts in social organization.<sup>11</sup>

Robbins also refers to Anderson's concept of the nation, and how citizens' feelings of

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<sup>11</sup> For critical analyses of how discourses around cosmopolitanism have formed in recent years, particularly in relation to globalization and internationalism, see Timothy Brennan's "Cosmopolitanism and Internationalism" and David Harvey's "Cosmopolitanism and the Banality of Geographical Evils."

belonging are produced linguistically and culturally, not by the space defined by the borders of the nation-state – both Robbins and Pheng Cheah refer to the loosening of the hyphen between nation and state, which is a nice way of understanding the cosmopolitical process that resonates with Wallerstein’s concept of the world-system. The concrete poets, by trying to escape national language by reducing it to a visual, easily comprehensible format, conscientiously attempt to produce a global (cosmopolitan) subject through an international poetic style. The fact that the major theorists come from Brazil supports this position, as their national language keeps them and their co-nationals slightly outside of their immediate South American cultural milieu, but also keeps them from identifying with one particular European or North American modernist tradition over another: the English, French, German, Soviet, Italian, and to a much lesser extent, Spanish modernisms are all similarly distant both culturally and geographically, a condition that does not apply to European or North American poets, and which affects their understanding of the spaces of global citizenry.<sup>12</sup>

### **A New World Literature**

Addressing the problem of how to deal with a world literature that, after the work done by theorists of globalization and cosmopolitanism, can no longer pretend that culture develops within nations without influence from other regions (and can no longer even pretend that was *ever* the case), a series of articles by Franco Moretti attempts to provide a new model for literary critics to confront the enormity of their field. His “Conjectures on World Literature” begins with a quote by Goethe from 1827 which proves the concept of a literature of the global is not a recent

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<sup>12</sup> For an attempt to characterize concrete poetry as a primarily South American poetic form – by designating Gomringer, the son of a Swiss father and Bolivian mother, and who lived in Bolivia as a child, and even Öyvind Fahlström, who was born in São Paulo to Swedish parents and lived there until he was 10, as South American poets – see David Colon’s “‘Now what the DEFFIL can that mean!’: The Latin American Roots, Rhetoric, and Resistance of Concrete Poetry.”

development: “Nowadays, national literature doesn’t mean much: the age of world literature is beginning, and everybody should contribute to hasten its advent.”<sup>13</sup> Trained as a comparatist, Moretti dismisses his field as failing to sufficiently engage with world literature, instead mapping what seems like a more entrenched Western European tradition.

The sheer enormity of the task [of reading world literature] makes it clear that world literature cannot be literature, bigger; what we are already doing, just more of it. It has to be different. The *categories* have to be different. 'It is not the “actual” interconnection of “things”’, Max Weber wrote, 'but the *conceptual* interconnection of *problems* which define the scope of the various sciences. A new 'science' emerges where a new problem is pursued by a new method.' That's the point: world literature is not an object, it's a *problem*, and a problem that asks for a new critical method: and no one has ever found a method by just reading more texts. That's not how theories come into being; they need a leap, a wager – a hypothesis, to get started. (“Conjectures” 55)

The sheer enormity he speaks of echoes the exponential increase in information which is the impulse behind the writings of Wiener and Shannon and Weaver, and which Turing’s Bombe had the potential to address. The concrete poets, in their permutational works as well as in their efforts to function within a simplified or reduced language – remember Gomringer’s claim that poems should strive to be “as easily understood as signs in an airport[,] or traffic signs,” – were dealing with a similar anxiety – a similar *problem* with *world literature* - albeit forty years

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<sup>13</sup> This passage by Goethe, paired with Marx and Engels’ mention of world literature in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), form the two originary moments for the field of world literature. Interestingly, the passage in which Marx and Engels refer to world literature is also the passage in which they bring about an idea of cosmopolitanism (Marx and Engels 476-7).

previous to Moretti's argument.

Moretti defends his methodological approach against advocates of close reading by outlining his desire for an overarching *system* of literary analysis. The problem with insisting on close reading, including methods promoted by New Criticism as well as deconstruction, according to Moretti, is that "it necessarily depends on an extremely small canon" ("Conjectures..." 57). What he advocates in its place is an idea of "distant reading":

At bottom, [close reading]'s a theological exercise – very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously – whereas what we really need is a little pact with the devil: we know how to read texts, now let's learn how *not* to read them. Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, *is a condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems. ("Conjectures" 57)

This distance that he advocates is unavoidable when approaching an accurate notion of world literature, one that operates in many languages across many geographies, and one in which for too long the dominant languages or regions have held primary positions.

Sociological formalism has always been my interpretive method, and I think that it's particularly appropriate for world literature... But, unfortunately, at this point I must stop, because my competence stops. Once it became clear that the key variable of the experiment was the narrator's voice, well, a genuine formal analysis was off limits for me, because it required a linguistic competence that I couldn't even dream of (French, English, Spanish, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, and Portuguese, just for the core of the argument). ("Conjectures" 66)

Concrete poetry allows for this incompetence in its readers. Indeed, it takes it as a given.

Removing the poetic subject and performing a global, glossed style circumvents the national critics who, although valuable, are often cloistering and girding in their methods. In the previous critical treatments of concrete poetry there has been no apparatus for reading it that gets away from modernist concerns (Mallarmé, Pound, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-gardes) and national histories in order to emphasize its fluid geographies and internationalist concerns. Ideas of space within theories of globalization, Wallerstein's world-system, and Moretti's concept of distant reading all offer potential remedies.

Moretti's subsequent essays attempt to develop an abstract model for world literature based on a statistical model of cultural and economic influence. His primary genre, at the expense of all the others, is the novel, from which he designs a theory of movement and adaptation from the core to the periphery. Efraín Kristal objects to this approach, and argues that by following economic development, and the model of a core and periphery development as it seeps into cultural output, Moretti perpetuates a Western bias that sees the bulk of culture from outside of the "core" as a negotiation, or compromise of Western forms and local conditions.

Kristal also challenges Moretti to account for the development of poetry:

I am arguing [...] in favour of a view of world literature in which the novel is not necessarily the privileged genre for understanding literary developments of social importance in the periphery; in which the West does not have a monopoly over the creation of forms that count; in which themes and forms can move in several directions – from the centre to the periphery, from the periphery to the centre, from one periphery to another while some original forms of consequence may not move much at all; and in which strategies of transfer in any direction may involve rejections, swerves, as well as transformations of various kinds, even from one

genre to another. (73-4)

Moretti responds: “Yes, forms *can* move in several directions. But *do* they? This is the point, and



**Figure 2.13.**  
**Augusto de Campos. “Ôlho Por Ôlho.”**

the Bolivian-Swiss Gomringer, the major developers of the poetic form, and the most articulate and prolific theorists of the movement. Daniel Spoerri, a Romanian living in Germany, and Diter

a theory of literary history should reflect the constraints on their movements, and the reasons behind them” (“More Conjectures” 75). When it comes to concrete poetry, forms certainly move from the periphery to the core, if we remain within the terminology of Moretti and Kristal. The Brazilians were, along with

Rot, a Swiss-German who moved to Iceland in 1957, were also major figures in the development of concrete poetry. And even Germany in the mid-50s would occupy a disputed position as a member of the developed core, experiencing a recent division into the GDR and the FRG, and learning to live in an occupied and re-constructing space. These poets were all members of what Stephen Bann describes as the first generation of concrete poetry (Bann, *Concrete Poetry: An International* 7). It is only in the second wave that figures like the Scottish Ian Hamilton Finlay, or the American Mary Ellen Solt, or the French Pierre Garnier begin to start producing work and theory. So in this example, forms do move in directions that do not necessarily follow economic development, and other factors need to be accounted for to trace their historical determinants. Moretti's idea about the development of the novel coming out of a negotiation of local narratives and spaces with a Western form is countered by the concrete poets, who, though the Brazilians and the Germans were certainly responding to their locales (the Brazilians in their leftist politics and the Germans in their response to their East / West split), were attempting to create a literature without locale that could be adopted and understood in any region without a hierarchy of influence through the photographic / electronic / visual basis of their experimentation. This does not negate Moretti's idea that a theory of literary history should deal with the constraints on the circulation of form, or "the reasons behind them," but it does challenge the idea that a unifying theory of world literature is necessary, or possible when dealing with different genres or forms. There need not be a global key, but rather an awareness of contingencies, and a critical attitude that is open to the possibility of entering a field of investigation without a determined outcome set in the reader's mind.

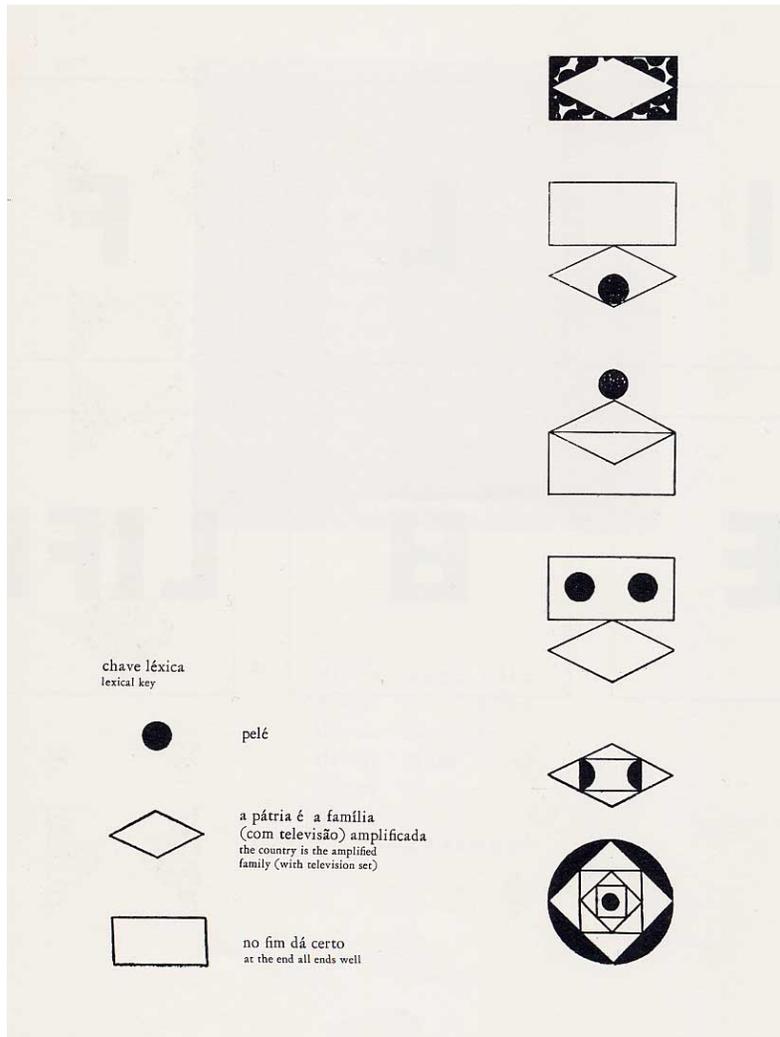
Christopher Prendergast addresses Moretti's theories in his review of Pascale Casanova's *La République mondiale des lettres*, a book that also deals with the ways in which world

literature is framed. Prendergast applauds Casanova for refusing “to traffic in the term ‘globalization’ and its tacky Third Way *idées reçues*,” which, having been written in 2001, provides evidence for how quickly academic trends rise and fall in contemporary discourse (100). Prendergast here substitutes a personal prejudice for a critical stance, though; the term “globalization” need not refer solely to the economic verve with which corporations and neo-liberal economists embrace the cost benefits of outsourcing production, which is how it is often used by the legions of protestors against such policies. Globalization primarily refers to an increased connectivity and common imaginaries, and in doing so does not limit itself to the age of transnationalism that developed during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a term, globalization carries with it the residues of all those meanings, which is part of what makes it so valuable and, at times frustratingly vague.

Prendergast perceives the field of world literature – a term that has, post-Gutenberg referred almost exclusively to printed literature – as contaminated and hierarchical. The national literatures that quickly adopted writing became dominant:

The European Enlightenment established a link between ‘reason,’ ‘civilization,’ and writing, thus confining oral culture to a position of inferiority, often attaching the pejorative valuation ‘barbaric’ or ‘savage.’ The argument that a culture attains to civilization only when it is capable of ‘inscribing’ itself not only devalues the oral tradition in the name of a specious fable of ‘development,’ but also overlooks the very real ambiguity of the acquisition of writing; at once an immense cultural gain, but also helping to institute structures of power and domination, within which those who have the skills of writing and reading enjoy advantages over those who do not. (102)

Relating this to concrete poetry, the question arises whether the poets were attempting to move away from these structures of dominance through an embrace of the photographic, or by critically mimicking the aesthetic of media in an increasingly electronic mediascape. In order to



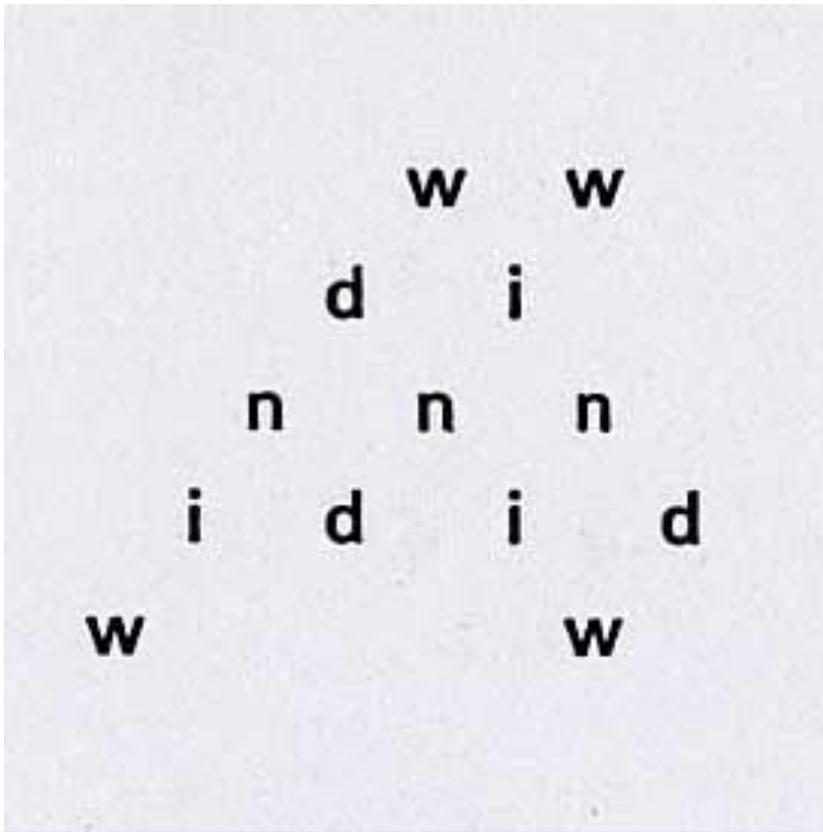
**Figure 2.14.**  
**Decio Pignatari. “Semiotic Poem.”**

create a more evenly distributed system of reference, were the concrete poets attempting to combine geographies instead of separating them?<sup>14</sup> Was the incompetence of the reader – and incompetence should not here be considered pejorative, in the same way that illiteracy would in the system Prendergast identifies above, but as a necessary condition in an expanding, poly-linguistic global environment – a material condition for a form that would aim to make poetry as globally accessible as the

traffic signals and signs in airports that Gomringer points to in 1960? This poetic strategy is perhaps most strikingly present in the sound experiments of Henri Chopin and Paul de Vree, who

14 Max Bense: “Concrete poetry does not separate languages; it unites them; it combines them” (“Concrete Poetry” 73).

used the expressive potential of the human voice to move outside of visual signage, but who also used electronic means, such as the tape recorder and tape splicing techniques, to distinguish their experimentation from previous sound poets like Hugo Ball and Kurt Schwitters. But it is there in the concrete visual poets, as well. Augusto de Campos's "Ôlho Por Ôlho," which he refers to as



**Figure 2.15.**  
**Eugen Gomringer. "Wind."**

"popcrete," is simply symbols cut out from magazines, mostly eyes and mouths, and arranged triangularly (98; see fig. 2.13). Pignatari's "Semiotic Poem" (1964) is not made of words at all, but of shapes, a lexical key for which is provided on the lower left side of the page (110; see fig. 2.14). Despite the subject of the poem – the fascination of Brazil with the football star Pele, a

fascination made all the more intense by his constant television presence – the form is accessible to any reader provided with only the most basic definition for the three symbols Pignatari makes use of.

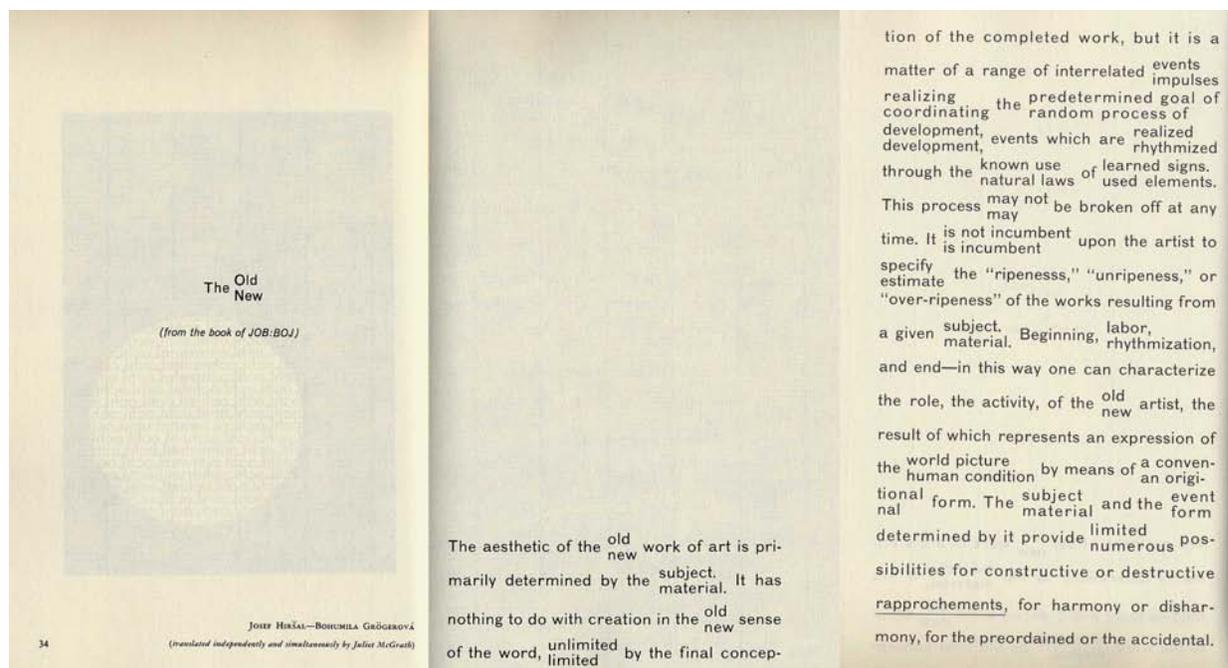
The issue of translation is necessarily central to concrete poems which function within language, as opposed to those that use only symbols, alphabetic or otherwise, or which strive for

illegibility. Eugen Gomringer's work engages with the issue of cross-linguistic understanding, and occupies a critical ground for the imagination of a new space, beyond the language-based nation of theorized by Benedict Anderson. Having spent the first eleven years of his life in Bolivia before moving to Switzerland, he wrote his first constellations in Spanish before attempting compositions in German and English. His early correspondence with Decio Pignatari was in French. Gomringer's poem "Wind," on first viewing, seems to be a rather banal, mimetic poem about wind, as the letters "w," "i," "n," and "d," are scattered about the page as if wind had dispersed the language material (37; see fig. 2.15). But the reader only fully grasps the poem's meaning when s/he realizes that "wind" refers to the same phenomenon in English as well as German, meaning that there is not only a difficulty in reading the letters, as they are not arranged on conventional lines, but even the sounds of the words and letters are indeterminate. The English "wind" becomes the German "vind;" the English "w [dʌb(ə)ljuː]," "i [aɪ]," "n [ɛn]," and "d [diː]," becomes the German "w [vɛ]," "i [ɪ]," "n [ɛn]," and "d [de]." The poem is then not about a relationship between signifier and signified, but of one between linguistic communities and of a common visual experience of language.

The Brazilians, too, operated within various linguistic communities, and were skilled translators, especially of American modernism. Elizabeth Walther-Bense recalls of Haroldo de Campos: "Besides Latin and Greek, he learned German, French, English, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Japanese, and Hebrew. Maybe some other languages, too. His goal was never to master foreign languages completely, but to be able to read literary texts and to translate them" (358). Augusto de Campos's "City Poem [or Cité Poeme, or Cidade Poema]" (1964), like Gomringer's "Wind," operates across language by producing a list of words that operate in English, French, and Portuguese if the suffix for "city" is added. The words form a string of

letters spanning three pages, finishing on the fourth with “city / cité / ciudad.” For example, the string of letters on the first page is “atrocaducapacausti,” which extracts into atrocity / atrocité / atrocidade, caducity / caducité / caducidade /, capacity / capacité / capacidade, etc..

For Eugene Wildman, the editor of the Chicago Review’s *Anthology of Concretism*, the activity of concrete across language plays a central role in his understanding of the significance of the movement. Writing in 1969, two years after his anthology was published, he identifies a folk aspect in concrete poetry, as it is written in a language meant to provide access to those with



**Figure 2.16.**  
**Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová. “The Old / New (from the book of JOB:BOJ).”**

a basic understanding of language, whether they are foreign or native speakers. Wildman uses the example of a calendar image in the Chicago Review’s office, unchanged since July 1967, whose caption, “A new bridge over the Biferno (Molise),” is printed in five different languages: Italian, French, English, German, and then Spanish, with the last two words identical in each.

Wildman asks: “But is this not a concrete poem?” (164-5) He considers it a found poem that

acknowledges the indeterminacy of the commodity in an environment of global trade while recognizing the value of disparate spaces of consumption; the calendar could be bought by an Italian, French, Spanish, German, or English consumer, each of whom would be confronted by an artefact that would remind them that there are other language communities in the world which demand recognition. Wildman's emphasis on the importance of translation comes out in his inclusion of an English translation of the Czechoslovakian poets Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová's poem "The Old / New (*from the book of JOB:BOJ*)," which is a prose passage that has certain verbs, nouns, and adjectives paired with their opposites, so that the beginning of the text reads "The aesthetic of the old / new work of art is primarily determined by the subject / material [...]" (34; see fig. 2.16). As the reader continues, s/he is confronted with potential readings that double with every choice between two words, adding up to four million, one hundred and ninety four thousand, three hundred and four possible readings.<sup>15</sup> Is this the aesthetics of entropy, "the tendency of physical systems to become less and less organized, to become more and more perfectly shuffled"(Shannon and Weaver 12)? The immensity of the work is only compounded when the reader is confronted with Hiršal and Grögerová's poem again ninety pages later, but in a different English translation.

Two poems by Hiršal and Grögerová printed in Solt's anthology, from "Vývoj I" (Developer) (1960-2), perform a synthesis of the mathematical / mechanical, the global, and the visual turn. The title is a reference to the photographic chemical product used to make visible the light captured by photographic paper during the development process, a product which needs to

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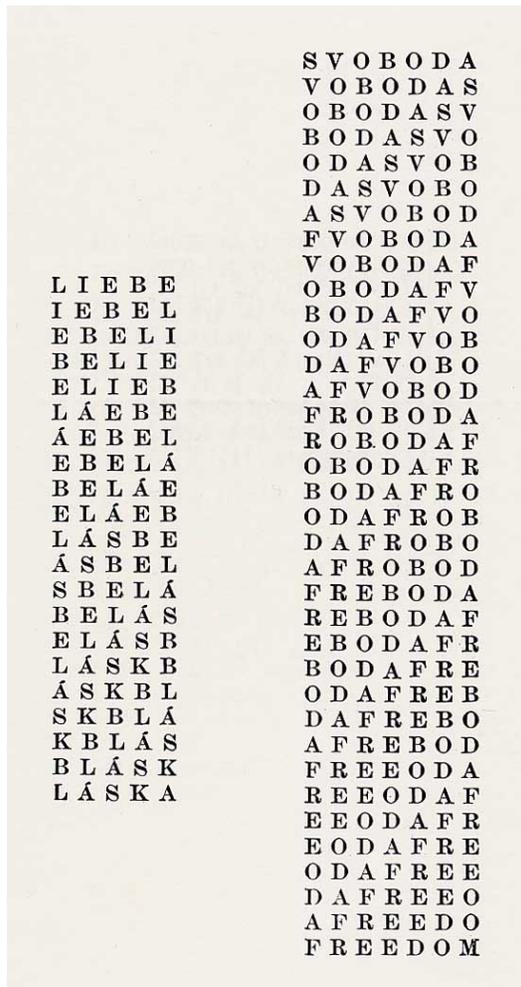
15 The connection between poetry and mathematical computation is usually associated with the OULIPO group, which was founded by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais in 1960. Unfortunately, critics rarely, if ever, connect their practice to the communication theory of the time, with most accounts categorizing them as inheritors of Surrealism.

be in contact with the paper for a very specific period of time or risk over- or underexposure of the image. The poem uses a permutational method reliant on word-length in which a word is gradually morphed into a word from a different language while creating diagonal patterns of repeated letters. The five letters in the German word for love, “LIEBE,” turn gradually, through nineteen letter combinations, into the Czech word for love, “LÁSKA,” in one example, while the seven letter Czech word for freedom, SVOBODA, travels through thirty-four combinations of gibberish before settling into the English FREEDOM, engaging both the mathematical structure of information technology developed by the rudimentary computer technology as well as the social significance of cross-linguistic communities (146; see fig. 2.17). Post-World War II Czechoslovakia was attempting to shift identities from one occupied consciousness, the German, to another, the Soviet, making the inclusion of the English word for freedom an especially loaded political statement at the height of cold war relations. It should here be noted that although Liselotte Gumpel’s *Concrete Poetry in East and West Germany* does identify concrete visual poets operating in East Germany, particularly Carlfriedrich Claus, for the most part concrete visual poetry is identified with the West, and deals with a specific media and capitalist infrastructure (advertising, consumerism, advanced communication technologies) popularly identified with the United States and its allies in the cold war.<sup>16</sup>

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16 Gumpel identifies a strong concrete poetry tradition in East Germany but explains that it did not have the same meaning as in the west. “Concrete” in East Germany referred more to an emphasis on the everyday lives of citizens and their work than a concern for the philosophical or social ramifications of an emphasis on the visual character of language. In this way it has more in common with previous socialist realist movements than what most critics would today refer to as concrete poetry. And although I argue that concrete poetry was very much a Western poetry, many poets practiced within Soviet bloc countries such as Poland and Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, “Between Poetry and Painting” which she



**Figure 2.17.**  
**Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová.**  
**“Developer (Vývoj I).”**

curated in at the Institute for Contemporary Art in London in 1965, Jasia Reichardt describes concrete poetry as the “first international poetry movement,” emphasizing the fact that beyond imagism or dada or surrealist poetry, concrete poetry was the first to engage with disparate linguistic communities and internationalism as a defining problematic (9). In order to understand the reasons behind the movement’s development it is necessary to investigate what exactly was the condition of nations or the experience of language, visual or otherwise at the time of writing. The global imaginary is an ancient idea, but one that underwent dramatic change as a result of the conditions brought about by the technologies of World War II. The link between language and mathematics is not a new

phenomenon, either, as any basic history of ciphers demonstrates, and the same is true of the combination of the visual and the linguistic, as any examination of early writing shows, or even a history of early 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-gardes. But there were shifts around the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that were forceful enough to prompt a new strategy of poetic composition, one that took the recognition of an altered mediascape as a challenge to create work that could speak to a new global reader whose consciousness was unbounded by linguistic borders.

### Fleeing the Nation

The 1960s were a time in which the concept of the nation met with some innovative resistance. Two short examples will serve to illustrate my point. In 1964, the Italian engineer Giorgio Rosa began constructing a twenty by twenty meter square concrete and steel platform in the Adriatic Sea, just outside of Italy's territorial waters off the coast of Rimini. After floating cylindrical steel columns out to the aquatic construction site, Rosa used his patented construction technique to sink them in place, and then filled them with a quick-drying concrete in order to stabilize them in the seabed. Rosa had designed the platform, which he called *L'Isola delle rose*,



**Figure 3.1**  
**Republic of Rose Island**

in order to develop a new space for living, one that could function outside of the strictures of national control. Completed in 1967, the platform was used mostly as a tourist attraction. Rosa hosted parties on the structure; a local swimmer made it

his home, as did, for a short time, a couple of fisherman whose boat had broken down close by. The citizens of Rimini knew it well, as it had been the subject of many newspaper articles, both in favour and against it, from its inception (see fig 3.1).

In early May 1968, however, Rosa and a group of investors he had gathered to shoulder some of the costs of the *Isola* decided to proclaim the structure a nation. After consulting an expert in international law, who informed them that in order to qualify as a nation they needed a government, a territory, and a population, they drew up a list of government positions, with Rosa as president, and issued postage stamps as a currency. The official language of the new nation would be Esperanto (though it is unlikely it was ever spoken there), turning the *Isola delle Rose* into *Respubliko de la Insulo de la Rozoj*. On June 24<sup>th</sup>, Rosa held a press conference on the structure in order to officially announce its sovereignty. On June 25<sup>th</sup> the Italian government sent a tax inspector and four Carabinieri to occupy the platform, and implemented a general landing prohibition. Rosa and his board of directors, now the *respubliko's* government in exile, sent a telegram to the Italian government protesting the illegal occupation of their territory, and specifically the detrimental effect it was having on their nation's tourist industry. The protest was unsuccessful, and two months later the Italian navy blew up the structure.

Some news reports speculated that the Italian government acted so decisively because they suspected the *Respubliko de la Insulo de la Rozoj* was being used as a base for a pirate radio station. The panic surrounding pirate radio was at its peak in the late sixties, as both England and the Netherlands had been trying to amend international law to protect themselves from radio stations anchored on boats and structures in international waters off their coasts.<sup>1</sup> The pirate radio stations in England were private enterprises set up in order to broadcast rock and roll and pop music to audiences who were dissatisfied with the strict programming mandate of nationally controlled radio that, in the form of the BBC, endeavoured to develop a strong British identity.

Paul Harris, in his chronicle of this period, *When Pirates Ruled the Waves*, celebrated the

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1 Part of this process was trying to extend territorial claims to include the underwater tectonic shelf, which would significantly extend their national territory. This argument is still being played out today, most recently in disputes between Russia and Canada over shipping routes in the Arctic, and by the British in their attempt to claim large swaths of potentially oil rich oceanic shelf in Antarctica (Bowcott 17; Burkeman 16).

entrepreneurial spirit of the pirates and their market success (despite many going bankrupt due to equipment failures and legal strife). If pirate radio were to be categorized politically, it would certainly be placed within the libertarian camp; a photograph from Harris's book of a decommissioned American naval vessel fitted with a long range transmitter and re-christened *The Laissez-Faire*, travelling from Florida to the southern coast of England, should remove any doubt about the pirates' political motivations (Harris 134a; see fig 3.2).

Rock and roll was for the pirate radio broadcasters what Esperanto was for Rosa: an



**Figure 3.2.**  
**M.V. Laissez Faire**

acknowledgement that national boundaries, both physical and cultural, were no longer sufficient to contain a global appetite for connectivity. Rosa's economics were no more progressive than that of the pirates; his national experiment was above all else a corporate enterprise, first in its promotion of patented new techniques of building, and then in its embrace of the tourist model, and Rosa admitted planning to sell cheap fuel to boats, foregoing the fuel taxes he would have to pay if he operated under Italian law. Both endeavours sought out spaces similar to those pointed at by the concrete poets – beyond nations and

beyond national languages, as determined by economic shifts and technological advancement – though they did so more for personal aggrandizement and monetary gain than for social or aesthetic amelioration. In this chapter I want to examine the relationship between concrete poetry and two other experimental spaces, both of which had utopian ambitions and both of which negotiated a complex path between the nation and the globe, though on scales much larger than those of Rosa and of the pirates. The first is the city of Brasília; the second is outer space.

### **Fifty Years Progress in Five**

Juscelino Kubitschek was elected president of Brazil in 1956 after running on a promise to build a new capital city in the undeveloped central plateau of the country, moving the locus of power away from the major metropolises of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. The relocation was meant to promote greater equality and balance as the nation moved forward on a program of rapid modernization. Though it was central to Kubitschek's political platform, the idea of Brasília was born much earlier, in the religious milieu of the nineteenth century. In his journal entry for August 30, 1883, the Italian João Bosco, who would become the patron saint of Brasília, writes about his dream of travelling by train across the Central Plateau:

I saw the bowels of the mountains and the depths of the plains. I had before my eyes the incomparable riches... which would one day be discovered. I saw numerous mines of precious metals and fossil coals, and deposits of oil of such abundance as had never before been seen in other places. But that was not all. Between the fifteenth and the twentieth degrees of latitude, there was a long and wide stretch of land which arose at a point where a lake was forming. Then a voice said repeatedly: when people come to excavate the mines hidden in the middle of these mountains there will appear in this place the Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey. It will be of inconceivable richness. (in Holston16)

Bosco specified that the city would be built three generations on from his vision, which, assuming generations last twenty-five years (which Kubitschek's government conveniently did), puts the date for its construction in the late 1950s.

“Fifty years progress in five” was the popular slogan of Kubitschek's government, and the central ground on which that concept would be formed was Brasília. The new capital was the synthesis of what Kubitschek called his Target Program for national development, an economic plan closely following the contemporary theory of developmentalism that was alternatively imposed on and adopted by several South American nations in attempt to “catch up” to the industrially developed states in Europe and North America. Developmentalism stressed state-directed industrialization as a means for rapid economic growth that would then allow them to participate in an expanding global trade structure. Despite its emphasis on short-term national economies, developmentalism was marketed conceptually as an entrance into an increasingly

connected global market.



**Figure 3.3.**

**Ronaldo Azeredo. “Velocidade.”**

The poetry produced within Brazil at the time would deal with this tension between the national and the global in various ways. Augusto de Campos's “sem um numero,” a poem dealing with the problems surrounding the census of 1962 in providing an accurate count of the inhabitants of the Amazon region in Northern Brazil, has already been discussed in a previous chapter, as has Decio Pignatari's “Beba Coca Cola,” which expresses the poet's anxieties about where exactly the development of Brazil would lead to

in a global market. Ronaldo Azeredo's "Velocidade" (1957) is another work that requires examination in this context. At first glance the influence of the Futurists seems to come through in the depiction of speed, the repeated "V"s of the initial line becoming shorter and shorter as the word emerges from its grid, which along with the regular and even permutation places it solidly within the concrete method. Visually, the repeated "V"s perform as a field of directional cues,, pointing downward and gradually to the left, to the beginning of the final line, "VELOCIDADE." When read aloud, the poem sounds as if it is a car shifting gears, finally reaching the top in the annunciation of the Portuguese word for "speed," "VELOCIDADE." But



**Figure 3.4.**  
**José Lino Grünewald. "Preto."**

is the poet inside the car or stationary on the side of a highway? In the latter case, the diminishing repeated "V"s might still function as engine sounds, but of cars going faster and faster past the listener / viewer. As the automobile industry in Brazil played a large role in its industrial growth, it would be difficult to read into Azeredo's work the same kind of enthusiasm for industry and technology that Marinetti and his group

possessed in Italy at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Azeredo 171; see fig 3.3). Considering the

poetic milieu in which Azeredo was writing, it is likely he would share the concerns of Pignatari and the de Campos brothers over exactly what development meant to Brazilian society, and who benefited the most.

José Lino Grünewald's "Preto" is another example of poetry tied to the economics of national development and global trade. Haroldo de Campos describes it as a placard poem in the tradition of Mayakovsky's "agit-plakat techniques," and it certainly has an aura of protest to it (Grünewald n. pag.). A vertical repetition of "preto," the Portuguese word for "black," is interrupted every two lines by the addition of four nouns: "um jato (a jet)," "um óleo (an oil)," "um fato (a fact)," and "petróleo (petroleum)." The poem shifts on the last line of the first section into another vertical column of the repeated "nosso (our)," and terminates in the emphatic "nosso petróleo" (Grünewald n. pag.; see fig 3.4). This poem is less interesting for its visual dimension and structural integrity than it is for its emotional thrust, a rare trait for a concrete poem. Beyond the similarities of the words (jato and fato, oleo and petróleo, preto and petróleo), the poem represents the graphic score of a crowd's chant. The upper section functions as a visual representation of a call and response; the lower section, which is transitioned into with the subject of the protest, "petróleo," is dominated by the word "nosso," meaning "our," and emphasizes a collective resistance through repetition. This protest has an obvious political dimension, aimed as it is at the exploitation of Brazil's vast oil holdings by foreign investment, which places it in the tradition of Pignatari and de Campos, where the fusion of the political and the visually poetic functions on both a local (national) and global scale.

Although the concrete poets had no real connection to the planning of Brasília, the jury that would eventually decide on the city's design shared their emphasis on the primacy of form, and the process of selecting a plan offers some striking parallels with the aims of concrete poetry. In 1956 the Brazilian government held a competition to decide the shape the new city would

take, and in 1957 proclaimed the design of architect Lucio Costa the winner. Costa

submitted his proposal on five medium-sized cards containing fifteen freehand sketches and a brief statement of twenty-three articles. His presentation featured not a line of mechanical drawings, no model, land-use studies, population charts or schemes for either economic development or administrative organization – in short, nothing more than the idea of a capital city. (Holston 63)

The design competition had stressed that it was searching for design ideas, not a construction plan, which is the reason they chose Costa's proposal over that of the firm of M. M. M. Roberto, which included “scores of blueprints, voluminous statistical projections of population and economic growth, and detailed plans for regional development and administration” (64). The jury was looking for a project for the future, not a plan for the present. Costa's proposal offered just that promise, a plan as undeveloped as the land Brasília was to be built on, and as full of prophecy as that of Bosco's vision. The text he submitted alongside his drawings begins: “It was not my intention to enter the competition – nor indeed, am I really so doing. I am merely liberating my mind from a possible solution which sprang to it as a complete picture, but one which I had not sought” (in Holston 64). At least one jury member was moved by Costa's quasi-mystical posture. The British architect and town planner William Holford wrote of his experience of Costa's proposal:

At the first reading of the report, one realized that here was a thinker, an urbanist, of the first order. On second reading one realized that there was not a single unnecessary word in the report, and not a single unnecessary line in the sketch plan or diagrams: yet everything essential was said... Even to me, who am [sic] no Portuguese scholar, the original version was immediately lyrical and striking. (Holford 398)



**Figure 3.5.**  
**Augusto de Campos. “Concreto.”**

Plano-Pilôto Para Brasília<sup>2</sup>: “With the concrete poem occurs the phenomenon of meta-communication: coincidence and simultaneity of verbal and non-verbal communication; only – it must be noted – it deals with a communication of forms, of a structure-content, not with the usual message communications” (A. de Campos, H. de Campos and Pignatari 72). The combination of efficient language, efficient diagrams, and ease of translation in Holford's account legitimizes concrete poetry's claim to be a poetry of the time, one in which global communication and circulation of culture has real effects on the everyday lives of people around the world, including

Although the conventional colonial romanticization of the Other might play a role in Holford's description, his language is interesting for the connection it draws between the efficiency of Costa's drawings and that of the poetic output of Brazil at the time. As well, his admission that he is “no Portuguese” scholar – indeed, we can assume his Portuguese was quite rudimentary, and that he depended quite heavily on translation – contributes to the rationale for concrete poetry to communicate across national languages, and for its emphasis on visual forms. As the Noigandres group puts it in their *Plano-Pilôto Para Poesia Concreta*, published in 1958, a year after Costa's

<sup>2</sup> Although the *Plano-Pilôto* was published in 1958, it was actually assembled writings by members of the Noigandres group that had been published between 1950 and 1958.

the development of an entire city from a single idea judged adequate by a panel of diverse national perspectives.

The city of Brasília was built in less than five years, from 1956 to 1961, a period that closely parallels the orthodox period in Brazilian concrete poetry. But the link between Brasília and concrete poetry, though never operating on the level of official culture, comes out most clearly in a comparison of the methods of construction for each. Justin Read argues that the “concrete” in concrete poetry is a “direct reference to Brazilian architecture and its predilection for reinforced concrete” (255). His point is strengthened by a poem written by Augusto de Campos in 1956, called “concreto,” which begins with the word “concentro” (focus; concentration) and moves through similar words: “certo” (certain), “concerto” (concert), “corte” (cut; hack), “contra” (against), “conceito” (concept), and “centro” (centre) before finishing with “concreto” (concrete) (145). The word “certo” appears in bold as its letters appear diagonally in the five words following “concentro,” functioning as a verbo-visual reinforcement of the poem, its meaning augmented by its position. The poem is a solid, confident structure that links the possibilities of concrete as a cultural movement to the potential of actual reinforced concrete to transform cities and spaces of living (see fig 3.5). This poem dates from the moment that the Noigandres group and Eugen Gomringer in Switzerland had just agreed upon “concrete poetry,” as a term, but it would be simplistic to read the poem as a strict celebration of that term. If this poem were by Gomringer, there would be an urge to read it as homage to the European concrete artists, dating from van Doesburg to Max Bill. Gomringer's work tends to emphasize the influence of visual art more than that of his Brazilian counterparts, whose early work cites the modernist and early 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde poets, from Guillaume Apollinaire to James Joyce, from Gertrude Stein to Ezra Pound, from João Cabral de Melo Neto to e. e. cummings. But it would also be wrong to read this poem as a condensation of William Carlos Williams' great

modernist slogan “No ideas but in things.” Although various literary critics have attempted to argue that the lines in Williams' “Red Wheelbarrow” are organized in order to suggest a series of wheelbarrows, and consequently that it is a “proto-concrete” poem, the case is less than convincing.

While it is true that there are concrete poems which prompt readers to dismiss them as simply mimetic, in the tradition of the shaped poems from the Axe of Simius to George Herbert's “Easter Wings” -- one thinks immediately of the playful but over-anthologized “Apfel” by Reinhard Döhl, or of the flower poems of Mary Ellen Solt – the Brazilian concrete poems tend to deal with structure within words instead of concepts. In de Campos's poem, the suggestion of cutting or hacking against concept in order to get to a centre, which is “concrete,” is only possible because the words share so many letter-shapes. The same is true of Pignatari's “Beba Coca Cola”: the poem can only end in “cloaca” (cesspool) because the letters are already present in “Coca Cola”; the poetry is immanent, contained within the structure of the words. Thus the emphasis on the visual character of language is not expressive but formally constrained: what we see is what we get, but the concrete poets' position is that there is more to language than what we are accustomed to seeing. There is a materiality in the language of concrete poetry that is overlooked by conventional approaches to literature. The emphasis on what is hidden, or contained within words that seem innocuous has a political character that is not present in the work of the Swiss poets. In a later interview, after the 1964 coup that deposed Kubitschek and installed a military dictatorship, Augusto de Campos cites this as the primary difference between the Brazilian and the Swiss-German concrete poets, that the Brazilians “thought about their work politically, under conditions that required them to” (Donguy 377).

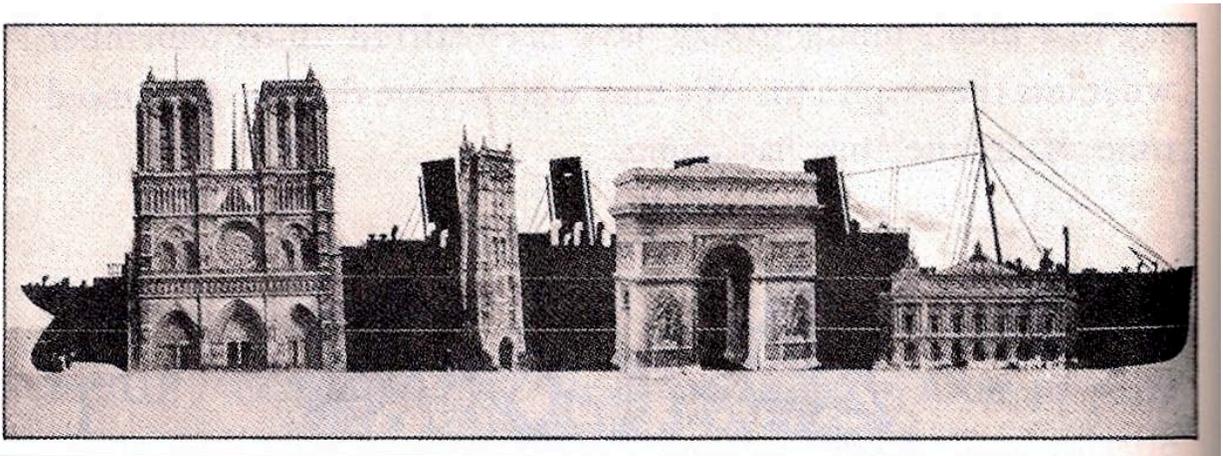
### **Reinforcing “Concrete”**

This emphasis on structural integrity and the reduction of expression to a material base is

what connects concrete poetry and concrete art, but it also connects it to the sphere of modernist architecture. The modernist tradition did not arrive in Brazil in 1956 with the initiation of Brasília. Both Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, who would design the majority of the monumental structures in Brasília, were admirers of Le Corbusier, and both had worked with him on the design of the Ministry of Education and Culture in Rio de Janeiro, which was built between 1936 and 1943. Niemeyer worked with Le Corbusier again in the 1940s on the initial plans for the headquarters of the United Nations in New York, and Costa was to be the first Brazilian representative in the Congrès Internationale de l'Architecture Moderne (CIAM). Le Corbusier's lectures in Brazil in 1929 and 1936 were well received, and both the architectural community and the artists and poets of the time had a firm idea of what role concrete, and specifically reinforced concrete, played in the worldwide movement of modernist architecture. When historicizing “concrete” as a term in relation to concrete poetry, therefore, it is necessary to historicize concrete as a material, as well. It is not enough to try to understand concrete art and poetry in relation to what we think of when we hear the term concrete – a near ubiquitous material holding up the buildings around us, making up the streets and sidewalks on which we travel daily – but to consider what concrete meant to both the poets and artists who used the term to describe their work. For although concrete is an ancient material, dating back to the Romans, it was not widely used in building until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and then only in a rudimentary form that had more in common with adobe than modern concrete. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century concrete was still made with ordinary lime mortar, a poor binding agent, which is why most buildings' structural walls were made of stone. It was only through the innovations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that concrete became popular in general construction, and thereby linked it to the industrial revolution as a quick and solid *technology* of construction.

Building on the discovery of France's François Coignet, who in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century

solved the issues of strength and solubility that had prevented concrete from being used structurally, the British Joseph Tall was the first contractor to realize that great expense could be saved by minimizing the work in the shaping of concrete by building forms: “By concentrating on standardization, he had the distinction of exploiting for the first time one of the most beneficial characteristics of concrete construction which, if perceived at all by his contemporaries, would have been condemned by them as contrary to Ruskinian principles of genuine craftsmanship and the dignity of human labour” (Collins 40). It was, however, by no



**Figure 3.6.**

**Le Corbusier. Diagram of architectural scale.**

means a smooth transition into concrete construction. At first, structural concrete walls were accepted by architects only if they were to be covered up by brick work, stucco, or other ornament, a requirement made less quaint by the fact that concrete at that time was not the clean, smooth, sterile grey of modernism, but the rough sepia of Victorian England. The first private buildings to be made of concrete in England were either industrial or railway buildings. These structures were not bound by the same codes as residential buildings, which did not permit concrete construction even as late as 1908.<sup>2</sup> The reticence could perhaps be forgiven if one takes

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<sup>2</sup> However, public buildings in England were made from concrete in the 1880s. “This allowed the public to become to some extent familiar with the general characteristics of the method, and enabled great advances to be made in structural techniques; but it did not force architects to study the aesthetic potentialities of the material, and it was precisely these which the public, having seen the factories and

the United States as an example, where in 1906 part of the Eastman Kodak plant in Rochester, New York collapsed, followed the next year by more collapses in Long Beach, Philadelphia, New York, and San Francisco.

*Reinforced concrete*, as a term, only came into use at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1898), and it was not until 1927 that interest in the possibilities of concrete really began to develop in architectural circles. Despite being embraced by Art Nouveau for its organic shaping abilities, concrete became the subject of serious articles only in the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> This re-positions Theo van Doesburg's first and only issue of *Art Concret* in 1929 as a journal very much determined by the contemporary shifts in the technology and aesthetics of concrete as a cutting edge building material.<sup>4</sup> Thus concrete as it functioned in the first half of the twentieth century was not the equivalent of stone, as we would consider it today, but carried within it the potential for new forms and possibilities, especially in the discourse surrounding modern architecture. Le Corbusier's 1923 *Vers Un Architecture* embraced the potential for reinforced concrete to transform the way people lived through architectural functionalism and mass-produced housing. Explaining how these houses would be built, he writes: "The concrete was poured from above as you would fill a bottle. A house can be completed in three days. It comes out from the shuttering like a casting. But this shocks our contemporary architects, who cannot believe in a house that is made in three days; we must take a year to build it, and we must have pointed roofs, dormers and

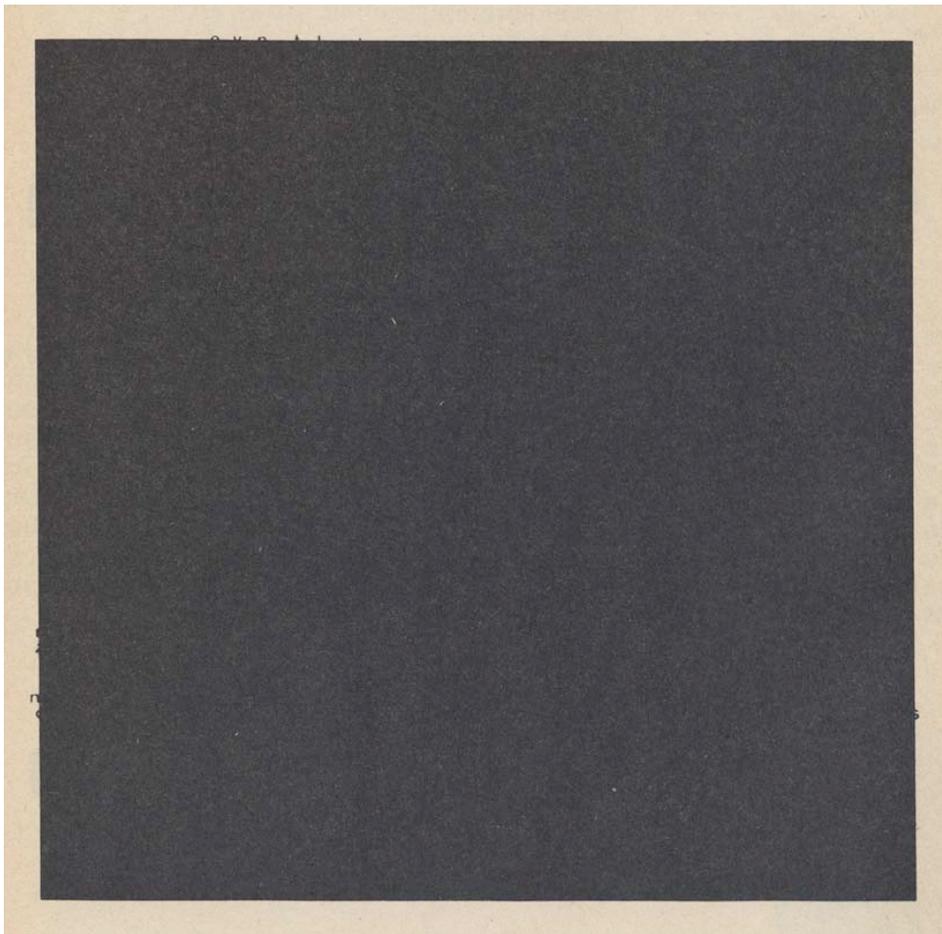
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railway sheds, most distrusted" (Collins 78).

3 "Art Nouveau, born, or at any rate baptized in 1896 (when it received its name), obviously needed a new plastic material if its buildings were to be organically constructed; ferro-concrete, which had been patented by François Hennebique only four years earlier, and used in his first factory the previous year, urgently required an appropriate and original architectural form if it were not to be merely a means of stylistic imitation. Instead therefore of carving solid ashlar into intricate rounded shapes, what could be a more obvious solution of both problems than to utilize this new plastic structural system in its most logical way, by moulding it with all the *élan* which modern fashion required?" (Collins 121)

4 "The publication of Francis Onderdonk's *The Ferro-Concrete Style* in 1928 coincided [...] with a period in Europe when concrete was being energetically welcomed by the modernists because of its capacity to produce new forms and denounced equally vigorously by the traditionalists for the same reason." (Collins 146)

mansards” (230-1). This passage is indicative of the overall tone of *Vers Un Architecture*, which is written as a sort of aphoristic manifesto, and which is valuable for understanding the awe materials like reinforced concrete and steel instilled in the architects of the time. It is in this book that Le Corbusier formulates his support for the engineer's aesthetic, which he illustrates visually by juxtaposing a steam-liner with various monuments of French architecture: the Notre-Dame cathedral, the Arc de Triumph, etc. (see fig 3.6). The steam-liner dwarfs the structures, and in



**Figure 3.7.**

**Heinz Gappmayr. “Untitled poem.”**

as a result of the material. Thus the concrete house finished in three days, though it looks like a box as a condition of the form, becomes a celebrated aesthetic object for the potential the process of its construction carries within it. If early concrete construction – the buildings that used stucco

doing so mocks the imagination of previous generations, pitying them for their primitive technologies (92).

The engineer's aesthetic is not one that is imposed upon materials, as Art Nouveau would impose shapes on concrete, but comes

or stone to cover up the concrete skeleton, or the work in the style of Art Nouveau - went against the grain by removing signs of labour, and thus offending the popular Ruskinian idea of the dignity involved in human labour, concrete construction in Le Corbusier's time was desired specifically for that reason: for the displacement of labour onto technology, and through that displacement a promise of a life free of toil, characterized by abundance.

A negation of the human in the modernist architecture that lauded straight lines and geometric order found a parallel in concrete poetry, where technology was privileged over subjectivity, invention over labour, structure over lyric. Primarily, concrete poetry is characterized by an appearance of *ease*, by the absence of the traditional traits of poetry: a lyrical subject, a conventional spatial syntax of left to right, top to bottom, etc..<sup>5</sup> A poem by Heinz Gappmayr in Eugene Wildman's *Anthology of Concretism* is simply a large black square of ink (Gappmayr 39; see fig 3.7). There are remnants of letters peeking out from three of the sides, but it is impossible to tell what they are, or what words, if any, they belong to. Some of the shapes bleeding through might not even be letters; they might be ink stains or smudges, a result of an excess of material that is neglected in conventional poetry. The technology of print is taken for granted, and its production made invisible. Gappmayr's piece refuses to be complicit in that desire for print language as a transparent mode of communication, forcing the reader to confront both the material process through which poetry is produced as well as the impediments readers face when experiencing national languages that they, as speakers of a different language, have limited or no access to.

In Brazil, the engineer's aesthetic was transformed into the engineer's poetics. This was true out of necessity in the case of Niemeyer's Brasília, where many of the monuments and buildings he designed in concrete would not have been feasible in Europe or the United States.

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5 This is excepting poets such as the East German Carlfriedrich Claus or the British John Furnival, both of whose poems are usually intricate images made up of handwriting or fields of type.

Because Niemeyer operated in a semi-industrialized context, he could not be confined to the rigidity of regular pre-fabricated components. On the contrary, the most cost-effective building materials at his disposal were those that could be assembled on-site – concrete poured over steel frames, precisely the technique which allows maximum flexibility for experimentation with curvature. The architect's use of unconventional forms in Brasília thus stands as a direct index to the nation's level of industrialization at mid-century. Since many parts and components could not be pre-fabricated, Niemeyer was forced to improvise, which in turn promoted an architecture of improvisation. (Read 266)

With labour being cheaper than materials, Niemeyer was able to allot more time to the construction of complex forms that would be just as strong as simpler, rectangular forms, in the process using less concrete and distinguishing the architecture of Brasília from the modernist buildings being constructed in more developed nations in Europe and North America.<sup>6</sup>

### **The International Typographical Style**

According to Augusto de Campos, during the first period of Brazilian concrete poetry, which he refers to as a period of orthodoxy, and delimits as taking place between 1953 and 1960, the poets sought a rational, disciplined space that would use rational, geometric type in order to create a collective, anonymous style for concrete poetry. They accomplished this in part by making Futura their standard font. As de Campos explains in an interview from 2001:

Donc la relation avec le design, la publicité et, de façon plus particulière, la

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<sup>6</sup> Read begins his essay with an account of how civil service demonstrators in Brasília in 2003, who were protesting against the drastic reduction of pension benefits, began smashing the large plate glass windows of the Congresso Nacional. The poignancy of the image comes from the fact that the pension benefits were part of the very social package that included the construction of Brasília as a modernist utopian project. Their attack on the very architecture of Brasília as a symbol of failed promises is therefore especially apt, particularly against the large glass in particular as it was meant to function as both a metaphor for truth and transparency but also as a representation of reinforced concrete's ability to provide such structurally sound *openness* "with its soaring spans and uncommon cantilevers" (Niemeyer, in Read 262)

typographie, était dès les débuts fermement établie. Le Bauhaus et le concept de la 'bonne forme' ont eu une influence décisive, et le type 'sans serif,' ou caractère bâton, fut choisi, plus spécialement le futura, pour sa clarté et sa précision, la microgéométrie de ses lettres favorisant la création de la macrostructure géométrisante du poème concret de la première phase. (Buschinger 151)

Many of the early Swiss and German concrete poems are set in Futura font as well, which is perhaps less surprising when one considers their proximity to the Bauhaus, the birthplace of rational typography. Hansjörg Mayer would produce a series of concrete poetry pamphlets called *Futura* in the mid-60s, and used the font himself in the majority of his compositions. Futura's design emphasizes its geometrical character, with the letters based on the primary shapes of circles, squares, and triangles, continuing the epoch's embrace of the rational. In his discussion of type designer Jan Tschichold, Simon Loxley explains it in terms that closely echo Le Corbusier:

'The essence of the New Typography is clarity.' Tschichold argued that with the increasing amount of print and information battling for the reader's attention, greater economy of expression was needed. Old typefaces were concerned with beauty, but this was achieved by superfluous ornamentation, which now had to be stripped away in the search for purer, clearer forms. (148)

The standardization of type would find its zenith in a Swiss typeface created in 1957 and named after the Latin word for Switzerland, Helvezia. The Helvetica typeface is a refined version of Futura: it does not adhere as strictly to the geometric impulse of orthodox modernism. But it carries within it a similar international impulse, one that the designer Rick Pyner associates with the post-war idealism that arose out of re-construction efforts in Europe (*Helvetica*). If Futura is the font of the Bauhaus, Helvetica is the font of the Marshall Plan. In the 1960s it began to be adopted on a grand scale. As a font it performed the role projected by the concrete poets: it was

ubiquitous, transnational and designed for legibility. Rather than the internationalism – and international style – that the Brazilian concrete poets and their modernist heroes envisioned, however, Helvetica quickly became the standard font for transnational corporations around the world.<sup>7</sup>

The desire for a standard, global type expressed by fonts like Futura and Helvetica is integral to concrete poetry. From the beginning Gomringer's manifestos speak of supranational poetry, universally understood, functioning in the same way as signs in an airport. Those concrete poets who used Futura font did so in hopes that the ideology of the Bauhaus, the faith in design, might allow poetry to exist in a sphere as rational as geometry. Those poets who avoided typesetting in favour of the typewriter, and who used the typewriter's standardized letters and spaces as a design tool were following a similar, if more mechanical impulse. But this impulse needs to be read both as a holdover from the modernist experiment as well as an anticipation of the creep of global capital and transnational organization that would take hold in the 1970s, and that continues today.

### **Cidade / City / Cité**

In the first manifesto of the Congrès Internationale d'Architecture Moderne in 1928, the group called on the League of Nations to legislate a single technical language to be taught to architects around the world, using standardized systems of measurement for domestic equipment and appliances. This would facilitate the construction of utopian cities by removing the impediments facing CIAM members who wished to design buildings and cities around the world, and would allow materials to be produced en masse and shipped to construction sites globally, or factories to be built in nations that could both fuel their national architectural revolutions and

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<sup>7</sup> Helvetica's ubiquity remains today. The American designer Paula Scher claims her antipathy towards the font developed out of its position as a de facto font of the Vietnam War, as many of the corporations that profited from the war used Helvetica in their advertisements and logos. When asked in an interview, "If Helvetica was the font of the Vietnam war, what is the font of this [the Iraq] war?", she answers "Helvetica" (Hustwit).

supply their neighbours with needed products, knowing they all needed the same materials, in the same dimensions.

The designers of Brasília, Costa and Niemeyer, followed closely the program of CIAM and its leading theorist, Le Corbusier, attempting in their design to impose standardized living upon the future residents of the city. A government report from 1963 on the living conditions in Brasília was unwavering in its support for the project that would eventually bankrupt the Kubitschek government and precipitate the military junta's seizure of power the following year:

The apartment blocks of a *superquadra* are all equal: same facade, same height, same facilities, all constructed on *pilotis* [columns], all provided with garages and constructed of the same material – which prevents the hateful differentiation of social classes; that is, all the families share the same life together, the upper-echelon public functionary, the middle, and the lower. (Holston 20)

Unfortunately, the problem with Brasília became that very hateful persistence of social class stratification it was designed to remedy. The architecture did not prevent the wealthy from moving out of the *superquadras* and across the lake, where they built homes that looked like the homes of other wealthy Brazilians, or from organizing exclusive private clubs to counter the open social clubs included in the plans for the apartment buildings. What the design did prevent, however, was social interaction, replacing the idea of a city square with a monumental square, removing it from living spaces by a network of grand freeways meant to separate the sectors of work from those of leisure. This is the engineer's aesthetic applied directly to the social organization of city space. As Holston describes it:

Architecture as the conductor and condenser of a new way of life – this is a metaphor drawn from the model of the machine. These social condensers would transform human nature as electrical condensers transform the nature of current, turning the bourgeois individualist and the denatured laborer of capitalist society into fully developed members of the socialist collective. (52)

This architecture of the machine follows, chronologically, the popular metaphor of the body and its pathologies to describe the 19<sup>th</sup> century city: town planners were imagined as surgeons, cutting into the city in order to open up veins for circulation, providing space for the city to breathe again, etc. The concrete poets, adopting the updated role of poetic engineer, emphasized structure and mechanical strategies of composition in order to perform a similar rejection of the conventional order. The lyric subject was replaced by the calculating subject; poetry was no longer meant for personal edification in a moment of meditation, but as another experience in a mechanized scheme for living: image poems that can be quickly comprehended and appreciated conveniently, contributing efficiently to the overall maximization of modern life. It was poetry subsumed into

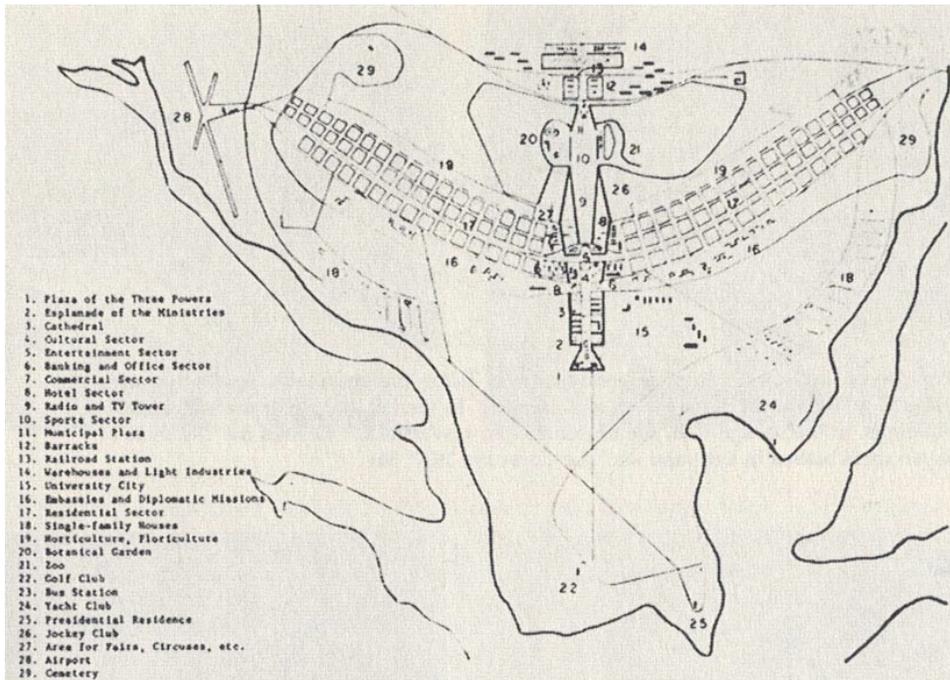


**Figure 3.8.**  
**Augusto de Campos. “City Poem.”**

design; it was *planned* poetry.

The modernist city is the horizon for the dream of a standardized subjectivity, its International Style attempting to produce a global citizenry following the post-revolutionary French model for a national citizenry. James Scott connects the history of standardized measurement in Europe to the expansion of trade networks and national unity and points out that in France in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the metric system would be to industry and commerce what mathematics was to science: “A rational unit of measurement would promote a rational citizenry” (32). The standard meter is tied directly to the French Revolution, and served to limit corruption and abuse by merchants, making agents of commerce equal under law and in the same way imagining a homogenous community of consumers. In 1963, it seems as if Augusto de Campos was still a supporter of the ideal, as his poem “Cidade city cité” suggests. The work is a long series of letters that appear to be gibberish until one comes to the end of the line, where “cidade,” “city,” and “cité” are printed in a vertical column (see fig 3.8). Only then does it become clear that the string of letters are all Latin roots that, when combined with the three words at the end, form words in Portuguese, English, and French. The word roots are organized alphabetically: the first five letters, “atroc,” becomes “atrocidade,” “atrocidity,” and “atrocité.” The second cluster is “caduc” making “caducidade,” “caducity,” and “caducité,” and so on. That de Campos wanted to create a poem that could function simultaneously in diverse languages is significant but not surprising, given the past statements by concrete poets about how the visual character of the work allows it to be read across different languages. Although the visual character in this poem is less pronounced than those works produced in the moment that de Campos describes as Brazilian concrete poetry's orthodox phase, it still fulfills that criterion. What is more significant is that the international “style” of this poem is conveyed through the multilingual list of words meaning “city,” thus tying the poem to the urban imagining contained in the theories of CIAM that

Niemeyer and Costa implemented so faithfully in their design for Brasília. It is important to note, as well, that shortly after this poem Augusto de Campos began his “popcrete” phase, which moved away from words and towards symbols and images, often taken from popular culture sources, with conscious reference to American and European pop art. This phase parallels the



**Figure 3.9.**

**Lucio Costa. Plan for Brasilia**

collapse of the utopian promise of Brasília and the developmentalist policies that accompanied it; the nation, in fact, suffered an economic collapse, and a military junta took power in 1964.

With such a drastic change at the level of government came a shift in poetic strategy. For example, Augusto de Campos produced “Ôlho Por Ôlho” in 1964, and “Luxo / Lixo” – a poem in which he repeats the word “luxo,” printed in an ornate font, in the shape of the word for garbage, “lixo” – in 1965 (in Solt 96).<sup>8</sup>

Discussing Costa's original sketches for Brasília, James Scott notes that the “monumental

8 “Popcretos,' c'est une terminologie que j'ai créée un peu comme par jeu, car nous n'avions pas à cette époque l'intention de créer un nouveau mouvement. C'était à la fois un peu de jeu par rapport aux orthodoxies de la poésie concrète, et un peu d'autocritique. Et ces expériences incorporent un peu de pop art, de vie quotidienne. [...] Ces poèmes et ces travaux avaient bien sûr une certaine direction politique parce que c'était le moment de la dictature militaire au Brésil; les poèmes offraient une sémantique politique, essayaient, un peu sous l'influence du concept de Maïakovski, d'établir une connexion entre une position politique révolutionnaire et un art révolutionnaire.” (Donguy, “Augusto de Campos” 377)

axis,” as Costa describes it, has alternately been compared to Christ's cross and an Amazonian bow, both of which contribute to the overall mythology of the Brazilian capital and its prophetic origins. Costa distanced himself from such sentimental projections, and Scott sides with him: “Even if the axis represented a small attempt to assimilate Brasília in some way to national tradition, it remained a city that could have been anywhere, that provided no clue to its own history, unless that history was the modernist doctrine of CIAM” (120). But neither Scott nor Holston make the observation that Brasília is shaped like an airplane, with the Plaza of the Three Powers and Esplanade of the Ministries as the cockpit, the superquadras as the wings, and the sports sector and barracks as the fuselage and tail (in Holston 33; see fig 3.9). As a symbol of increased connectivity, the airplane would be an appropriate model for Brasília, if a little obvious: flying was the most convenient way for the government workers to travel between the central city and the financial and cultural centres of Rio and São Paulo. But the airplane holds significance for modern architectural design and literature as well. Scott, in arguing against the proportions of the monumental squares and plazas in Brasília, notes that the city is best viewed, “as are many of Le Corbusier's plans, from the air” (121). And Holston begins his chapter “The Modernist Project” with this quote from Le Corbusier's 1933 book *The Radiant City: Elements of a Doctrine of Urbanism to Be Used as the Basis of Our Machine-Age Civilization*:

Take an airplane. Fly over our 19<sup>th</sup> century cities, over those immense sites encrusted with row after row of houses without hearts, furrowed with their canyons of soulless streets. Look down and judge for yourself. I say that these things are the signs of a tragic denaturing of human labor. They are proof that men, subjugated by the titanic growth of the machine, have succumbed to the machinations of a world powered by money. (*Radiant City* 341)

Besides the arrogance implied by the imperative “Take an airplane,” and the God-like invitation

to “Look down and judge for yourself,” the perspective from an airplane obliterates the human scale in favour of the monumental. The implementation of the airplane as planning tool served only to de-differentiate spaces for living, and there are implications here for poetry as well.

The perspective from the air had its influence on modernist literature, specifically in the work of Gertrude Stein, whose work Decio Pignatari cites as an influence in his 1956 manifesto, “New Poetry: Concrete.” In her 1938 book *Picasso*, Stein writes about how the technology of flight altered the “composition of living,” and thus required a new mode of literary and artistic composition:

One must not forget that the earth seen from an airplane is more splendid than the earth seen from an automobile. The automobile is the end of progress on the earth, it goes quicker but essentially the landscapes seen from an automobile are the same as the landscapes seen from a carriage, a train, a waggon, or in walking. But the earth seen from an airplane is something else.... When I was in America I for the first time traveled pretty much all the time in an airplane and when I looked at the earth I saw all the lines of cubism.... (50)

The view from an airplane does away with the earth-bound rules of traditional visual representation, destroying the hierarchy of foreground, middle ground, and background: it replaces depth with breadth. The influence is clear in the plans of modernist architects, but it is there in the programmatic statements of concrete poetry, as well, including the Noigandres' notion of structure-content, as developed in their Pilot Plan, and Gomringer's of linguistic “constellations”:

Our languages are on the road to formal simplification, abbreviated, restricted forms of language are emerging. The content of a sentence is often conveyed in a single word. Longer statements are often represented by small groups of letters.

Moreover, there is a tendency among languages for the many to be replaced by a few which are generally valid. (Gomringer, "From Line" 67)

Both positions emphasize a stripping down in order to facilitate the communicative potential for concrete poetry in an era of rapid transformation of everyday life, much in the same way that

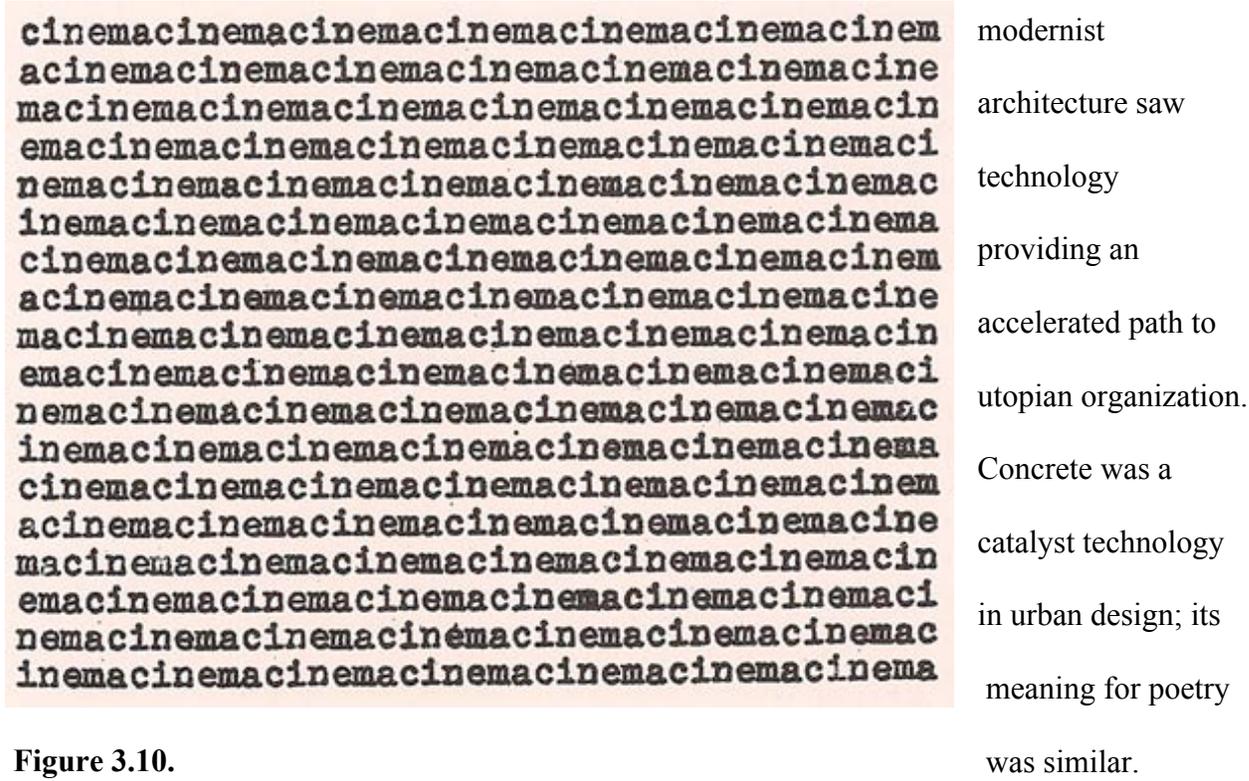


Figure 3.10.

Pierre Garnier, and Ilse Garnier. "Texte Pour une architecture."

At a certain

point, however, the perspective from the airplane must return to earth. In Brazil, this descent was marked by the shift from concrete to popcrete, in the case of Augusto de Campos, and to semiopoetry in the case of Pignatari. In Europe, concrete poetry had spread from Gomringer's Switzerland to Germany, France, Belgium, Britain, Czechoslovakia, Italy, and beyond. As in Brazil, orthodoxy gave way to a more playful stance. Max Bense in Germany and Pierre Garnier in France became the most vocal theorists of the movement, and the poetic work became less prescriptive and more descriptive; there was less emphasis on structural integrity and more on visual experimentation. The constellations of Gomringer transformed into the technical

manipulation of print technology: no more “Ping / pong” style compositions, but rather work like Pierre and Ilse Garnier's “Texte pour un architecture,” in which the word “cinema” is repeated regularly and in the dimensions of a cinema screen in order to recreate the visual hum of a screen



Figure 3.11.

Franz Mon. From *et 2*.

swathes out of public poster boards and display them as examples of re-construction-era France's consumerist palimpsests (see fig 3.11).

Bense writes in 1965 that “Concrete texts are often closely related to poster texts due to their reliance upon typography and visual effect; that is, their aesthetic communication scheme often corresponds to that of advertisements. The central sign, often a word, takes on polemical or proclaiming function” (“Concrete Poetry” 73). Garnier writes in his 1963 “Position I of the International Movement,” which was signed by twenty-five other practising concrete poets but

(though in that sense it is more like a black and white television screen than a cinema screen, and the dimensions are more like an older cinema screen than the wide screens that emerged in the 1950s) (see fig 3.10); or the German poet Franz Mon, whose texts appear to have been cut up and mixed with other texts, recalling the images of the French *décollagistes* of the 1950s and 60s who would cut

significantly not the Noigandres group<sup>9</sup>:

If the poem has changed

It is that I have changed

It is that we all have changed

It is that the universe has changed

Men are less and less determined by their nation, their class, their mother tongue, and more and more by the function which they perform in society and the universe, by presences, textures, facts, information, impulsions, energies. (Garnier 79)

The names of modernist precursors like Mallarmé and Apollinaire are no longer included, replaced by the influence of advertisements. The wonder of technology and the desire to keep pace with it artistically transforms into the pressure to react to its effects, to catch up. Change, which held so many possibilities in the post-war period of development in Brazil and the reconstruction in Europe, was no longer coming but had arrived, and not in the ways that the modernist poets or architects had predicted. There was a new “international style,” but one that resulted in the spectacularization of the urban landscape by the commodity and not, to the dismay of Le Corbusier, Costa, and Niemeyer, by that of the technocratic architect.

The reaction against the airplane perspective occurred in writing about architecture and urban planning, as well. In 1961, the same year that Brasília was “opened,” Jane Jacobs published *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, in which she adopts the empirical perspective of a pedestrian experiencing first-hand the effects of the urban spaces she analyzes.

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9 The only signatory from Brazil was E. M. de Melo e Castro. There is a note at the end of the text that Ferdinand Kriwet agrees with parts of the declaration, and that Henri Chopin could not sign it for reasons that “are discussed within his poetry” (Garnier, “Position 1” [1968] 80). A note on an earlier, unpublished version claims that the Noigandres group preferred to remain within the formulation of concrete poetry in their 1958 “Plano-Pilôto Para Poesia Concreta,” and that Garnier had yet to hear back from the Stuttgart group, comprised of Bense, Reinhold Döhl, Ludwig Harig, and Claus Henneberg (Garnier “Position I du Mouvement” [1963]).

The first sentence of her book is unflinching in its rejection of what she considered the cold, masculine, rationalist programs of Le Corbusier and his contemporaries: “This book is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding” (5). Where Le Corbusier advocates separate sectors for work and leisure, Jacobs proposes mixed-use buildings; where he calls for cities to be razed and rebuilt in a single, homogeneous style, she sings the praises of old buildings and their power to evoke community history; where he wants to extend roads into expressways through cities for efficient traffic commutes, she sees short blocks for easy pedestrian navigation and increased possibilities for human interaction. She located her critiques in the areas and neighbourhoods she was most familiar with, mostly in New York, a method that is not without problems but which, unlike CIAM, sides with the local over the global.

Along the same lines, but from a position of architectural critique, is the study produced out of a Yale Architecture graduate symposium led by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour in 1968, *Learning from Las Vegas*. In this study the airplane is replaced by the automobile, but not the automobile of Gertrude Stein, which she denigrated for its earth-bound perspective. The automobile in Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour's has changed because the road environment had changed. This was an American car, in a uniquely American city:

A driver thirty years ago could maintain a sense of orientation in space. At the simple crossroad a little sign with an arrow confirmed what was obvious. One knew where one was. When the crossroads becomes a cloverleaf, one must turn right to turn left [...]. But the driver has no time to ponder paradoxical subtleties within a dangerous, sinuous maze. He or she relies on signs for guidance – enormous signs in vast spaces at high speeds. (9)

Their argument proceeds from the explosive growth of Las Vegas in the post-war period into a giant advertisement for itself, and concerns itself primarily with the appearance of the Las Vegas

Strip.

Las Vegas is the reverse image of Brasília, but no less important for developing an understanding of the global forces which can be discovered in analyses of concrete poetry. If the early concrete poets – specifically the Noigandres group and Gomringer – were concerned with what *could be*, following both the Bauhaus faith in the power of design to transform living and its corollary in architecture, then the later poets were concerned with what *had become*. They responded to the new role of the consumer, who had replaced the modernist labourer as the figure of economic development. Walter Gropius's dream of the fusion of artistic forms “rising to heaven out of the hands of a million craftsmen, the crystal symbol of the new faith of the future,” was taken up by poets within a global environment where the craftsmen had been replaced by shoppers at the A&P, and creative production no longer hoped to rise to the heavens, but spread, horizontally, to the suburbs (quoted in Guillén 58). The shift in concrete poetry, which is a general shift, not a solid break from one tradition to another, could thus be understood as operating on a hinge between the modernist texts of Le Corbusier and CIAM – *Vers Un Architecture, La Ville Radieuse*, CIAM's programmatic “Athens Charter” of 1933 – and *Learning From Las Vegas*, a text that contributed to the initial understanding of what postmodernism might look like. Whereas the modernists focused primarily on the technocratic control of life through form, the postmodernists focused primarily on the effect of forms, specifically those that were unplanned but which nonetheless had succeeded in infiltrating everyday life on a massive scale, and had turned the urban inhabitant from worker to consumer.

Following this investigation into the transition between modernism and postmodernism, between the worker and the consumer, it is helpful to look at Brasília and Las Vegas as representative cities. Brasília was itself a sign, ideologically weighted by its pristine, monumental architecture; Las Vegas is made up of a collection of smaller signs, constantly

changing and littering the roadway with a surfeit of information:

The rate of obsolescence of a sign seems to be nearer to that of an automobile than that of a building. The reason is not physical degeneration but what competitors are doing around you. The leasing system operated by the sign companies and the possibility of [a] total tax write-off may have something to do with it. The most unique, most monumental parts of the Strip, the signs and casino facades, are also the most changeable. (Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour 34)

The modernist concept of history is sacrificed to the perpetual present. Efficiency in design has its pinnacle in the hotel casinos that place the check-in desk behind and to the side of the entrance, so that guests walk onto the casino floor before they even see their rooms. Venturi,

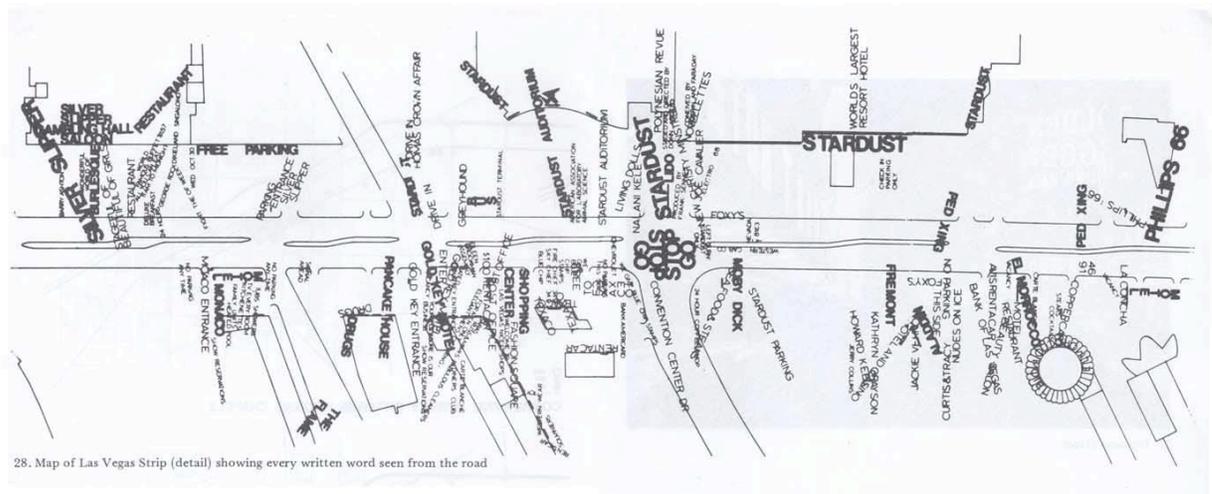


Figure 3.12.

**Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Stephen Izenour. Las Vegas Street Signage**

Scott Brown, and Izenour include in their study a representation of the Strip “showing every written word seen from the road” which looks like it could be a poem by John Furnival (30; see fig 3.12). The words overlap each other, some in bold fonts, some in small regular fonts in proportion to their actual size. The letters appear to be Letraset, a dry-transfer lettering technology that offers flexibility to the designer, but the depiction of the roadways and medians are obviously done by hand, further distancing their critical methodology from that of their

modernist precursors.<sup>10</sup> The authors describe how modern architecture abandoned iconography, begrudgingly including signs such as “LADIES” or “GENTLEMEN” only where regulations or basic efficacy required them, as such images were bound to disrupt the purity of the space. In a passage reminiscent of Le Corbusier's admonishment of architects unwilling to embrace the structural and aesthetic possibilities of reinforced concrete, Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour point out that

Architects who can accept the lessons of primitive vernacular architecture [...] and of industrial vernacular architecture, so easy to adapt to an electronic and space vernacular as elaborate neo-Brutalist or neo-Constructivist megastructures, do not easily acknowledge the validity of the commercial vernacular. For the artist, creating the new may mean choosing the old or the existing. Pop artists have relearned this. Our acknowledgement of existing, commercial architecture at the scale of the highway is within this tradition. (6)

They do not believe that modernist architects are against technology, but that their technology is outdated. The concrete of Le Corbusier and the steel beams and glass of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe were, after all, consequences of giant leaps in the technology of building, but they were also technologies tied to the industrial revolution. They were no longer symbols of progress, especially in a world entrenched in an ideological schism between the rapidly expanding capitalism of the United States and its allies, and the state socialism of the Soviet Union and its allies.

But replacing the airplane perspective of the modernist planner / architect with the

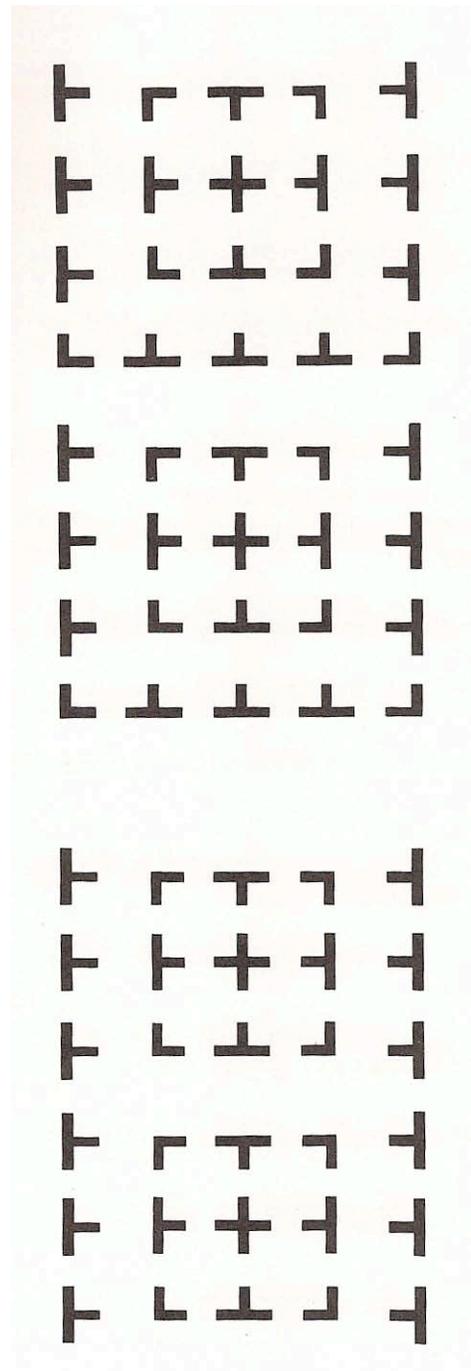
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10 The dry-transfer lettering known as Letraset came onto the market in 1961 and was instantly successful. Although there is no evidence that it was widely used amongst concrete poets, who preferred, for the most part, the typewriter, letterpress, and hand-lettering, it is likely that it contributed to at least some of the work, specifically those pieces that use irregular fields of orientation, like Mary Ellen Solt's flower series. The popularity of Letraset amongst graphic designers, a profession amongst which several concrete poets can be counted (Pignatari, Gomringer, Rot) is well documented (Consuegra 265).

pedestrian perspective of Jacobs and the automobile perspective of the chroniclers of American excess is not sufficient for understanding the global cultural environment of the 1960s. Both Jacobs and the authors of *Learning From Las Vegas* were primarily concerned with conditions in the United States, and while conscious of the importation of architectural style from Europe, they do not pay much attention to the present or future conditions of other nations, or the impact that the invisible hand that had done so much to establish their ways of living might have on the world's inhabitants. The international style of capital was left to its own devices, and its presence in Europe in the wake of the Marshall Plan was eerily similar. The engineer's aesthetic gave way to that of the social engineer, the advertiser.

### Unnational Space

Yet another 20<sup>th</sup> century technology provided a unique perspective for the understanding of global identities: the space ship. The history of early space exploration overlaps neatly with that of concrete poetry: the Soviet Union's Sputnik satellite was launched in October of 1957 and the last of the Apollo moon missions, which marked the end of the 'space race' in most senses of the term, returned to Earth in 1972. Far too many historical accounts of the space program, however, emphasize the role it played for the



**Figure 3.13.**

**Mary Ellen Solt. "Moonshot Sonnet."**

United States in the techno-propagandistic battle with the Soviets. Not nearly enough place it within a development of a new global imaginary, or the concomitant shifts towards transnational economic organization, a development that is directly linked to the proliferation of imagery within a drastically expanded mediascape. As the twin traumas of the Holocaust and the atomic bomb attacks of 1945 were not felt by European Jews or the Japanese alone, but were distributed via visual media along a path of horror around the world, the space expeditions and their visual data had a tremendous international effect upon humans' visual conception of the Earth, and by doing so altered the way its inhabitants thought about one another. Things did not become smaller, in the popular understanding of McLuhan's concept of the global village, but the distances, both on Earth and in outer space, became less of an obstacle. The radio transmitter and domestic air travel made a new level of connectivity possible.

The first image of Earth from space was collected from a camera fitted to the nose cone of a V2 rocket launched from White Sands, New Mexico in 1946. Several V2 rockets, from the same manufacturing plant in Peenemunde, Germany as the rockets that had wreaked havoc on London a year previously, had been captured by the Americans at the end of the war and shipped, along with the team which designed them, back to the United States. Werner von Braun, the chief engineer of the Nazi's rocket program, who held the rank of Major in Hitler's SS, would become the Americans' top rocket designer over the next three decades, and was the figure responsible for the Americans' reaching the moon before the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup>

The V2 from White Sands reached a height of sixty-five kilometres, just beyond the Earth's atmosphere, before returning to Earth. It was not until Sputnik in 1957, however, that a rocket was powerful enough to launch a satellite into orbit. The polished aluminum sphere

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11 Von Braun's Nazi history was kept secret in America until after his death in the 1970s. There is speculation that he and his team were passed up for defence contracts because of their foreignness, and that had they been awarded those contracts the United States would have been the first to both launch a satellite and a manned space expedition.

satellite emitted a simple pulsebeat as it orbited the Earth. The signal was pure information, without any linguistic character, but information that carried an exciting *message* to its recipients; the pulsebeat operated outside of national language, entirely within scientific communication. The Americans tried to distinguish a code within the emission, but it was nothing more than a simple pattern designed to be received by amateur radio operators around the world, welcoming them to a newly discovered space.

The launch of Sputnik occurred within the International Geophysical Year (IGY), an international cooperative endeavour to use recent advances in scientific observation tools to gather data about the Earth's oceans, weather, polar ice caps and atmosphere. The year was actually eighteen months (July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1957 – December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1958), and was scheduled to correspond with increased sunspot activity and several eclipses. The data collected was guaranteed to be open to scientific organizations from all nations, creating a space of global exchange using technical data as a universal language. This was the promise of space exploration in general, to discover a space that superseded the political organization of Earth:

Amid explicitly imperial tropes of representation, space offered the prospect of a renewed form of settlement, this time into a zone safely free from human difference. Returning to etymological roots, humans could find new domains to culture, together, as a species. By considering the earth as a planetary entity, then, fantasies of space exploration have presented a 'limit case' of one measure of scale. Within them – and their potential realization – the atmosphere serves as the threshold of human unity. (Redfield 800)

The space race was not simply about the battle between the Soviet Union and the United States for scientific and military supremacy, but was watched by a global community uninterested in the terrestrial political consequences those powers were convinced would take place. Indeed, as

one NASA historian explains, the interest in the space race might have had something to do with the feeling that it existed as a “surrogate for face-to-face military confrontation,” and that it had a calming effect on an anxious world that had become accustomed to the idea of rockets carrying nuclear warheads, not scientists and their instruments.

The images of Earth transmitted from satellites and astronauts were just that: images of the *Earth*, not of the United States and the Soviet Union alone. However much the emphasis on the national space programs of each might imply their dominance, the geophysical data did not correspond. In fact, in some cases it disagreed. As Denis Cosgrove points out, images of Earth from space challenge Western observers' “received notions of continental scale by exaggerating precisely those regions – Africa, the southern oceans, Antarctica – that, through the cartographer's choice of map projections, normally appear so small on world maps, and so correspondingly insignificant in Western geographical consciousness” (278). The images had the effect of recalibrating the visual prejudice that had been perpetuated by even the putatively objective cartographer's instruments. This was the dream of outer space, that it could be a space free of political manoeuvring and trivialities. In an article in the *New York Times* in 1957, shortly following the launch of Sputnik, Andrew Haley of Washington, “one of the few specialists in space law,” is reported to have called on the United Nations to declare the moon a “free and independent autonomous area [...] to keep any nation from claiming it as a possession” (“Free Zone Urged”). This statement, however utopian in rhetoric, is of course compromised by the panic some Americans felt in trailing the Soviet Union's rocket technology. It was also not a position shared by Professor Fred Singer of Maryland, who is reported in the same article to have proposed turning the moon into a testing ground for hydrogen bombs. His motives were altruistic, though, as using the moon as a target “would eliminate the danger of radioactive fall-out on earth [sic] and would add to the deterrent power of hydrogen bombs by exploding them

where all nations could study the results” (Free Zone Urged).

The spectacle of the Moon, exploding or not, and that of the Earth from space are both part of what was becoming a new technological sublime. The American astronaut Frank Borman is quoted in *Newsweek* in 1968: “When you're finally up at the moon looking back at earth [sic], all those differences and nationalistic traits are pretty well going to blend and you're going to get a concept that maybe this is really one world and why the hell can't we learn to live together like decent people” (in Cosgrove 282). A similar sentiment is present in Mary Ellen Solt's “Moonshot Sonnet, a poem which engages directly with the implications of space travel on the potential for new structures of global communication. She explains her poem:

Made by copying the scientists' symbols on the first photos of the moon in the *New York Times*: there were exactly fourteen “lines” with five “accents.” We have not been able to address the moon in a sonnet successfully since the Renaissance. Admitting its new scientific content made it possible to do so again. The moon is a different object today.<sup>12</sup>

Also the sonnet was a supranational, supralingual form as the concrete poem is. So the poem is both a spoof of old forms and a statement about the necessity for new. (Solt 307; see fig 3.13)

The photos from Ranger 7 were not the first photographs of the moon from space. The Soviets had photographed the moon and its far side in 1959 from their Lunik 3 satellite. What was significant about these photographs, besides being produced by Americans, and providing information for a possible moon landing, was the quality of the images. In the *New York Times* article from which Solt composed her piece, the technical gathering of visual data from the satellite is described in detail. The scientists received data from the satellite's six slow-scan

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12 Here we can return to Garnier's “Position 1 of the International Movement: “If the poem has changed / [...] / It is that the universe has changed” (78).

television cameras, and used a modified 35 mm kinescope camera to capture the data onto film negatives. The signals, which arrived at ground control in what appeared to human eyes as a light tracking horizontally from top to bottom on a monitor, were also recorded onto magnetic tape, from which another 35mm print was made. Scientists also used Polaroid cameras intermittently in order to create an instant record of the instruments' functionality. The negatives, upon exposure, were processed “with what was described as 'tender loving care' at one of the finest Hollywood laboratories” (Witkins 8). The four thousand images were one thousand times clearer than images taken by Earth-bound telescopes. The visual interference of the atmosphere only allowed the Earth-bound perspective to gather images from the equivalent of five hundred miles. The Rangers photographs “meant in effect that the 240,000 mile distance to the moon had been shrunk by man's ingenuity to a mere half-mile of what he could see of its topography” (1). This emphasis on the innovation of the imaging process enforces the idea of an expanding, interrelated visual economy determined by shifts in technology. New camera and film technology, used by both NASA and the American film industry, can here be linked to the compositional strategies of concrete poetry.

In Solt's composition, the markings reproduce the centring lines associated with camera lenses or telescopes. Each quatrain has a full target, and the finishing sestet has two (this is an Italian sonnet, not an English sonnet) (242). The poem positions itself within a history of aerial photography that was transformed drastically in the late 1950s / early 1960. Cosgrove notes a famous use of aerial perspective in the opening images of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, in which a camera mounted to a plane navigates through clouds, and looks down on the Fuhrer's plane “providing our's [sic] and Hitler's mastering gaze with quasi-cartographic glimpses of the German landscape below.” He continues:

The revolutionary perspective afforded by the aerial view of the Earth encouraged balloon photography from the earliest days of the new medium and that view also appealed to the Modernist imagination in the interwar years. This appeal was especially strong in those nations – Italy, Germany, and the United States – that most enthusiastically adopted Modernism's futuristic aesthetic. The Italian Futurist painter [sic]<sup>13</sup> Marinetti, for example, proclaimed the aerial view as the artistic perspective of the future. (279)



**Figure 3.14.**

**NASA. “EARTHRISE.”**

photography, let alone those photographs taken from the Moon or from deep space. What space photography offered was a near-complete erasure of the human in preference for the geophysical and astronomical. The ordered lines of cultivated earth contain the history of agriculture, and those marks point directly to villages and then cities that represent the pinnacle of human organization. By making the physical marks that were inspirational to the global understanding

But if aerial photography was the apotheosis of the modernist future, what did that imply for satellite photography? The airplane perspective so valued by Le Corbusier and modernist planners, the perspective that allowed them to disregard the human scale in favour of the monumental, seems almost intimate in relation to satellite

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13 Marinetti was not a painter.

of modernists invisible or obscured by clouds, images from space elevate the achievement of an apparently disinterested physics to a God's eye view, and began in earnest a way of thinking about the Earth that emphasizes instrumental readings of the geophysical environment over indices of human accomplishment. Cosgrove's discussion of *Earthrise*, a photograph of the Earth with the Moon's surface in the foreground, taken by astronaut William Anders from the Apollo 8 mission in 1968, he notes that the image “was the subject of immediate commentary and speculation about a reformed *view* of the world” (273; my italics; see fig 3.14). In Solt's work this comes through in the replacement of the mark of the poet's subjectivity with those of the scientist's purposeful, illustrative marking, and the replacement of all traits of national language

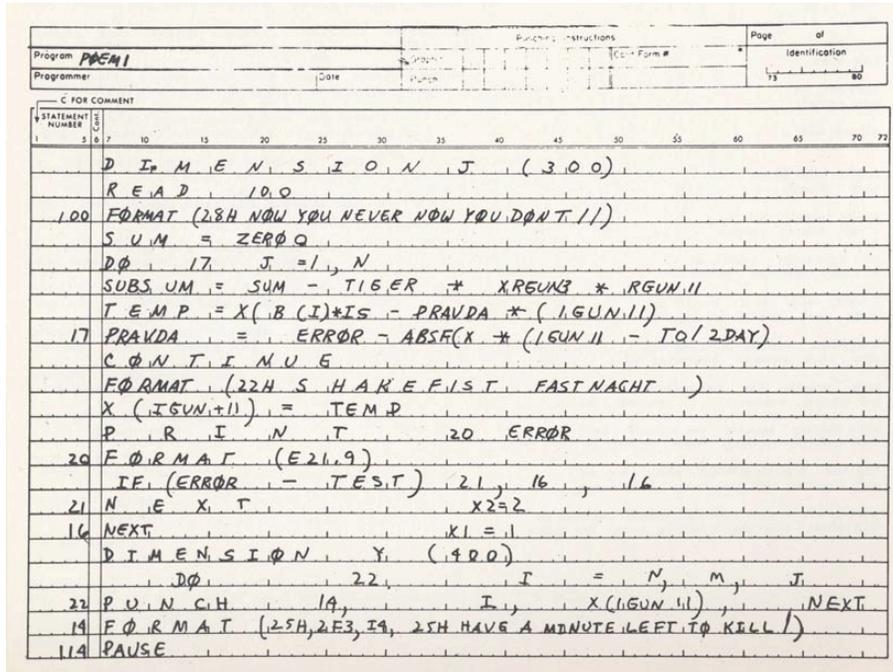


Figure 3.15.

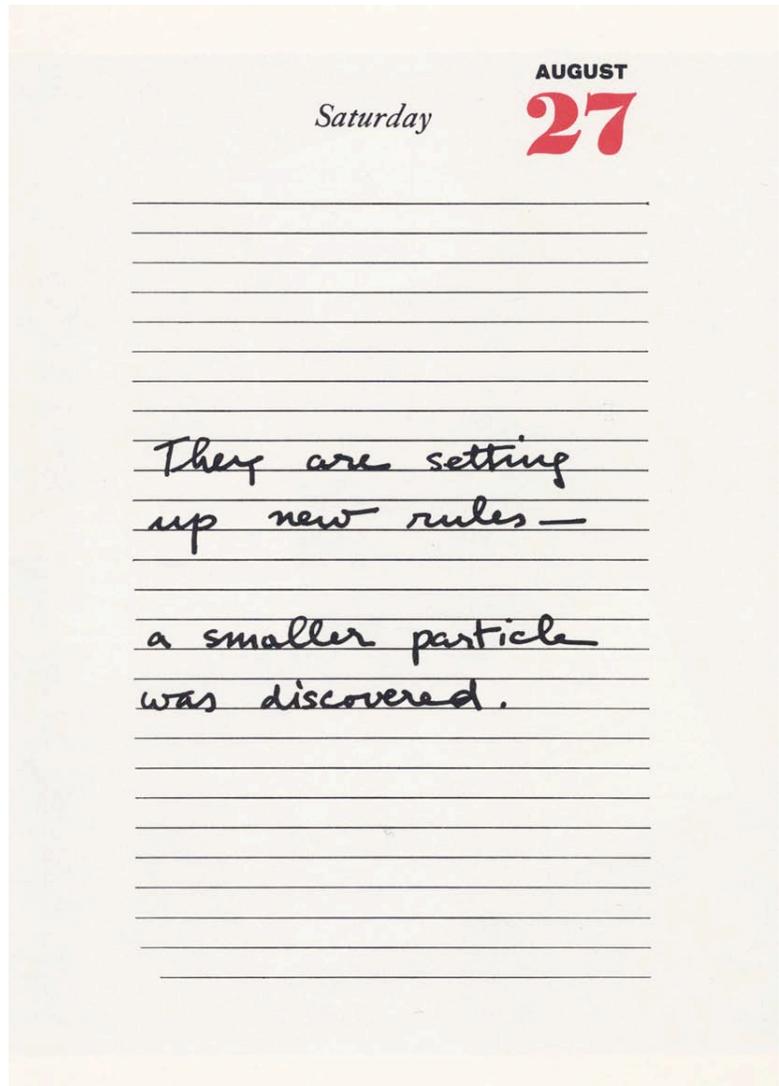
**Carl Fernbach-Flarsheim. “PØEM 1.”**

society in love with technological organization. In her essay “The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man,” which first appeared in 1963, she argues that the space scientists and astronauts were not explorers in the sense previously given to the term as it relates to the European colonizers:

by one which could claim to be closer to the literal meaning of *universal*.

The diminishment of the human scale worried Hannah Arendt, whose perspective was shaped in part by the horrors so recently produced by a

It was indeed [the scientists'] search for 'true reality' that led them to lose confidence in appearances, in the phenomena as they reveal themselves of their own accord to human sense and reason. They were inspired by an extraordinary love of harmony and lawfulness which taught them that they would have to step outside any merely given sequence or series



**Figure 3.16.**

**Carl Fernbach-Flarsheim. "Untitled Poem."**

of occurrences if they wanted to discover the overall beauty and order of the whole, that is, the universe. This may explain why they seem to have been less distressed by the fact their discoveries served the invention of the most murderous gadgets than disturbed by the shattering of all their most cherished ideals of necessity and lawfulness. (272)

Solt's poem does not contain this anxiety, though other concrete poems that deal with the

technological sublime do. Solt does not mention in her anthology that “Moonshot Sonnet” was designed – which most likely means typeset – by Edwin Morgan, the British poet who wrote a series of poems from the perspective of a computer, all of which end in a glitch. Carl Fernbach-Flarsheim is another American concrete poet who deals with the intersection of scientific information and everyday life, but, like Morgan, remains within national languages, for the most part, and is concerned with how communication is interrupted or disturbed by conflicting lexicons. His “PØEM 1” from 1967 is composed in FORTRAN, the programming language developed by IBM in the 1950s, and printed by hand onto a programming card. The composition combines technical formulae and instructions: “TEMP = X (B (I) \*IS – PRAVDA \* (| GUN ||)”; all the “O”s are switched to “Ø”s (246; see fig 3.15). A poem he submitted to Solt for her anthology is simply a calendar page with a handwritten note reading “They are setting up new rules – a smaller particle was discovered.” (248; see fig 3.16). Solt adds an explanatory note herself in the glossary: “Here the poet incorporates the calendar page itself as part of the poem, for on the day the scientist makes a revision, the poet knows that he will be called upon to make a revision” (310).

Space exploration in its early stage, in spite of its ultra-nationalist politics of aggrandizement, achieved at least in part the supranational character that concrete poetry set as its goal from its first theoretical writings. When the American astronaut Michael Collins, who accompanied Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin on the first moon landing in August 1969, but whose name is less known in the annals of history because he never actually set foot on the moons' surface, recalls:

After the flight of Apollo 11 the three of us went on a round-the-world trip.  
Wherever we went people, instead of saying, 'Well, you Americans did it,'  
everywhere they said 'We did it,' 'we, human kind... we the human race ...we

people did it.' And I had... I'd never heard of people in different countries use this word 'we', 'we, we' as emphatically as we were hearing from Europeans, Asians, Africans, everywhere we went it was 'We finally did it,' and I thought that was a wonderful thing. Ephemeral, but wonderful. (Sington)

This moment of togetherness was not a result simply of the re-imagining of the Earth prompted by space photography, but of the collective re-imagining of the moon as a space belonging to the potential of humans. It was not simply the new perspective of Earth from space that held transformative power, but the renewed perspective of space from Earth. When humans looked at the moon in the 1950s and 60s it had, as Solt argues, become a new object, one that held all the utopian promise that had fled the modernist city. It was a space, in theory, unencumbered by national boundaries, even after it had been bombarded with American and Soviet satellites and stabbed with a series of stiffened American flags, all of which are as visually insignificant as the ones on Earth as seen from space. It was also a space reachable only through the most rigorous devotion to scientific calculation, and as such represents the second site for concrete poetry's utopian impulse. Both were technologically determined and designed with the dreams of universal emancipation, but one came from looking down, the other, from looking up.

– Chapter 4: Concrete Poetry and Conceptual Art:  
A Difference of Opinions –

Certainly there are at least twenty people using either words or written things as vehicles for their art, but there is a distinction between concrete poetry, where the words are made to *look* like something, an image, and so-called conceptual art, where the words are used only to *avoid* looking like something, where it doesn't make any difference how the words look on the page or anything.

Lucy Lippard [1970], in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966-1970....* (157)

Most of the concrete poets are now starting to do theater and getting out of concrete poetry [Acconci, Perreault, Hannah Weiner, etc.]. They realize the sort of decadence that follows from that sort of materialism [treating words as *material*]. They are trying to say things about the world that are illogical in terms of language.

Joseph Kosuth [1969], in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966-1970....* (132)

In the postwar era, various types of concrete and visual poetry, in particular, promised to probe the space of the typographic page and link contemporary literature with the visual arts. Yet a reliance on rather quaint illustrational or pictorial modes – as in poems that take on the shape of their subjects – left much concrete poetry out of touch with changing paradigms in the visual arts and the wider conditions of language in modernity.

Liz Kotz [2007] *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art*

As a historical term, Concrete poetry identifies the postwar resurrection and academicization of the linguistic and poetical experiments of the radical avant-gardes of the teens and twenties that had been conducted in the context of Russian Futurism, and the practices of international Dadaism in Berlin, Zürich, Hanover, and Paris. [...] The concrete poets of the postwar period typically emerged in areas that had been both remote and protected from the cataclysms of World War II, both privileged and disadvantaged with regard to the naivety of their early rediscovery of these avant-garde projects. Thus we find early resuscitations named Concrete poetry in the context of Latin American countries and in Switzerland in the forties [sic], often working in tandem with the academicization of abstraction (for example, Eugen Gomringer

and Max Bill). Here the celebration of a newfound ludic irrelevance and of typographical gamesmanship displaced both the political, the graphic, and the semiological radicality of the originary figures.

Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois, Benjamin Buchloh [2004], in *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (482)

the recent publications (edition n. 3 of the paris review «vh 101» autumn 1970 – the catalogue of the exhibition «information» at the museum of modern art in new york, in summer 1970) while analyzing the phenomenon of «conceptual art» intentionally missed to mention [sic] in any way visual poetry. [...] we intend to exemplify in the next numbers our statements by publishing the product of « conceptual art » showing beside the visual poetic matrix from which it was copied.

for example:

joseph kosuth copying from timm ulrichs, ben vautier, jean claude moineau etc. [sic]

carl andre copying from all northern concrete poets

richard artshwager copying from heinz gappmayr

and so on

Sarenco [1971] “Visual Poetry and Conceptual Art: A Well Organized Plagiarism,” *Lotta Poetica* 1 (12)

In an essay written for a recent catalogue of an exhibition of Brazilian concrete poetry, Kenneth Goldsmith admits that, as an emerging artist in the New York art scene in the 1980s, he had never heard of concrete or visual poetry. His work often involved text, and he consciously positioned his sculptures and installations against earlier language pieces by artists like Joseph Kosuth, Barbara Kruger, and Jenny Holzer, which he considered too cold and confining. But it was not until the Miami-based collectors Dr. Marvin and Ruth Sackner purchased one of his pieces and invited him to install it in their home gallery that he discovered in their extensive archive of concrete and visual poetry that the type of work he had been trying to produce himself had already been made:

[At the Sackners'] I encountered an entire history of textuality that I never knew

existed: concrete and visual poetry. Nowhere, in my dead-center position of the New York art world, had I ever heard of this stuff. I was floored. Here was a history dating back hundreds of years that I – and seemingly the entire New York art world – was totally unaware of. In it I saw a rich play of semiotic signs and signifiers, uses of letter forms that teased out Wittgensteinian language games, utopian politics, transnational (and transrational) uses of language, all presented with a sophisticated visual elegance. (Goldsmith 194)

Upon his return to New York, Goldsmith was dismayed to find his enthusiasm for the history of concrete and visual poetry met with indifference by his artist cohort. Within this narrative of discovery and dismissal lies a systemic disconnect between poetry and the visual arts that is magnified in the relationship of concrete poetry and the language-centred conceptual art that emerged during the mid to late 1960s in the United States and Britain. The endurance of such a schism is evident by the quotations offered at the beginning of this chapter, from Lucy Lippard's 1970 claim that in concrete poetry words are made to “*look like something*” to Liz Kotz's 2007 recapitulation of concrete poetry's “quaint illustrational or pictorial modes – as in poems that take on the shape of their subject,” both of which participate in an unfounded and unfair conflation of concrete and shaped poetry. Referring to Kotz as a “young art historian,” and noting that her book is published by “a top-notch academic press,”<sup>1</sup> Goldsmith offers his explanation for the oversight:

To read poems – any poems – as visual art is a grievous mistake and perhaps is the most common misunderstanding of this genre. While concrete poetry employs visual means, it's the tension between textuality and visuality that gives the work its punch, making it successful poetry. It's like reading Mallarmé as if it was a Monet; although both employ

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<sup>1</sup> The press is MIT Press, which also published Krauss, Foster, Bois, and Buchloh's *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* from which the fourth epigraph is excerpted.

radical ideas of spatiality, to read them through an identical lens would be an inviting confusion of genres, discourses, and intentions. (“Curation” 196)

Indeed, it is the disciplinary interstice that concrete poetry staked out for itself in the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, combined with its consciously international character, that has likely contributed the most to its general critical neglect. Approaches to national literatures, even when they attempt to deal with concrete and visual poetry, lack the apparatus to deal with its “global” networks. Literary scholars, assuming they find the literariness of the poems intriguing, often lack the lexicon to consider the work within its visual context, and art historians and critics, assuming they find the presentation of the texts interesting, often lack the literary knowledge to properly deal with the status of the work as poetry.<sup>2</sup>

Liz Kotz betrays none of this cross-disciplinary anxiety in her book, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art*, perhaps because the poetry she analyzes is written by visual artists like Carl Andre, Dan Graham, and Vito Acconci. Nor does she offer any reason for restricting her study, broadly titled, to work produced by figures in or around New York City. Kotz ignores any possible link between concrete poetry and communications technology, which I have addressed in previous chapters, but when speaking of work by John Cage and Andy Warhol, notes that “the turn to language in 1960s art occurred in the wake of new recording and transmission media, as words took on a new materiality and urgency in the face of magnetic sound” (Kotz 5). Her recognition of a technological shift in language use, when placed beside the implication that technology was used significantly only in New York and its immediate surround, ignores the history of sound poetry and *Musique Concrète* in France – founded by

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<sup>2</sup> This is an important point: the International Concrete Poetry movement was, first and foremost, a *poetic* movement. I agree with Goldsmith when he insists, “Concrete poetry set out to radically change the field of *poetry*, not visual art. The formal innovations were both a direct extension of earlier movements in poetry and an affront to more conservative strains of mid-century poetics” (“Curation”196).

Pierre Schafer in 1948 – or the radio transistor's role in the expansion of culture across the globe. Her methodology is weighted more towards art than history.

In a footnote to her dismissal of concrete poetry quoted above, Kotz writes:

Exceptions could [sic] no doubt be made here for many poets, including some of Eugen Gomringer's work, as well as for projects by Emmett Williams and Dieter Roth, both of whom were loosely affiliated with the Fluxus group. Yet there is no question that many artists dismissed concrete poetry as deeply pictorial and irrelevant. When Joseph Kosuth describes the work of artists like Graham or Acconci as resembling concrete poetry, there is no question that he means it as a term of derision. (293)

The problem here is not that “many artists dismissed concrete poetry as deeply pictorial and irrelevant,” but that this fact is overlooked as a site of investigation, and that such a position has served to reproduce this position in critics. The questions remain: why has art history held such an antithetical position to concrete poetry for so long? What was it that the artists in question found so objectionable, and to which poems, poets, and publications were they referring?

The pairing of conceptual art and concrete poetry does not automatically make sense beyond their common practice of *displaying* language: in conceptual art it was meant as the dematerialization of the art object, while in concrete poetry it was the rematerialization of the word. But such formulations, though conveniently phrased, do not stand up to further scrutiny. Concrete poetry was nearing its end in the late 1960s as conceptual art was just beginning to gain momentum, which might explain why the conceptual artists were so eager to disassociate themselves from its history while deploying its techniques. With concrete poetry's emphasis on commercial design practices and the condition of language within the mediascape and the everyday, it might make more sense to examine the work in relation to Pop Art, which emerged

nearly contemporaneously with the first meeting between Gomringer and Decio Pignatari in Ulm in 1955. Or, in its stripped down aesthetic and concern with mass production, it might prove germane to mine the similarities between concrete poetry and minimalism. Fluxus, in its international character, language-based experiments, and regular intersection with concrete poetry and poets, would also be – and is, often enough – a more likely pairing. Conceptual art's approach to language is different than concrete poetry's. If Kosuth and the Art & Language group can, however reductively, be designated as the dominant theorists of the early, orthodox, language-centered conceptualism, then their emphasis on philosophy of language coming out of Ludwig Wittgenstein, or of structural linguistics coming out of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson, contrasts with the approach of Max Bense, in Germany, or the Noigandres group in Brazil, who come to language via information theory and computation. But what makes conceptual art a valid and productive counterpart to concrete poetry is the fact that beyond its participants and later critics' near unanimous dismissal of concrete poetry as a significant field, it contains figures who produce work that very much borrows from techniques of concrete poetry while at the same time denying any line of influence. I am speaking specifically of the work of Carl Andre, Dan Graham, and Vito Acconci.

Before dealing with the poetry written by these artists, however, it would be helpful to determine what exactly is meant by the term “conceptual art.” Like the term “concrete poetry,” it has both a specific and vague meaning, as it refers not only to an orthodox form or practice, but also to work that responded, and continues to respond, to a shift in art production and discourse coming out of the mid-1960s. Some historians locate the beginning of the movement in Harry Flynt's 1962 essay “Concept Art,” published in La Monte Young's *An Anthology of Chance Operations* the following year. But Flynt's formulation of concepts *as art* had more in common with the work being done by composers like Young, John Cage, and George Maciunas than they

did with the work that would later come to be known as conceptual art. In this Flynt parallels Öyvind Fahlström, who used the term “concrete poetry” in 1953, but in a way that had more to do with Musique Concrete than with what Gomringer and the Noigandres group would begin to produce two years later.

Alexander Alberro, instead of pointing to a coherent legacy of conceptual art, opts to identify four trajectories that end up in conceptual practice: 1) The self-reflexivity that had come to define modernist painting and sculpture in the late 50s / early 60s, specifically work by Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. This position questions the basic status of what a work of art could be by rejecting conventional requirements of facture:

One of the recurring characteristics in much art that is referred to as conceptual is the consideration of every one of the constituting elements of the artwork as equal components. In the process, the valuation of technical manual skill is largely (if not entirely) abandoned, as well as the notion of an original, cohesive work. In turn, serial and highly schematic structures emerge, placing the inherently hierarchical concept of quality under duress. (Alberro, “Reconsidering.... xvi-xvii)

2) The impulse towards reductivism, which pushes “the conventional objectness of the artwork toward the threshold of a complete dematerialization” (xvii). 3) The negation of aesthetic content, which comes out of the legacy of Marcel Duchamp. And 4) The problem of placement: “Here, the subject of the work becomes both a reflection on the conventions that will frame it or situate it, and a self-questioning of how it will be communicated or displayed” (xvii).

Alberro points to the dominance of the work of Kosuth, Christine Kozlov, and the Art & Language group in the popular understanding of the history of conceptual art, though he implies that such an understanding might have been consciously manufactured by Kosuth's polemical writings of the time. These artists worked within the category of language-centered

conceptualism, drawing influence from logical positivism and structural linguistics. Art, for Kosuth, could no longer be about anything other than the signifying potential of art. For Art & Language, a rejection of the plastic arts inspired a rigorous and verbose philosophical interrogation of art as language, in both its primary (objects, galleries) and support (critical writings, discourse) language. Such a position would allow for the near complete breakdown of art as a category, as the process of analyses of 'art propositions' became the *work* of art in place of the material objects to be hung in a gallery or purchased by a collector.

Sol LeWitt represents an alternative narrative to Kosuth *et al.*, and has the privileged position of having written the first manifesto of conceptual art, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in *Artforum* in 1967 (although Kosuth would later claim that he, himself, had used the term in his notes the year before, and is thus entitled to the title of "founder"). For LeWitt, whom Alberro positions as an aesthetic opposite to the tradition represented by Kosuth and Art & Language, conceptual art was an emancipation of the artist from the contingencies and creative vicissitudes involved in the production of actual art work. The artist would create an idea, and then that idea would structure the work: "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art" (LeWitt 12). LeWitt positions this work directly opposite the tradition of expressionist art, in which the genius of the artist's hand and aesthetic decisions are valued above all else:

It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator, and therefore usually he would want it to become emotionally dry. There is no reason to suppose, however, that the conceptual artist is out to bore the viewer. It is only the expectation of an emotional kick, to which one conditioned to expressionist art is accustomed, that would deter the viewer from perceiving this art. (13)

But the art LeWitt imagines as conceptual remains within a gallery, and requires a traditional

viewing audience to be moved mentally, if not emotionally by the work on display. Kosuth and the Art & Language group disparage that viewer, and blame her / him – and the critics who created her / him – for the period of stagnation art had fallen into, and which the shift towards art as philosophical investigation would pull it out of. As Kosuth says in an interview in 1969, making clear his desire to elevate art discourse to the rarefied sphere of science or philosophy: “The public's not interested in art anyway.... No more interested in art than they are with physics” (in Alberro, “Reconsidering” xx).

The language-centered conceptualists often used language in the presentation of their work as well as a theoretical model for the works' function. But there are important differences between the appearance of language in concrete poetry and conceptual art. Kosuth's series of black and white photostats of dictionary definitions, for example, used a medium that was cheap and reproducible in order that they might be thrown away after each exhibition.<sup>3</sup> But such a practice refuses to engage with the materiality of language as it appeared in contemporary culture, with new printing techniques and advances in photography facilitating the expansion of advertising into the everyday. It pretends that language is objective, ordered by the dominant authority of a dictionary which controls meaning, a structural model that goes even beyond the structures of Saussure, who emphasized language's volatility through the idea of language communities. These communities never emerged from dictionaries; it was always *vice versa*. Language was, for Kosuth and Art & Language, a readymade, but one that lacked the sophistication and criticality of Duchamp. Benjamin H. Buchloh, whose 1990 “Conceptual Art 1962-69: from the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions” continues to be a landmark essay in the analysis of work from this period, refuses to take them at their word:

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<sup>3</sup> This fact did not prevent Kosuth's photostats from being exhibited in exhibitions of concrete poetry, however. His photostat of the definition of “abstract” appeared alongside concrete poems in *Concrete Poetry: An Exhibition in Four Parts* at the University of British Columbia in 1969.

In 1969, Art & Language and Kosuth shared in foregrounding the 'analytic proposition' inherent in each readymade, namely the statement 'this is a work of art,' over and above all other aspects implied by the readymade model (its structural logic, its features as an industrially produced object of use and consumption, its seriality, and the dependence of its meaning on context). And most importantly, according to Kosuth, this means that artistic propositions constitute themselves in the negation of all referentiality, be it that of the historical context of the (artistic) sign or that of its social function and use.

(Buchloh 126)

The language-centred conceptualists presented language as if it were invisible, ethereal. By contrast, the post-conceptualist artists of the 70s sought to accentuate the power of language to present itself as *image*, and to transmit meaning beyond its semantic character. Alberro explains that the interrogation of the link between text and image moved the work into an examination of how language shapes subjectivity, a position that is more in tune with the post-structural language-based philosophy that emerged in Europe in the mid-60s from figures like Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault:

[There are] distinct differences between [...] post-conceptual art and the linguistic conceptualism of the late 1960s. The latter, with its emphasis on a purely formal language..., [is] one that correlates historically with the legacies of reductivism and self-reflexivity. By contrast, artists such as [Victor] Burgin, [Jenny] Holzer, [Mary] Kelly, and [Barbara] Kruger theorize language beyond the purely analytic and formal, situating it within a synthetic, discursive practice determined by a system of control and domination. From this perspective, language is perceived as in and of itself the very medium by which ideological subjectivity is always

already constructed. In other words, in direct response to the formal neutrality of conceptual art of the late 1960s, the post-conceptual work of artists such as Burgin, Holzer, Kelly, and Kruger in the 1970s argues that language is inextricably bound to ideology. (“Reconsidering” xxviii-xxix)

The interest in the relationship between text and image and the weight that correspondence carries in a hyper-commercialized global environment is present in concrete poetry from its inception. This is not to say that the practices of Burgin, Holzer, Kelly and Kruger are derivative of concrete poetry, but to point out that their approach to language as situated, material, and ideological is something the two movements share. And this points to a curious reversal of disciplinary approaches as language crosses the boundaries of poetry and visual art. Concrete poetry adhered to the modernist visual art position of the art experience in its emphasis on the immediately comprehensible poem, and on simultaneity. The language-centred conceptualists, on the other hand, refute that position by a rejection of the concept of the art experience in favour of philosophy, adhering to the modernist literary position which celebrated difficulty and opacity, demanding sustained and engaged attention from its audience. This position is exemplified in the writing in the journal *Art & Language*, which requires of its readers a pre-education in philosophy and aesthetics, and strives to exclude a mass public. A passage from Lucy Lippard's monumental *Six Years...* elucidates this position:

I don't understand a good deal of what is said by Art-Language, but I admire the investigatory energies, the tireless spade-work (not calling one one), the full commitment to the reestablishment of a valid language by which to discuss art, and the occasional humor in their writings. The chaos inherent in their reason fascinates me, but it is also irritating to be unequipped to evaluate their work. I don't know how it is or if it is evaluated by adepts in philosophy as philosophy,

but I find it infuriating to have to take them on faith. I agree with their goal of clearing the air around the 'pseudo mystique' of art and artists, their demand that observers stop being 'good catholics.' If only they could exorcise the Jesuit in themselves at the same time. [...] For all their distaste for formal or 'esthetic' or 'reactive' art, it approaches given conditions analytically (what is more 'esthetic' than 'an inquiry into the nature of art' or into the nature of 'natural sculpture?'); as well as reactively, inasmuch as words, thought, tortuous systems are their material, and they emphasize this material and its inherent properties as much as say, Carl Andre emphasizes his. (in Lippard 151)

Concrete poetry's approach to language, on the other hand, like the post-conceptualists, is postmodern. Language is tied to ideology and produces subjectivities, which is why the concrete poets felt they had to adapt: they created designed words for a designed world. The linguistic conceptualists, conversely, adhered to a modernist, structural model of language coming out of the first half of the twentieth century, specifically the work of Jakobson and the logical positivist writings of A. J. Ayers.

While Alberro positions post-conceptualist artists in opposition to the ideologically disinterested Anglo-American conceptualists, it could be argued that they were continuing the project of South American conceptual art, which had been active since the mid-60s. A year before LeWitt would publish "Some Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," the Argentinean artists Eduardo Costa, Raúl Escari, and Roberto Jacoby wrote "A Media Art (Manifesto)," which called for the creation of works made up strictly of false accounts of exhibitions and events published in newspapers and magazines. Questioning the manufactured truths of a media saturated society, the artists claimed, in a manner that both Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard would have appreciated, "The work would begin to exist in the same moment that the consciousness of the

spectator constitutes it as having been accomplished” (3). The work of the Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles concentrated on the commercial transformation of South American society, and one piece in particular addressed the transparency / opacity of language in a politically charged manner. For *Insertion – Coca-Cola* (1970), Meireles printed texts critical of Brazilian politics and imperialism in vitreous white ink on empty Coca-Cola bottles. When the bottles were returned to the factory and refilled, the text became visible, and was distributed commercially by the Coca-Cola Corporation. This was just one in a series of Meireles’s *Inserções em circuitos ideologicos* (Insertions into Ideological Circuits), which he describes as rooted in the need “to create a system for the circulation and exchange of information that did not depend on any kind of centralized control,” and were transmitted through a variety of alternative “circuits” (Alberro, “Reconsidering” xvii).

Mari Carmen Ramírez emphasizes the interventionist character of Latin American conceptualism, and positions it against the conventional narrative of conceptual art as it was exported both economically and critically from the dominant centres:

The grounding of artistic languages in extra-artistic concerns has indeed been a constant of the avant-garde in Latin America since the 1920s. It was not only an intrinsic part of the process of tearing apart or recycling forms transmitted from cultural and political centers but a logical step in the act of construction of a tradition with the copy as its starting point. On the other hand, Benjamin Buchloh has suggested that the obsession with 'facticity' of North American Conceptual art practices can derive only from the concept of an 'administered society' typical of 'late capitalism.' The absence in Latin America of the social conditions supporting an administered society makes it an unsuitable model, perhaps even antithetical to a Latin American context. The elaboration of a Conceptual art practice aimed at

exposing Latin American political and social realities thus involved a series of inversions of the mainstream model of Conceptual art. (556)

Like Brasilia, whose majestic arches are less a design preference than an economic necessity – requiring less concrete, which was an expensive material, and more labour, which was cheap and plentiful – and as such stand as an index to the level of development of Brazil at the time, so, too, does the conceptual art produced in South America offer, in its formal as well as its ideological concerns, an explanation of the relationship of the continent to the cultural centres of North America and Europe.

But while a study of the corresponding positions and formal decisions between South American concrete poetry and conceptual art would be valuable, such an approach does not offer an explanation for the general dismissal of concrete poetry by the Anglo-American conceptualists and their critical legacy, and would risk overlooking the regionalism that the international character of concrete poetry strives to transcend. The aim of this chapter is, rather, to counter the dismissal of concrete poetry by those who produce the dominant narrative of linguistic conceptualism, to recuperate the work by showing that the understanding of concrete poetry by such figures is undeveloped, and to show that the poetic experiments of artists whose visual work was very much involved in the conceptual milieu are not as innovative as their chroniclers would have us believe.

For instance, when speaking of Carl Andre's visual poetry in the introduction to Andre's collected writings, the art historian James Meyer describes the work as “recalling the most radical examples of concrete poetry” (10), but adds a footnote:

Although Andre maintains that he took no interest in the international tendency of concrete poetry that flourished in Brazil, Germany, and elsewhere during the 1950s and 1960s – his principle inspirations being [Ezra] Pound and [Gertrude]

Stein – the contemporaneity of these endeavors bears noting. Mary Ellen Solt's observations that concrete poetry stresses the 'physical material from which the poem ... is made,' or that the concrete poem is 'an object to be perceived rather than read,' may equally be applied to Andre's practice. (21)

Why Meyer places Andre's experiments alongside the “most radical examples of concrete poetry” is likely a rhetorical position determined by the genre of the introduction – considering them alongside the most *conventional* experiments hardly induces a desire to continue reading. But such a suggestion is likely also symptomatic of the belief that concrete poetry is primarily mimetic or shaped poetry. That Meyer should turn to Solt for an explanation of concrete poetry is less significant but still appropriate; texts by Gomringer, Bense, or the Noigandres group would have been more authorial, although *international*.

Andre produced, early in his career, a series of one-word poems, which were printed in the center of a page. In his *A Theory of Poetry: 1960 – 1965*, he explains: “They are not the first poems I ever wrote.... But they are the first poems in which I took the English language for subject matter. All my earlier poems originated in some conceit or observation or sentiment of my own. These poems begin in the qualities of words. Whole poems are made out of the many single poems we call words (in Kotz 141). What is significant here is the modifier “English,” which isolates Andre from the concrete poets' explicit aim to deal with *language* on a supranational level; Andre's decision to stop investigating the constitutive elements of language at the level of the *word* rather than the letter, or punctuation, also sets him apart. Kotz, in discussing Andre's “One Hundred Sonnets,” a collection of one-word poems repeated in fourteen-line grids, notes that the work “moves progressively from pronouns – I / you / he / she / it – to body parts and fluids – head / hair / face / ...blood / urine /sweat – to colors, numbers, minerals, and basic elements of the landscape – sun / moon / star / cloud / rain / as if to assemble

a set of basic material properties analogous to those of Andre's sculpture” (Kotz 146). But this is an unreflexive projection of sculptural techniques onto poetic material, and one that Kenneth Goldsmith identifies as a major reason for the difficulty art history has had understanding the project of concrete poetry. In conversation with his friend, the artist Hollis Frampton, Andre describes his poetic Constructivism as

the generation of overall designs by the multiplication of the qualities of the individual constituent elements. May I suggest, furthermore, that Ezra Pound in the *Cantos* exploits the plastic and Constructivist quality of words, symbols, and phrases. I grant that his purpose is not gained, but enhanced, by this method. [e. e.] Cummings [sic] would seem an obvious example, but I would insist that his divisions and eccentricities are more an attempt to reintroduce musical values in poetry than an exploitation of plastic possibilities. (Andre and Frampton 37)

It is difficult to understand how Andre can share the same influences as the concrete poets and produce similar work, and yet consistently refuse to find parallels with any of their poetry. The English critic and anthologist Stephen Bann identified a constructivist strain in concrete poetry in 1967, and the work done by poets like Ian Hamilton Finlay, Diter Rot, and Hansjörg Mayer, just to name a few, could arguably fit into Andre's poetic desire for the reduction of language to its constituent element. Unlike Andre, however, these poets take the influence of Pound's fascination with Ernest Fenollosa's research on the iconic Chinese written character to go beneath the level of the word, perhaps a result of opening up their sphere of influence beyond the American canon to include figures like Stéphane Mallarmé, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Filippo Marinetti.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Meyer points out that Andre's background was working class, but his family was literary, and as a child adults would often recite poetry to him, even on a jobsite where they might be working together. “His father, an immigrant from Sweden, had not learned English until the sixth grade. While Andre's

When Frampton challenges Andre on his choice of words for a series of poems – green / five / horn / eye / sound – and suggests a different set might be as poetical, Andre responds:

Yes. Your own blue / six / hair / ear / light follows the method with its own precision. Not even the method is mine but belongs to whomever uses it. Nor do I think that my *Five Poems* are better than yours, but both our sets are radically different from the poem: “*I am a red pansy.*” These latter five words relate most strongly to each other and depart very far from the specificity of their referents. In fact we may presume that the five words together share one super-referent. The five words of my *First Five Poems* very purposely do not share a super-referent. My green is a square of that color or a village's common land. My five is 5 or: .... My horn is either on the brow of a rhino, or under the hood of a Cadillac. My eye is paired above my nose or founded in my psyche by punning. Sound is Long Island, even. But I have gotten rid of the overriding super-referent. (75)

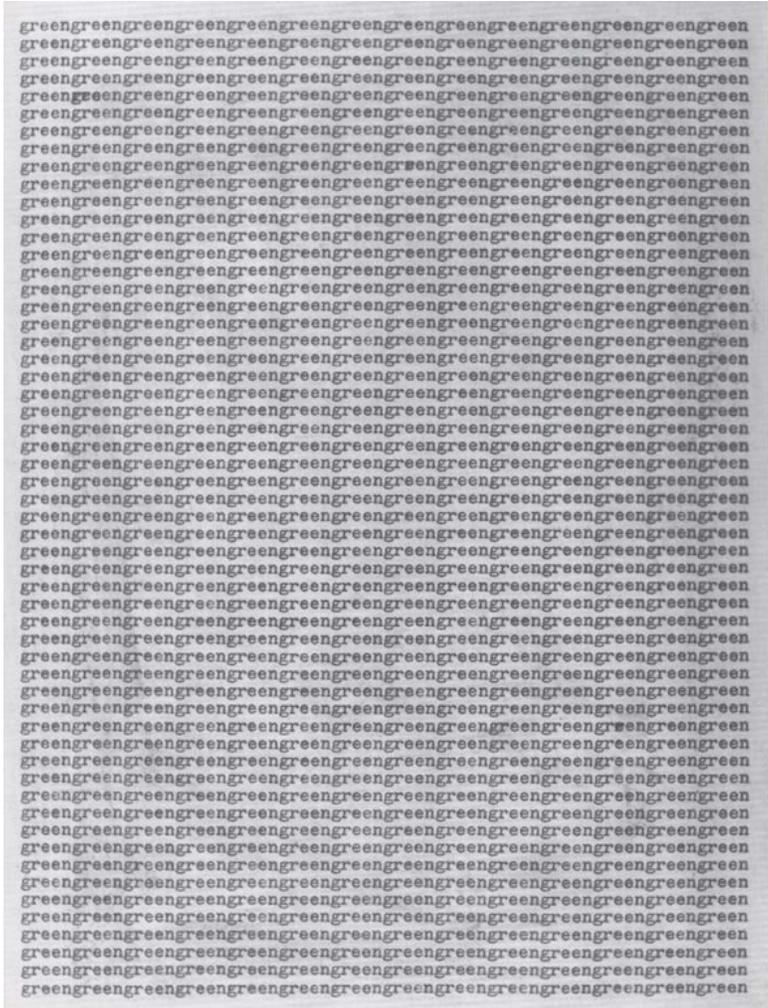
Andre treats the phrase “I am red pansy,” which in itself seems to tap into a specifically American xenophobic, anti-communist homophobia, as a word, and his disruption of the syntactic order is what, for him, provides a poetic charge. But such a simple disruption is not a new poetic strategy; it had been widely used by the time Andre was writing by figures he lists as influences (Pound, T.S. Eliot, Stein, etc.) and myriad others he neglects to mention. It is strange, however, that, as a sculptor writing poetry, he never addresses the subject of the space of that page, and the function of words within that space.

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mother and uncle were his earliest instructors in the rhythm and meter of poetical language, his father taught a different lesson: the semantic specificity of the word. The English lexicon, hard won, was greatly prized in the household on Moffat Road, and not only the diction of the great poets” (11). For what it is worth, this biographical anecdote might provide some understanding of Andre's fixation on English and the American tradition, and perhaps his rejection of a parallel poetic project, that of the concrete poets, who also understood the power of English, but who addressed it as a potentially imperial force, and dealt with it through translation, formally simplified language, and by paying attention to the transformation language was undergoing at mid-century.

Robert Smithson, whose writings on language and art have come to occupy a sizable ground in the canon of art history, celebrates Andre's poetry in his 1968 essay "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art" for its strategy of demolishing any reference beyond the words themselves. Yet, in this emphasis of the word, neither Smithson nor Andre is willing to talk about language's material function. Smithson makes this clear when he writes:

Andre doesn't practice a 'dialectical materialism,' but rather a 'metaphorical materialism.' The apparent sameness and toneless ordering of Andre's

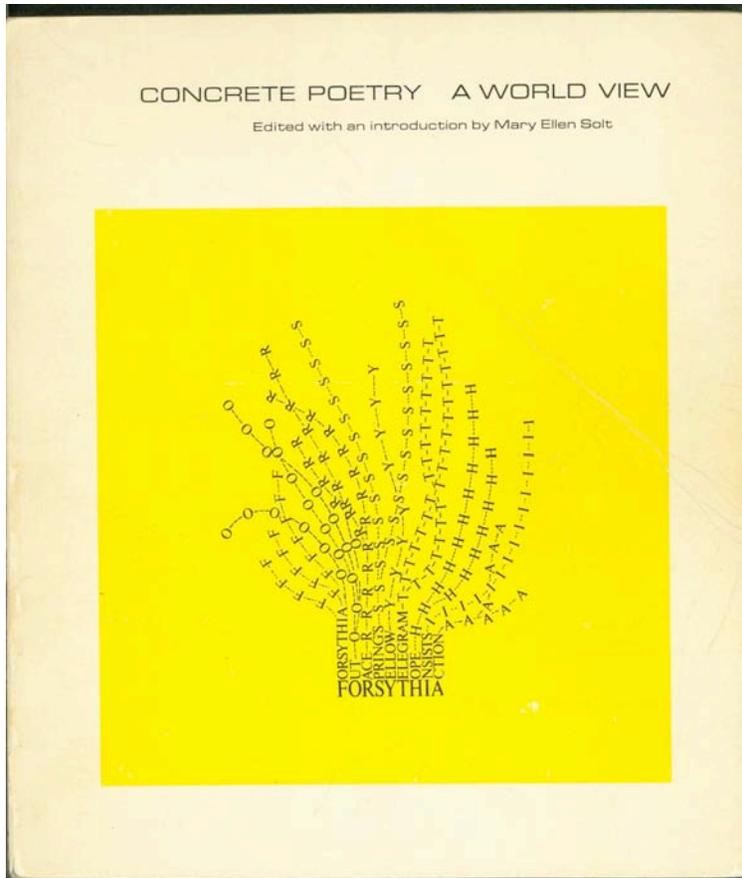


**Figure 4.1.**  
**Carl Andre. "Green."**

poems conceals a radical disorientation of grammar. Paradoxically his 'words' are charged with all the complication of oxymoron and hyperbole. Each poem is a 'grave,' so to speak, for his metaphors. Semantics are driven out of his language in order to avoid meaning. (Smithson 80)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> That Smithson should laud Andre's poetry for its displacement from the political and temporal

Meyer reads Smithson's description of Andre's poetry as a grave for metaphor within the tradition of Jakobson's formulation of the two axes of language: the vertical axis, in which words can be substituted for others, is referred to as the paradigmatic or metaphorical axis; and the



**Figure 4.2.**  
**Mary Ellen Solt. Front cover of *Concrete Poetry: A World View***

green), and repeating it in an arbitrarily sized grid does not disrupt that metaphorical axis in any way that differs significantly from the work of Pound and Stein that Andre reveres (see fig. 4.1). Speaking of a poem he wrote about a rose, called “Plastic Poem,” Andre tells Frampton that the rose “will not be printed in a blooming, petalled pattern” in a thinly veiled reference to the

horizontal axis, in which words are connected to each other in relations of grammar is referred to as the syntagmatic or metonymical.

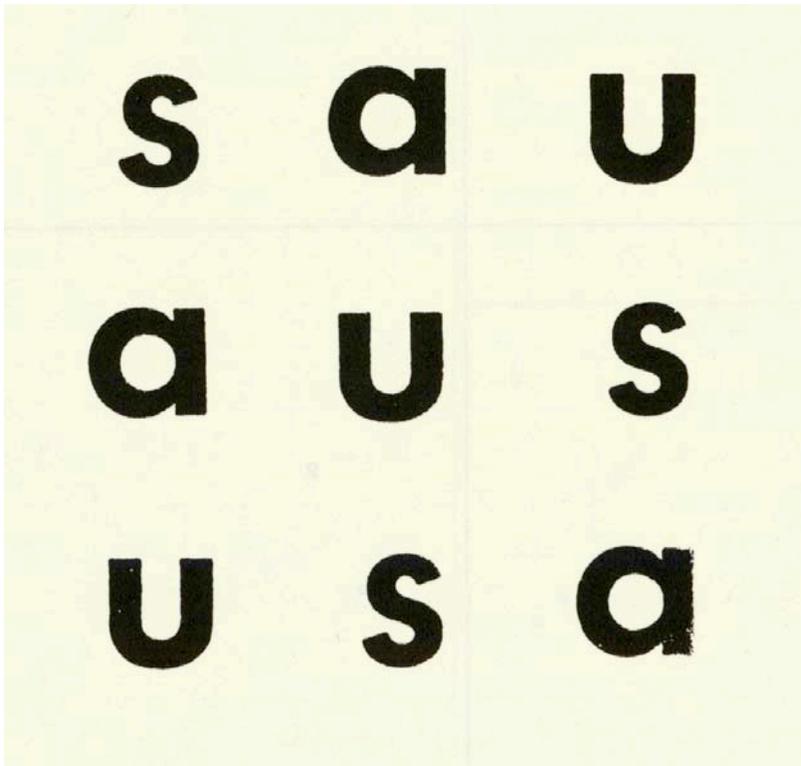
Smithson sees Andre's poetry as disrupting both axes, as his presentation of single words alone on a page or a repetition of a single word within a grid removes them from their signifying power. But there is a problem with this reading.

A grid of the word green still refers to the color green, or a park, or money (but most likely the color

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that necessarily accompany dialectical materialism is not surprising given Smithson's own practice, in which measurements of the human are often subordinated to those of the earth or the universe. But Smithson's fixation on geological time is often too close to theological time, which extracts itself from the human scale. The critical success of such a position speaks loudly of the privileged site of production that both Smithson and Andre were working out of at the time.

mimetic compositional strategies Andre associates with concrete poetry.<sup>6</sup> In addressing the difference between his disruptions, or “boiling down” of grammar in order to emphasize words outside of syntax, and those experiments of Stein and Eliot, he reductively reads their work as developing out of the social constraints of the time, ignoring Stein's polylingualism in works like *Tender Buttons* that reflected experiences with foreign languages in her personal life – she had a



**Figure 4.3.**  
**Hansjörg Mayer. “USA / SAU / AUS.”**

German nanny as a child and spent a considerable amount of time in France – as well as in the demographic shift of the United States, as millions of immigrants entered the country in the first decades of the twentieth century, bringing their languages with them. What Andre believes Eliot's social constraints were, beyond being an American who yearned to be British, is unclear.

Examples of poems in grid forms that do more than Andre's are not difficult to locate in

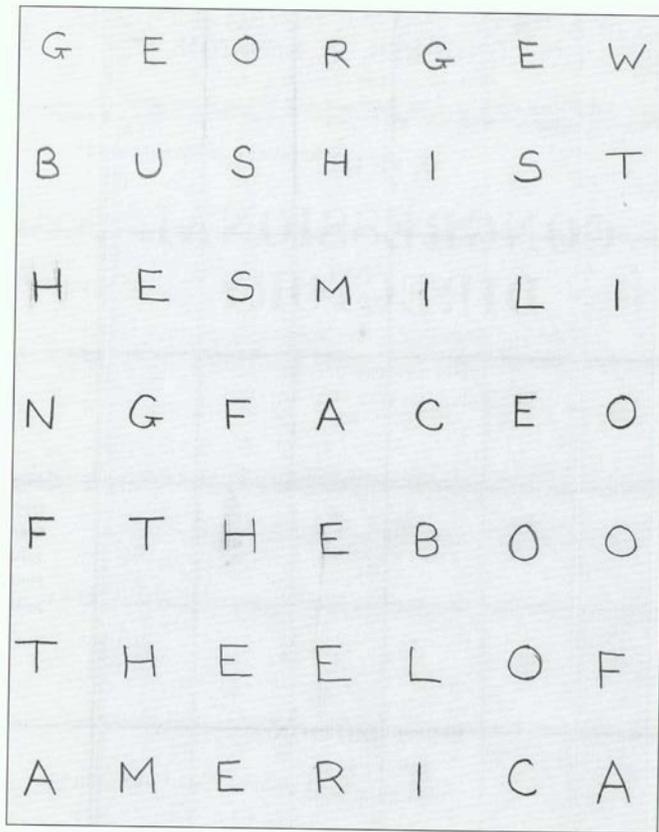
<sup>6</sup> Andre's statement would unfortunately prove prophetic, as four years later Mary Ellen Solt would produce a series of poems in which the names of flowers and plants were arranged into shapes that mimicked their shapes of their referents. Her decision to put one of these poems, “Forsythia,” on the cover of her 1968 anthology, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, perhaps the most widely referenced of the concrete poetry anthologies in English, is likely a contributing factor in the sustained lack of engagement with concrete poetry as a serious poetic movement by literary and Art Historical scholars alike (see fig 4.2). There is more to this poem, however, as each of the “stems” is comprised of Morse code symbols for the corresponding letters, linking the tradition of pastoral poetry with the new understanding of nature in contemporary communication theory.

concrete poetry. Ronaldo Azeredo's "Velocidade" is an early example that treats the word as material – both visually and aurally – while at the same time referring to the social conditions under it was written. Hansjörg Mayer's simple grid poem from 1965, "sau / aus / usa" uses the German words for "sow" and "out" to identify in the very structure of the initials, or *brand*, of the United States a political position analogous to Decio Pignatari's 1957 "Beba Coca Cola" (see fig. 4.3). And Pierre and Ilse Garnier's "Texte pour une architecture" (1965) seems to have much in common with Andre's techniques in *One Hundred Sonnets*, but the poem works because of the relationship between the visual effect of the word's repetition and the meaning of the word at the time (see fig. 3.10). Beyond the fact that cinema is a word that functions in both French and English, the visual composition of the poem in the ratio of a 35mm screen ratio simulates a television screen as it would appear on film (with lines running up and down that would be indistinguishable to the human eye) or as if the reception were poor. The significance thus comes out of the meaning of the word "cinema" in France at the time, when television is emerging as a new visual medium from which information that would have previously been received in public theatres is transmitted. Thus a suggestion about implications for architecture, both in size, function, and public / private uses are brought into relief. This poem would not work if it were one in a series of grids organized thematically: as if, for instance, the next poem were to be "popcorn," or "organ," in the way that Kotz notes Andre's sonnets "move progressively from pronouns – I / you / he / she / it – to body parts and fluids – head / hair / face / eye ... [etc]" (146). This type of grouping hardly seems to disrupt the paradigmatic / metaphorical axis in the way Smithson would argue it does.

Addressing his use of the grid as compositional technique in 1973, Andre writes:

The grid system for the poems comes from the fact that I was using a mechanical typewriter to write the poems, and as you know a mechanical typewriter has even

letter spacing, as opposed to print which has justified lines with unequal letter spacing. A mechanical typewriter is essentially a grid and you cannot evade that. And so it really came from the typewriter that used the grid rather than from the grid to the typewriter. (Andre 212)



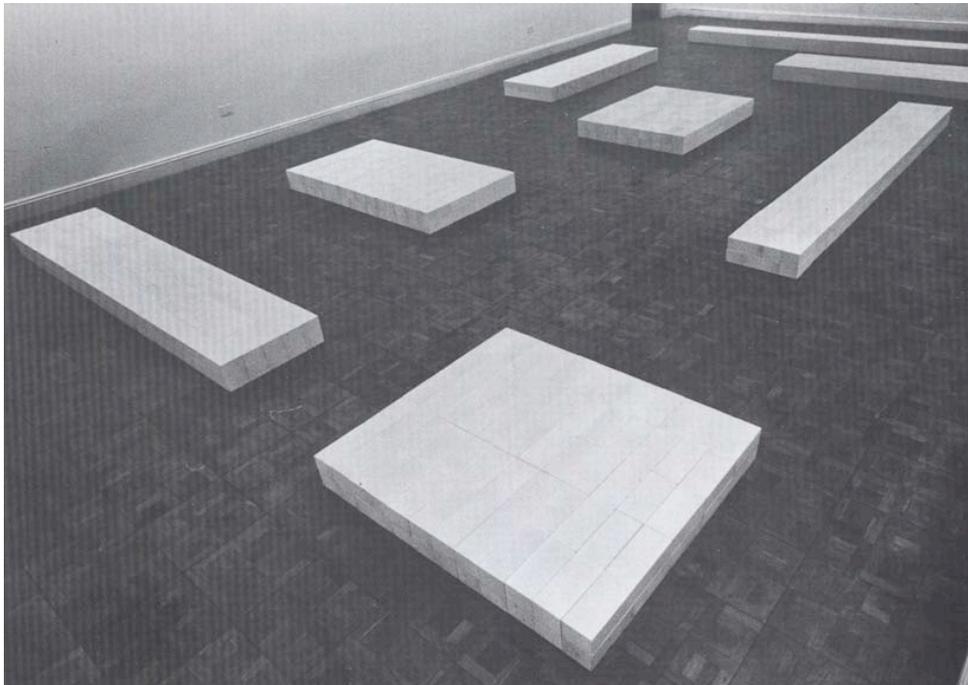
**Figure 4.4.**  
**Carl Andre. "George Bush."**

the machine. The tactility remained at a mediated distance because he submitted to its ordering principle by letting the page be manoeuvred the machine only. The equivalence of the typewriter and the grid ignores the movement of the page by the poet, or the possibilities created by mechanical failures or alternative features of typewriters (jammed keys, non-uniform letter

His emphasis on the ordering properties of mechanical typewriters is rather conventional; Charles Olson had developed a similar point in his influential 1950 essay "Projective Verse," although for his more experimental purposes the even spacing of the typewriter encouraged a greater control over the breath in the recitation of poetry. Andre talks about his experience writing his work as a tactile experience, typing with one finger. But it is strange, then, that he does not extend that idea to the page in

weight, fading or coloured ribbons).<sup>7,8</sup> For Andre, language is material, but it is not a social material that goes through changes of meaning in conjunction with historical and technological shifts. Rather, it is a material for the artist to experiment with, to order in unique and creative ways, and as such his poetry separates itself from the concrete poetry movement in its insularity.

Andre's poetic works retained the mark of the artist, and would often refer to the region in



**Figure 4.5.**  
**Carl Andre. “Equivalents I-VIII”.**

which he lived.  
His long poem,  
King Phillips War,  
for example, was  
produced by  
mapping a  
mathematical  
structure onto a  
series of texts  
dealing with the  
colonization of the

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<sup>7</sup> The Brazilian concrete poets were more likely than any other group to work with colours in their compositions, but it was not as a result of forsaking the typewriter. Augusto de Campos's “Poetamenos” series from 1953, for example, which consists of fragmented speech and syntax in coloured fonts arranged on coloured pages, was composed using a typewriter and coloured carbon paper (*Poesia Concreta* 18).

<sup>8</sup> At this point in his career, much of Andre's poetic output had become primarily prose printed in blocks, as in *Still A Novel* (1972), which disrupted reading by repeating letters and eliminating spaces, but which could still be decoded by the reader in the way that a word-search grid puzzle might function, a technique he was still using in 2001, though with handwriting instead of a typewriter (see fig. 4.4). The shapes or appearance of the puzzles have no relation to the meaning of the statements or words, but function strictly as an impediment to reading. There are a few examples of poems from earlier in the sixties where words are illegible because of over-inking, or of a work that uses only punctuation to create an op-art type pattern via page adjustment, works which would place him in direct relation to concrete poetry, but these works are never addressed by him or by his critics, and they have not been published beyond a limited edition of thirty-six loose-leaf binders.

United States, specifically the area concentrated around what came to be Rhode Island and Massachusetts. But despite congratulating Frampton on his choice of words to replace his one word poems, claiming that they are as equally good from a poetic standpoint, the words chosen by Andre are still *chosen by Andre*, and achieve their poetic value from being designated as such. This parallels his sculptural practice, where his sculptures of everyday material such as bricks or bales of hay are granted value by the certificate of ownership that accompanies them when purchased (see fig. 4.5). Alberro describes this practice, which Andre pioneered along with the artist Dan Flavin, as a new form of guaranteeing authorship: the certificate, signed by the artist, delineates in legalistic language (often complemented by a schematic drawing on standard graph paper) the various components of the work. Given the general accessibility of the materials and Andre's deskilling of the procedures of production, it is primarily the certificate that authenticates his work” (Alberro, *Conceptual Art* 23). At a symposium in 1968, Andre responded to a question about unauthorized reproductions of his sculptural work by comparing them to forged cheques, which implies the only difference between Andre's poems and Frampton's alternatives is the amount of social capital their signatures are able to draw (Alberro, “Conceptual” 178). Concrete poetry, on the other hand, never really had the same issues with authenticity or ownership. There are historical, material reasons for this, of course. Poetry, especially avant-garde poetry, has never had as much of a market as visual art so the poets have less to be territorial about than their artist counterparts. Poetry is also primarily distributed through the mass media of books, even within small press editions, and while there are issues of copyright, the modalities of ownership and consumption are vastly different. Concrete poetry, through fine press printing, limited edition folios, and gallery exhibitions strayed from conventional methods of production in order to emphasize the poem as object, but the position of the poet never superseded the demands of linguistic structures of the compositions. From the

Noigandres Group's "Plano-Pilôto para Poesia Concreta":

The poem as a mechanism regulating itself: feed-back. Faster communication (problems of functionality and structure implied) endows the poem with a positive value and guides its own making.[...]

Concrete poetry: total responsibility before language. Thorough realism. Against a poetry of expression, subjective and hedonistic. To create precise problems and to solve them in terms of sensible language. A general art of the word. The poem product: useful object. (A de Campos, H. de Campos, Pignatari 72)

While Andre attempted to boil down syntax to get rid of grammar, the concrete poets sought to boil down poetry to get rid of the poet.

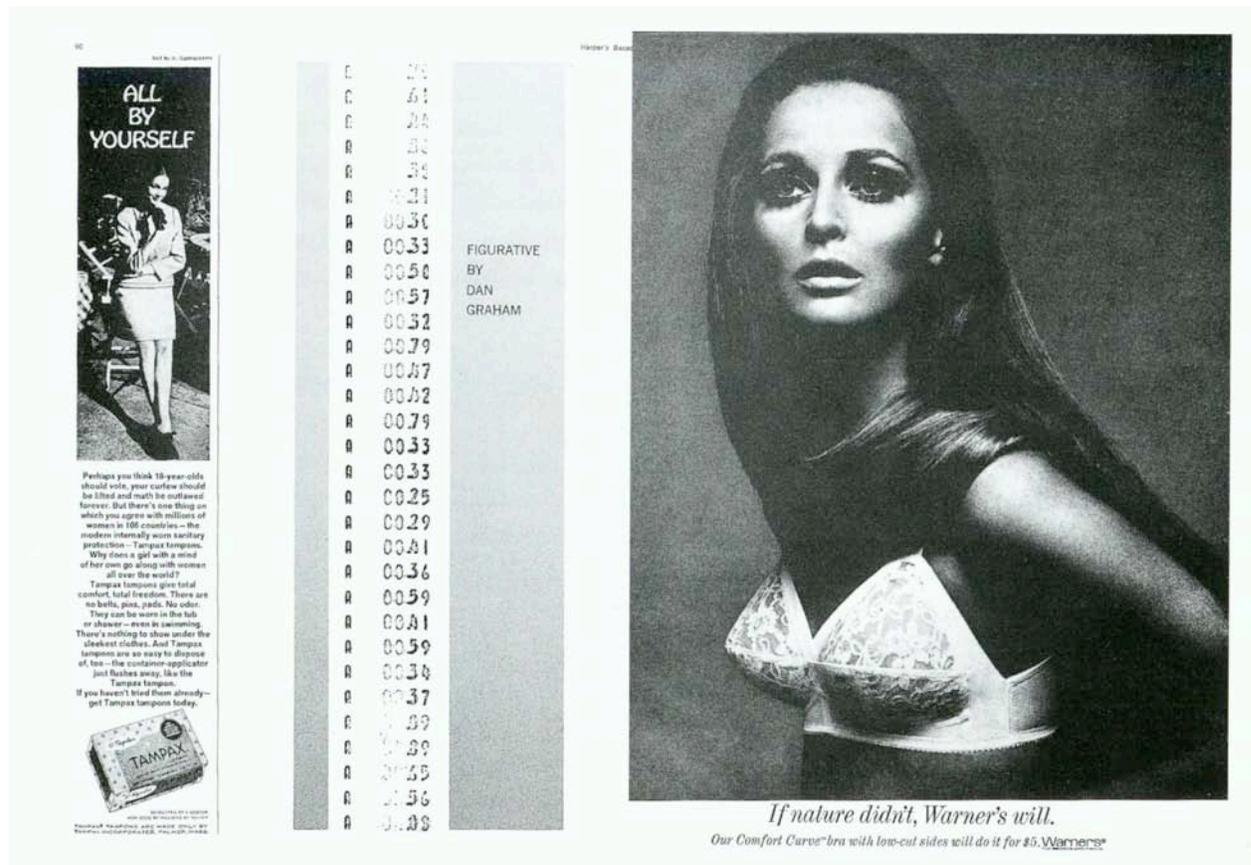
The language-based work of Dan Graham provides a counterexample to Andre's privileged position. Graham produced site-specific literary work in the mid-60s that sought to intervene in and disrupt the flow of information. His pieces were not politically motivated in the manner of Meireles's "Insertions in Ideological Circuits," but they did perform a critical function in critiquing the passivity with which data is produced by commercial magazines and consumed by readers. His project can be traced, in part, to his experience as a young writer in New York, where he moved from Indiana in 1964 to open up a gallery with friends. The gallery failed after a year, but the lessons that Graham would learn from that failure would prove influential:

Through the actual experience of running a gallery, I learned that if a work of art wasn't written about and reproduced in a magazine it would have difficulty attaining the status of 'art.' It seemed that in order to be defined as having value, that is as 'art,' a work had only to be exhibited in a gallery and then to be written about and reproduced as a photograph in an art magazine. Then this record of the



sprouted up all over the United States. The photographs adhere, for the most part, to a similar objectivity, emphasizing the uniformity of the houses in sequence, as opposed to advertisements trumpeting the mass-produced house as an inexpensive temple to the family.

Graham would produce several other magazine pieces, but none on the scale of *Homes for America*. In 1966 Graham placed an advertisement in the *National Tattler* requesting a clinical description of post-coital detumescence in males (Graham, *Dan Graham* 94).<sup>9</sup> A list of prices without a total, called “Figurative,” was published in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1968, sandwiched in between advertisements for Tampax and Warner's bras (93; see fig. 4.7) There is no indication

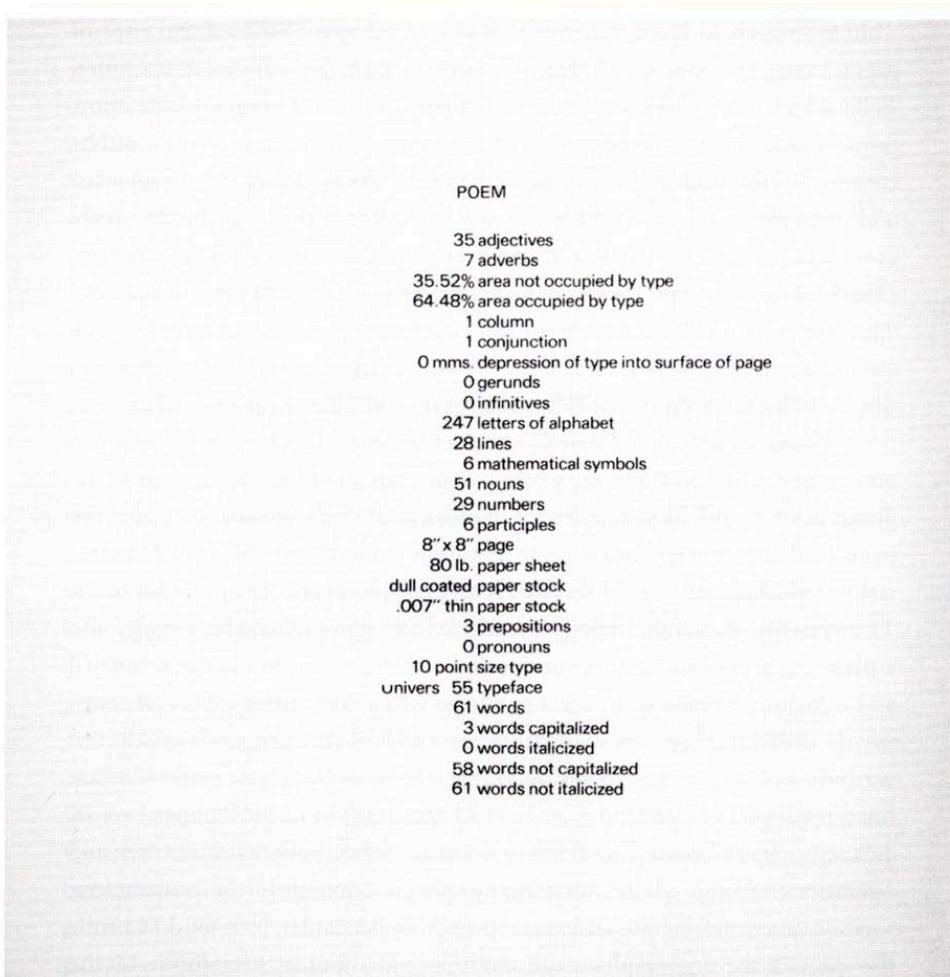


**Figure 4.7.**  
**Dan Graham. “Figurative.”**

that Graham considered these pieces as poems, *per se*, although the editor of *Harper's Bazaar*, a friend of Robert Smithson's, published “Figurative” in the poetry section. It would be stretching

<sup>9</sup> He received only one response, in 1974, which he published in his book *For Publication* [1975].

the comparison of concrete poetry and conceptual art to link the representation of the potential ordering of tract houses represented by letter strings in *Homes For America* to an idea of rhyme schemes, or to the permutational poetry of Haroldo de Campos (“Alea I – Variacões Semanticas” [1967]) or Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová (“Vývoj I” [1960-2]; see chapter 2). But a piece that he published in the art journal *Aspen* in 1966 invites attention to its status as poetry by his labelling of it as such. The work subsequently has come to be referred to as “Schema,” but the



**Figure 4.8.**  
**Dan Graham. “Poem, March 1966.”**

program on which it is grounded was titled “POEM / MARCH 1966,” and is simply a list of data categories defined by its own presentation: “Each poem-page is to be set in its final form by the editor of the publication where it is to appear, the exact data in each

particular instance to correspond to the fact(s) of its published appearance” (Graham, “POEM” n.

pag.; see fig. 4.8).<sup>10</sup> Because there are categories that strive for exactitude – percentage of ink coverage, for example – which change with every modification of the data, Graham sees the production of the piece as inevitably inaccurate inasmuch as it is dependent upon the editor's measurements. He imagines a solution of technological supplantation: “It would be possible to 'compose the entire set of permutationally possible poems and to select the applicable variant (s) with the aid of a computer which could 'see' the ensemble instantly” (“Poem” n. pag.)

Graham's rejection of the composing subject as insufficient and his emphasis on the materiality of not only the language of the piece but its mode of communication, as well, seems to position it within the same sphere of poetic investigation the concrete poets had been operating for the preceding decade. But the conditions of its publication in *Aspen* have perhaps overdetermined its critical reception: it was in the same issue that Roland Barthes' essay “The Death of the Author” was published for the first time in English. Barthes begins his essay by pointing out the impossible figure of the author:

It will always be impossible to know [the author], for the good reason that all writing is itself this special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices, and that literature is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin: literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes. (Barthes n. pag)

But the position of the concrete poets in the decade previous to Barthes' essay was also sympathetic to this position, though it came more out of a technological determinism than a theoretical response to the ideas of structuralism. Concrete poetry sought to undercut the position of the author in order to compose mass poetry, able to be quickly and collectively consumed.

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<sup>10</sup> The title “Poem” was dropped for its publication in *Art & Language* 1:1 in 1969 (Graham, *Dan* 96).

Adriano Spatola explains:

Haroldo de Campos says: 'Concrete poetry speaks the language of today's man. It rejects the craftsmanship, discursiveness, and metaphor that transform the poetry of our age – marked by technological progress and non-verbal communication – into an anachronism that causes the divide between poet and public often deplored in sentimental terms that are anything but objective.' From this perspective, the synthetic / ideogrammatic method that brings all textual elements (audio, visual, semantic) into play can be considered an organizational process of the poem in exact consonance with our civilization's need for as rapid and direct a message as possible. (Spatola 92)

For the concrete poets as well as Barthes, it was the figure of Stéphane Mallarmé who first identified the potential of language to function on its own, beyond the spectral figure of the author. This fact did not escape the attention of Brian O'Doherty, the Irish artist who compiled the issue of *Aspen*, who dedicated the issue to Mallarmé. Barthes writes:

In France, Mallarmé was doubtless the first to see and foresee in its full extent the necessity of substituting language itself for the man who hitherto was supposed to own it; for Mallarmé, as for us, it is language which speaks, not the author: to write is to reach, through a preexisting impersonality – never to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realistic novelist – that point where language alone acts, 'performs,' and not 'oneself': Mallarmé's entire poetics consists in suppressing the author for the sake of the writing (which is, as we shall see, to restore the status of the reader. (n. pag.)

By limiting the reference of language to the actual language, Graham abandons the position of author, abdicating responsibility for not only the meaning of the work but even a portion of its

content, as different data is produced with every publication. That he should designate the work a “poem” need not remove it from its status as artwork, but the gesture should be taken seriously. It both separates Graham from the dominant American poetry of the time, which operated within the individualized figures and poetry of Robert Bly and the Beat poets, while aligning it with the program of concrete poetry to emphasize the materiality of language and the conditions of its expression. As Graham explains in the late 1960s: “A page in *Schema* as matter of fact materiality and simultaneously semiotic signifier of this material (present): as sign it unites, therefore, signifier and signified. It defines itself as place as it defines the limits and contingencies of placement (enclosing context, enclosed content). It is a measure of itself – as place. It takes its own measure – of itself as place that is, placed two-dimensionally on (as) a page” (in Alberro, “Structure as” 26). The fact that it should be placed firmly within the critical history of conceptual art, with no connection to concrete poetry, speaks both to the fact of the insularity of Anglo-American conceptual art at the time as well as a persistent refusal to consider concrete poetry beyond an idea of the shaped poetry and visual emphasis.

Beyond Graham's *Schema*, which is about as material as conceptual art's engagement with language ever gets, the artists use language primarily to critique and subvert the institution of art, specifically the role of the critic and all of his / her apparatuses. Charles Harrison accounts for this antipathy by describing the two voices of post World War II art production: the creative and the critical. He argues that the creative voice, which championed the genius of the individual artist and the transformative power of art experiences, dominated the years between the end of the war and the mid-60s, when conceptual art began to increase the volume of the second, critical voice:

Conceptual Art worthy of the name was only provisionally and trivially an art without 'art objects.' More significantly it was an art which was not to be *beheld*,

which was not visible – or even conceivable – in any mode which the 'adequately sensitive, adequately informed, spectator' was competent to regulate. The initial task was not to invent a form of high art without objects – logically speaking, an absurd enough idea – but rather to evade in practice those predicates which the beholder was wont to attach to the objects of his attention. (50)

This attack on the critic was championed by Kosuth, as well, who wrote in his statement for the 1970 exhibition *Information* that “an artist's dependence on the critic or writer on art to cultivate the conceptual implications of his art propositions, and argue their explication, is either intellectual irresponsibility or the naivest kind of mysticism” (qtd. in McShine 73-4). The beholder was then to be transformed by the exposure of the structures of art production into a reader, a figure who was an active participant in the production of a text's meaning. That concrete poetry emphasized simultaneity and speed of comprehension should not, however, be read as a converse move away from a reader and towards the literary equivalent of the beholder. Such a relationship takes too literally the visual metaphors of both positions. Rather, it is the subversion of the authorial voice in both conceptual art and concrete poetry that ties the projects together. As Barthes argues:

Once the Author is gone, the claim to 'decipher' a text becomes quite useless. To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing. This conception perfectly suits criticism, which can then take as its major task the discovery of the Author (or his hypostases: society, history, the psyche, freedom) beneath the work: once the Author is discovered, the text is 'explained.' the critic has conquered; hence it is scarcely surprising not only that, historically, the reign of the Author should also have been that of the Critic, but that criticism (even 'new criticism') should be

overthrown along with the Author. (n. pag.)

Graham's work seems to do a better job of eliminating the author than Andre's poetic work. *Schema* was a model of reproduction, fitting into LeWitt's formulation of conceptual art



Figure 4.9.

Vito Acconci. "Page / Pages: Reading the First Page of *The New York Times*, Saturday, June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1969."

ideas as a machine that makes art. It was even translated for publication in the German periodical *Interfunktionen* in 1972, an event that recognizes its fidelity to language over the composing subject. Andre's work, in spite of its disconnect between the words and the composition of the poem, maintained their original language source, and in doing so retained the

character of the conditions of their production. The fact that Andre's "First Five Poems" would always be "green / five / horn / eye / sound," and never "vert / cinq / corne / oeil / son" speaks less about the poem than it does about the poet and his historical and geographic position. Andre's response to Frampton's question about the viability of his poetry, that "not even the method is mine but belongs to anybody who uses it," is not really true: the method belongs to Andre and his group. Otherwise it would never have become known. Certainly no poet other than Andre could ever hope to be published if her / his work simply chose random words and repeated them without any investigation of their visual or semantic structure. The method belongs to Andre in the same way that Tristan Tzara's "How to Write a Poem," which is a set of instructions for cutting up a newspaper article and pulling words and phrases out at random, belongs to dada. The ignorance of the site of his method is a privilege that comes with the time and space: again, the conceptual artists' retreat into structural linguistics and linguistic positivism are an effect of their position in the Anglo-American political alliance. Austere philosophical investigations were not likely to be received as well in South America, for example. Andre explains: "The poetry I am trying to write is poetry which eliminates the poet, or at least makes the poet transparent in relation to the light cast upon the object.... What I want to illuminate in my poetry are not those things which only I can see, but those things which any man can see. I am interested in those poems which you can go back to Manhattan and duplicate" (in Kotz 151). The significant term in this passage, like his unconscious emphasis on "English" in the passage cited earlier when discussing language as material, is "Manhattan." It is an economic as much as a formal issue that he does not express the same position towards his sculpture, despite describing both practices as attempting to perform similar functions with different materials.

The poetic work of Vito Acconci, like Andre's, maintains a geographical subjectivity as well, although Acconci never adopts the anti-author position to the same extent as Andre or

Graham. Acconci was trained as a poet, returning to New York from the Iowa Writer's Workshop in 1964. This training suggests Acconci would be very much cognizant of the American contemporary poetry scene, all the way from the New York School to Black Mountain poetics. His emphasis on the space of the page owes much to this tradition, specifically the work of Charles Olson, whose emphasis on the writing of place is fully evident not only in his theoretical writings but also in his epic work *The Maximus Poems*, begun in 1950 and unfinished by the time of his death in 1970 as an investigation of his home, Gloucester, Massachusetts. Acconci's fondness for the typewriter – almost all of his poems appear as typewritten – can also be traced back to Olson, like Andre's. The typewriter is used for its exactitude and its disinterestedness, not for any type of compositional agency in the way the concrete poets would have used it; the page is always upright, the margins always set. But the performative aspect of the work is where Acconci departs. Whereas Olson's work used the typewriter as a tool for scoring the performance of a poem, Acconci's work is more of a recording of a performance, using the typewriter as a machine to document his performances as poetry. His poem “Page / Pages: Reading the First Page of the New York Times, Saturday June 21, 1969,” for example, is simply a record of the phrases he comes across at thirty second increments, recorded alongside the page and column of the newspaper where they were found (see fig. 4.9). Craig Dworkin describes Acconci's poetry as “working with the movement of language over the self-enclosed performance space of the printed page” (Dworkin xi). But the performance space is not one devoted to the performance of language as much as it is to the figure of the poet. Thus it is less concerned with the appearance of language and its materiality than it is with the disruption of syntax and notation. Dworkin cites a rejection letter written by Acconci for a work submitted to the journal *0 to 9*, which he edited with Bernadette Mayer from April 1967 to July 1969, *0 to 9*: “Not the kind off thing 0 to 9 [sic] is out for; for me, there's too much emphasis on message here,

not enough on the space of the page” (Dworkin xvii). Here is a document of Acconci's interest in the page as a compositional unit, like the concrete poets or visual poetry going back to Mallarmé, but it is one that results in a radically different type of poetry. At this point, in the late 1960s, Acconci was already moving toward the medium of performance, for which he is better known. In an interview in 1993, Acconci explains his reasoning:

It started to *seem* impossible to use on the page a word like 'tree,' a word like 'chair,' because this referred to another space, a space off the page. Whereas I *could* use words like 'there,' 'then,' 'at that time,' ... words that referred to my activity on the page, my act of writing on the page. So, in fact, toward the end of the time I was writing, I was driving myself into a corner, into a kind of dead end, when in order to preserve the literalness of the page the only thing I could use on the page were commas, periods, punctuation points. (in Kotz 156)

The limitations he outlines are not limitations of language to function as itself, but of language to function as a representation of Acconci himself, of his desires and movements, of his position in space. The page had become a unit of containment too restrictive for the artist's subjectivity; his texts would eventually become descriptions of performances, which would then be documented by photographs or video. The final issue of *0 to 9* would testify to Acconci's shift away from poetry, including as a supplement a series of Streetworks, propositions for or descriptions of performances by artists and poets such as Adrian Piper, Acconci, Hannah Weiner, and John Perreault, among others.<sup>11</sup>

Although Acconci and Mayer published writings by international authors, the journal was very much a New York publication. Investigations of space that went beyond the page never really extended outside the region of the American northeast. In this way the poetry mimics the

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<sup>11</sup> Note that, besides Piper, these are the artists that Kosuth refers to as the concrete poets who are turning to theater in Lippard's *Six Years...*

larger tendency of early conceptual art, where considerations of the international are primarily located in its pursuit of a market. For Benjamin Buchloh, the evacuation of the authorial voice from conceptual art, along with all remnants of a transcendent aesthetic experience, was a formal reaction to the “operating logic of late capitalism,” which manifested in a “rigorous and relentless order of the vernacular of administration. (143; 142). Alex Alberro takes that position further by proposing that the work of the conceptualists was less a reaction to than an adoption of that logic. Unlike Kotz, he explains his decision to focus his study *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* primarily on work coming out of New York City by arguing that not only the form of the work but its distribution, as well, was determined by the economic position of New York at the time. It is through Alberro that an explanation of the formal decisions of Anglo-American conceptual art might be developed in parallel with concrete poetry's concern with a global shift in communication and consumption, and why, perhaps, the artists were more reluctant than the poets to frame it as such. He identifies the gallerist and curator Seth Siegelau as a major figure in the success of conceptual art, and the list of artists he represented confirms it: Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, Douglas Huebler, Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Sol LeWitt, and Douglas Huebler are just some of the artists who would go on to become the dominant representatives of the movement. Siegelau was an unconventional gallerist; he was 23 years old, one year younger than Dan Graham, when he opened up his gallery on 56<sup>th</sup> Street in New York, eight blocks south of Graham's. Seth Siegelau Contemporary Art, which also sold oriental rugs and had couches to encourage potential purchasers to experience the gallery as an art environment, would last a year longer than Graham's John Daniels Gallery, but in 1966 the gallery did not close so much as it evolved. Siegelau moved his operation to a two-bedroom apartment near Madison Avenue, significantly the center of the booming advertising industry, and from this location began to function as a gallerist at large, claiming “You don't need a

gallery to show ideas” (in Alberro, “Conceptual Art” 16).

It is Siegelau more than any of the artists he represented who transformed the language surrounding art, and did so in a manner that, like the concrete poets, took advantage of material shifts in communication in order to expand the reach of his message. If the concrete poets addressed the appearance of language as it is designed in advertising in an attempt to hijack or *détourne* its style towards a poetic end, Siegelau adopted the language of public relations and corporate press releases towards a commercial end: selling the work of the artists to an expanding market of newly affluent Americans. In a pamphlet he drafted for the art consultation company, Image, which he founded along with the wealthy businessman and collector Jack Wendler, Siegelau writes:

Fine Art? Why should we get involved with art? [...] Because Fine Art is good business. The contemporary corporation has much to gain from the identification with the positive virtues the Arts possess. [...] Specifically, an identification with the Arts will do the following: a. Improve the image of your company by making your public more aware of what you are doing in the community. b. Assist in developing a more fully rounded personality for your corporation by adding a Cultural dimension. c. Provide a bold, unique and exciting element in the presentation of your products and services. d. Promote greater public acceptance of your corporation and its products and services by making yourself more attractive and visible in the marketplace. (in Alberro, *Conceptual* 14)

The transformation of language is not material here, but generic. The gallerist / curator becomes the publicist, the entrepreneur who unashamedly fuses the world of commerce and high art in a manner just as radical as the conceptual artists' rejection of the critic as middleman.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lippard, in the 1972 Postface to *Six Years...* is confused by the commercial success of the

Though Joseph Kosuth was never as explicit about his entrepreneurial spirit as Siegelau, Alberro makes a case for him being every bit as strategic:

Kosuth was a skillful advocate of his own work who acutely understood the value of public relations and self-promotion. Accordingly, he was often found at the 'right places, promoting his career and cultivating 'social capital, defined by [Pierre] Bourdieu as ' a capital of social connections ... that is often necessary in winning and keeping the confidence of high society, and with it a clientele,' and that may be drawn on to make an artistic career. (*Conceptual* 26-7)

It is perhaps against this spectacularized figure of the artist as commercial rather than social figure that Sarenco, the Italian visual poet, critic, and publisher, launched a serial attack on conceptual art in his journal *Lotta Poetica* at the beginning of the 1970s. In several articles printed between 1971 and 1972, all titled “Poesia visiva e conceptual art / un plagio ben organizzato [Poesia Visiva and Conceptual Art / A Well-Organized Plagiarism],” he attacks language-based conceptual work produced by figures like Kosuth, Andre (in his poetry), and Richard Artschwager. He largely avoids examples of their work, however, instead opting to disqualify the entire conceptual art movement as derivative and socially corrupt. Support for his position comes from Paul de Vree, the Belgian concrete and sound poet, who wrote the opening article of *Lotta Poetica's* first issue, in which he laments the proliferation of individualistic, conformist poets at a time of increased mechanization of society (de Vree 1). The French

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dematerialized work her project was devoted to chronicling:

It seemed in 1969 [...] that no one, not even a public greedy for novelty, would actually pay money, or much of it, for a xerox sheet referring to an event past or never directly perceived, a group of photographs documenting an ephemeral situation or condition, a project for work never to be completed, words spoken but not recorded; it seemed that these artists would therefore be forcibly freed from the tyranny of a commodity status and market-orientation. Three years later, the major conceptualists are selling work for substantial sums here and in Europe; they are represented by (and still more unexpected – showing in) the world's most prestigious galleries. Clearly, whatever minor revolutions in communication have been achieved by the process of dematerializing the object [...] art and artist in a capitalist society remain luxuries. (263)

concrete poet Jean-Francois Bory provides a note of thanks to Sarenco's expose in *Lotta Poetica*

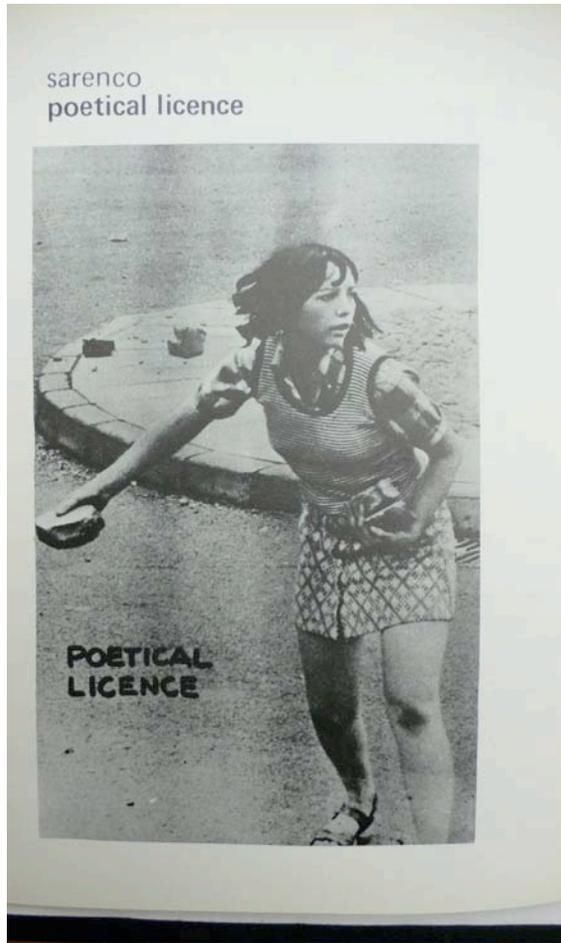


Figure 4.10.

**Sarenco. "Poetical Licence."**

the term originates, that the 'newness' of 'concept art' is artificial" (Higgins n. pag.). All of these positions are polemical, and lack any type of engagement with specific conceptual pieces or their artistic functions. But they are useful in understanding how much attention conceptual art received from the international art market at its peak. In one of the articles Sarenco takes aim at Giancarlo Politi, the publisher and editor of *Flash Art*, for refusing to recognize the lineage of linguistic conceptual art in the history of concrete and visual poetry – a concession which might devalue the work as *innovative*, in the entrepreneurial sense – and hits upon a material reality that helps explain the reason why concrete poetry is at a disadvantage in a historical dialogue:

3, claiming "i hope you will go on in this way because all the conceptual artists have, in fact, copied from the visual poetry and i saw things directly stolen in my books by linde burkhardt (germany), cordioli (italy) and many others. the list would be too long to enumerate it here" (Sarenco, "Poesia," *Lotta* 3 12; lower case in original). And Dick Higgins, the American poet, visual poetry historian, and owner of Something Else Press, which published Emmett Williams' *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* in 1967, writes a supportive letter in 1972, taking the view that Harry Flynt's original formulation of "concept art" lacked the "sick brouhaha of fashionable, marketable 'concept art.'

[...] But it makes it crystal clear, since it's where

“the reason why politi backs up the conceptualists with drawn sword is fairly obvious: his review is entirely paid by the galleries art [sic] whose 'stables' are composed by 'conceptualist race horses'; [*Flash Art*] is not an information periodical but a publicity magazine from the first to the last page” (*Lotta Poetica* 9 12; lower case in the original). Despite concrete and visual poetry's emphasis on keeping up with technology, and on maintaining pace with a rapidly changing society, they never adopted the language of capital in the same way as conceptual art, and continue to suffer the discursive ramifications.

Without referring to Kosuth by name, Sarenco does point to his series of photostat dictionary definitions:

the conceptual artist reproduces [a definition] as is, making it bigger, [...] its linguistic abstractionism, this revalueing [sic] it as a apex of the splendour of the bourgeois intellectualism. the poet is not satisfied to [...] ascertain how a dictionary definition is well made: he wants to know whom and what there is behind it, who commands behind that language, what class situation it represents.  
(*Lotta Poetica* 7 16; lower case in original)

Because Sarenco's position is within the radical Italian poetic avant-garde, his position is foreign to many of the concrete poets who came before him, who were less concerned with the class criticism than they were with the material conditions of language (see fig. 4.10). Although Eugen Gomringer, Henri Chopin, and the Noigandres Group were all concerned with politics on some level, and with the politics of the left, specifically, none of them can be placed on the same footing as the Italian visual poets, who saw their work functioning alongside social revolution. But Sarenco's critique of the politics of conceptual art is significant, and one that mirrors the kind of dismissal that visual art and its critics have adopted toward concrete poetry: that it is disengaged, simply a formal exercise, that it is depoliticized. As it turns out, both positions are

wrong, and they are both right. While Kosuth's definitions are not politically as engaged as Sarenco's poems, or the Brazilian concrete poems that deal with American imperialism, Anglo-American conceptual art's radical questioning of the structure of art production, specifically what a gallery can be and the role of the critic, did result in work that engaged directly with issues of class, gender and imperialism in the 1970s, particularly in the work of artists like Hans Haacke and Martha Rosler. The South American conceptual artists like Cildo Meireles might be a better precursor for the work of Haacke and Rosler, but it was the work of the highly publicized, market shifting artists like those represented by Siegelau that created the spaces and critical infrastructure for the acceptance of their work. It was that same infrastructure, however, that maintained and protected the dominant narrative of conceptual art as a language-based Anglo-American phenomenon at the expense of work from different, peripheral terrain. But the impulse in Kosuth and Art & Language, to make art more of a philosophical exercise, to be circulated and understood by artists alone, is in direct opposition to concrete poetry's project, which sought to expand the circuits of reception for their poetry through the development of a method that would compete for attention in a world where the *viewer* was beginning to take the place of the *reader*. The idea of the international, for conceptual art, was not, as it was for the concrete poets, of a global audience, but of a global marketplace.

## – Chapter 5: Spaces of Concrete –

Concrete poetry operates within a space that is particularly difficult to locate. Its poetic form is inextricable from its distributive form, and its method of circulation is by no means homogenous: it manifests as sculpture, as painting, as poster, as handwritten, mechanical, or photo-printing on pages of mass printed texts and small press books, folios, and ephemera. It could be argued that previous poetic movements, specifically the historical avant-gardes, also challenged standard disciplinary categories, but not to the extent of concrete poetry. The dada poets were close associates of the dada painters, but the poetry of Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, and Kurt Schwitters was designed to function on a page or a stage. The Futurists' words were liberated from the line but not the page, even if that page was not always a standard size. The Surrealists, as well, though experimental with images and psychology, were less so with form. Isidore Isou's Lettristes might come closer to concrete poetry's elusive distributive form, as they branch into painting and film, but the Lettriste movement was not a poetic movement as much as it was a self-consciously avant-garde project. The concrete poets, however, perhaps because their experience of space in the second half of the twentieth century had shifted so far from that of the poets and artists of the first, slide between the gallery and the book, the poster and the page, the mass printed anthology and the fine art press edition. The tension between the word and the image, and the possibilities for distribution that each historically adopts, is part of what has kept concrete poetry out of dominant cultural discourse for so long, but is also a large part of what makes it so significant as a 20<sup>th</sup> century poetic experiment. By looking specifically at the shift within the work from an aesthetics of production to one of distribution and reception, I argue that it enacts an understanding of space that has implications for poetry, visual art, and culture on a global scale within its period and beyond.

Concrete poetry's dispersed geography, although paradoxically integral to its cohesion as

an international movement, sometimes accentuates its incongruities and creates a difficulty in mapping the work. The movement's chronological development is also an impediment; the period between 1955 and 1970 provides a valid bracket, but it is a considerable span, and encompasses the transformation of the work from an early orthodoxy to a more experimental practice. The period and movement also occupies a precarious historical position on the hinge between modernism and postmodernism, and as such demands to be read against the spatial characteristics of both.

Traditionally, approaching the concept of space within literature evokes Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoön*, the 18<sup>th</sup> century essay which attempts to outline the formal imperatives of literary and visual representation. Literature, Lessing argues, operates temporally, through narrative. The plastic arts operate spatially, as there is no order in visual representation: foreground and background function in simultaneous relation to each other. It is with reference to this text that the literary critic Joseph Frank opens his 1945 essay "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," which deals with how modernist writers attempted to refute Lessing's criteria by forcing their readers to experience texts outside of the temporality of narrative. Frank deals with the major modernist authors – James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Gustav Flaubert, Ezra Pound – and outlines how their practice of shifting narration and disjointed syntax attempted to spatialize literature, disrupting the idea of a narrative linearity. He positions the techniques and concerns of the Imagists in opposition to the verbiage of the Victorian era, and locates a possible explanation for such a shift in the work of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century German critic Wilhelm Worringer, who theorized that the spiritual stability of an era can be determined by the degree to which its cultural production adheres to naturalistic representation. Worringer's argument, although reductive, posits that naturalistic representation, particularly in the plastic arts, arises from cultures that have a harmonized relationship with the cosmos, and thus delight in representing the order they find themselves in. Example periods cited are ancient Greece, the

Italian Renaissance, and Western Europe at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Non-naturalistic representation, conversely, springs from cultures with a confused relationship to the cosmos, and who thus delight in the transformation of nature into lines and planes, if not scientific then simplified representation that allows them an escape from the external world. Examples of art from these perturbed periods are Egyptian monumental sculpture, Byzantine art, and most of the work produced during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Naturalistic style is characterized by perspective and depth; non-naturalistic style is characterized by shifting vantage points and surface (Frank 71).

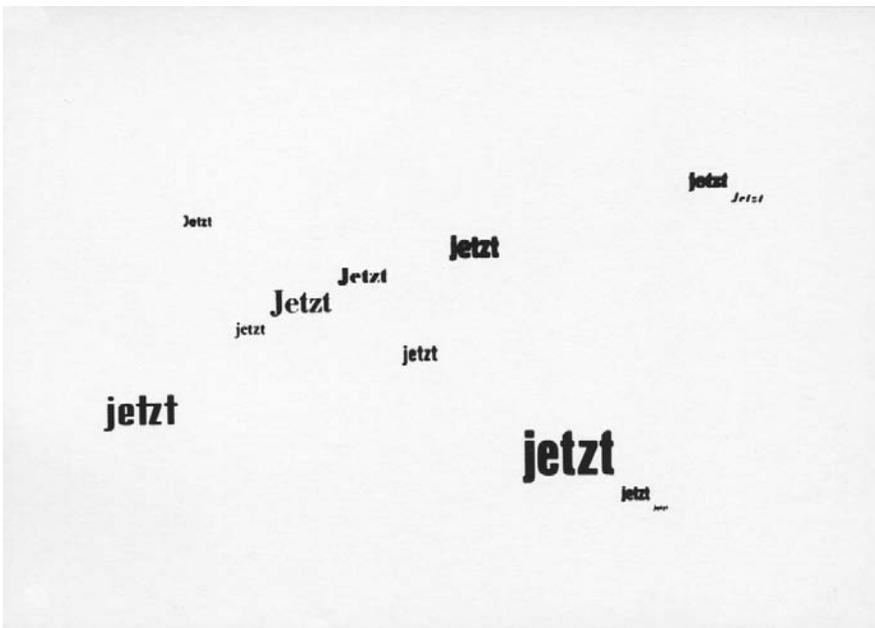
Frank cites Pound's *Cantos* to argue his point about the obliteration of the conventional idea of time-space, as the work juxtaposes ancient, Renaissance, and modern references in no discernible progressive order. Languages – Greek, French, Italian, and Chinese – appear beside each other in a collapsing of geography and tradition. This technique is a disruption of the literary analogue of Renaissance perspective, as is the work of Woolf, in a text like *To the Lighthouse*, or Joyce, in a text like *Ulysses*. The unfolding of a narrative does not, in these works, follow an order that allows for the comfortable positioning of a reader:

Past and present are apprehended spatially, locked in a timeless unity that, while it may accentuate surface differences, eliminates any feeling of sequence by the very act of juxtaposition. Ever since the Renaissance, modern man has cultivated both the objective visual imagination (the ability to portray space) and the objective historical imagination (the ability to apprehend chronological time); both have now been abandoned. (76)

Modern literature aims for a space of simultaneity rather than one of causal progression, what Marshall McLuhan argues is an acoustic space rather than a visual space. In a footnote at the end of his essay, Frank notes that some critics' objections to his argument insist, in lockstep with Lessing, on the time-based nature of literature. Frank responds: "I could not agree more. But this has not stopped modern writers from working out techniques to achieve the impossible – as

much as possible” (76).

Concrete poetry's space complicates Frank's space. Its resistance to standard ideas of poetry and the book position it somewhere beyond modernism – in spite of the explicitly stated influence of writers such as Ezra Pound, James Joyce and Guillaume Apollinaire – functioning within what Rosalind Krauss might refer to as an “expanded field” of poetry. But examining concrete poetry in light of Frank's understanding of how space functions in literature allows us to situate the work historically. If non-naturalistic representation is a sign of a confused relationship to the cosmos, it is easy to identify in a literature that departs so drastically from conventional form the anxiety that came in the wake the nuclear bomb and cold war posturing. On a different level, the degree to which the disruption of the literary analog of Renaissance perspective – the



**Figure 5.1.**  
**Gerhard Rühm. “Jetzt.”**

poetic line, and to a lesser extent, the page – appears in concrete poetry to be beyond the most radical time-space experiments of Pound's *Cantos*. The Austrian concrete poet Gerhard Rühm's 1958 placard poem “Jetzt” is an example of a poem that deals explicitly with both

visual and literary perspective, and of the connection between time and space that Lessing's *Laocoön* attempts to treat programmatically (see fig. 5.1). The poem presents the word *Jetzt*, which is German for “now,” in various different font sizes and typefaces, some beginning with an uppercase “J,” some with a lowercase. The idea of a stable present is confounded by the

spatial understanding of “now” as a fleeting, shifting time index, one that contradicts itself as soon as it signifies: *now*, once read, becomes *then*, in a constant coming into being and passing away that the layout of the poem encourages. Making use of both the idea of perspective, in the larger words occupying the foreground and the smaller words the background, as well as the idea of font-size corresponding to volume, a strategy implemented by the poetic and graphic avant-gardes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the poem refuses to provide the reader / viewer with a fixed position in the way that a conventional poetic line would, or a photograph or perspectival painting would: no representation of “Jetzt” could be any more “now,” or *present*, to use a pun, than any of the other representations. As such it evokes the experience of simultaneity in a more effective manner than Pound or his contemporaries, although in this case with a more explicitly temporal reference.

The various typefaces in Rühm's poem position it within a culture of the increased visualization of language, particularly in relation to advertising. Language in advertising was no longer meant to function transparently, but to communicate a disruption of standardized lines and representation. Words referred to themselves, in an attempt to stand on their own, creating a new poetics that was put to great use by developers of *brands*. In this sense the term “jetzt” gains greater meaning by parodying the consumerist desire to be up to date – the modernist “make it new” comes to ground in post-WWII consumer culture as “buy it new.” The dizzying assault of the various “jetzt”s performs the anxiety of the consumer, to whom history simply means out of style. The drastically altered mediascape that arose at mid-century as a result of the rise of electronic media is what led Marshall McLuhan to theorize the experience of space as acoustic rather than visual. As the media critic Richard Cavell puts it: “To combine a notion of space as socially produced with an inquiry into the technologies of spatial production is to work towards a social theory of the production of space. McLuhan sought to examine not only how

society produces space but also how technologies of space produce society” (Cavell 30).

McLuhan's position is that the technology of the book since Gutenberg, and the rise in literacy the printing press allowed for, has emphasized a visual understanding of space, as ordered and linear. With the development of electronic media, however, ideas of spatial order are destabilized, resulting in a collapsing of time and space.<sup>1</sup> Voices become disembodied via telephony and sound recording; bodies become disarticulated by photography and film. Renaissance perspective and the printed page are replaced by a media environment that demands a new proprioception. While it might seem counterintuitive to apply the term “acoustic” to visual poetry, it becomes applicable when referring to the understanding of space on which the work relies. The Noigandres group's “Plano-Pilôto para Poesia Concreta” [1958] refers to this new spatial understanding:

Concrete Poetry: product of a critical evolution of forms. Assuming that the historical cycle of verse (as formal-rhythmical unit) is closed, concrete poetry begins by being aware of graphic space as structural agent. [...]

Concrete Poetry: tension of things-words in space-time. Dynamic structure: multiplicity of concomitant movements. (in Solt 71-2)<sup>2</sup>

This early and influential text, which is an amalgam of the Noigandres' theoretical writing in the preceding years, outlines a development of space beyond that of the line of verse and emphasizes ideas of movement and simultaneity in place of fixed perspective and progressive, causal relationships. Rühm's text, from the same year, is exemplary.

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<sup>1</sup> McLuhan was a critic of print media and its ordering effects, but he nevertheless continued to write books about space, though while concurrently producing films, sound recordings, and television programs to distribute his ideas. His books after *Understanding Media* were, however, examples of books written *against* the idea of the book, and made use of many of the graphic techniques implemented by concrete poetry. For an exhaustive and convincing treatment of McLuhan as book-artist, see Chapter 5 of Richard Cavell's *McLuhan in Space: A Cultural Geography*.

<sup>2</sup> The link between the Noigandres poets and the theories of McLuhan is strengthened by the fact that Decio Pignatari translated McLuhan's *Understanding Media* into Portuguese (*Os meios de comunicação como extensões do homem*. Sao Paulo: Cultrix, 1969).

Presenting an alternative understanding of space, but one that still emphasizes its preferred position over the temporal in 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural production, Frederic Jameson, in “Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” the 1984 essay for *New Left Review* that he would later expand into a book, identifies a rupture between an idea of the modern and its end in the late 1950s or early 1960s, instigated by post-colonial uprisings, massive national reconstruction projects, the rise of the superpowers, and the initiation of the cold war. He offers a defence of his periodizing method by arguing that postmodernism is better conceived as a cultural dominant than a style. This approach pre-empts any protest that the techniques he might identify as characteristic of postmodern cultural production – such as the use of popular culture in high art contexts, or the fragmentation of the subject – have already been put to extensive use by modernist writers and painters; this is the type of protest that usually results in the separation of the work from its historical contingencies. A similar reasoning might be offered in response to those who claim concrete poetry is as old as the first written symbol, or that it remains a viable poetic category for contemporary poets. These positions, as I argue in my introductory chapter, serve to elucidate a literary style, but impede a greater understanding of the movement's reasons for coming into being, or for its expiration.

As Jameson points out near the end of his essay, in the section dealing with his theories of cognitive mapping, humans' perception of the world changes over time, and those changes have material effects on culture and the organization of living. It is a point that might seem obvious, especially for a historical dialectician, but Jameson makes an effort to shift attention away from the temporal and toward the spatial, performing a critique Marshall McLuhan had spent much of the 1960s and 70s enacting extensively in his theories and book work. Jameson uses the development of cartography from maps of coastlines to larger regions, to the globe in its entirety, and then to the representation of curved lines on a flat map as examples of technological

advances which provide a shift in the way people relate to their spaces: “how technologies of space produce society” (Cavell 30). The time period Jameson identifies as the emergence of postmodernism is marked not only by a rapid increase in communication, but also by a new visual representation of the globe in the form of photographs from outer space. This visualization has the double effect, as I argue in chapter three, of drastically altering the human scale so integral to the modernist imagination, while developing a new understanding of the Earth's geography.

If modernism as a cultural dominant was marked by a consideration of time, specifically the march toward some better, mechanized future, postmodernism is defined by space. Grand narratives become grand spectacles; the synchronic overtakes the diachronic. Jameson's primary metaphor for the postmodern space is the Bonaventure Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, and he foregrounds his inability to critique the structure in the lexicon with which he is accustomed to speaking about architecture: volume, line, order, etc.. What he speaks about instead is a deracination of the hotel visitors' spatial understanding, how they become disoriented and confused within the interior, and are unable to see into the building from the exterior thanks to its reflective glass surface. Jameson's understanding of the influence of postmodernism on culture comes out of his observation of architecture, which, he argues, more than any other cultural sector is tied to the economical shifts from the sphere of the nation and its industries to the accelerated wealth production of multinational corporations within finance capital. He points to the headquarters of multinational corporations, whose architectural style, though hardly homogenous, carries the residue of their moment better than any other medium, and it is these buildings' aesthetic opposition to modernist styles that Jameson reads onto other cultural artefacts: the rise of photography as a fine art medium, for example, or the linguistic disjunction found in language poetry representing the breaking down of a unified subject position (Jameson 63-4). A similar experience of deracination and frustration of disciplinary tools of analysis greets

the literary critic in her / his encounter with concrete poetry. Ideas of language are imploded; there is no standard measure of meter, form, or syntax. Imagery becomes image, literally. The modernist subject disappears, and national and linguistic borders become blurred.

Mike Davis's response to Jameson's essay, printed in the subsequent issue of *New Left Review*, is vicious in its encapsulation of Jameson's argument, dismissing the idea of a depthless present, or the proposition that architecture can be read as directly influenced by economic structures. Davis bristles at the idea of reading history through culture; his concern with the Bonaventure Hotel is not its aesthetic or style, but its position in the recently redeveloped downtown core of Los Angeles, a city that Davis argues has systematically excluded the Asian and Hispanic lower classes which have traditionally lived and worked around the Bunker Hill district. Davis sees the link between the hotel, which was built primarily for the rich and upper-middle class, with its boutiques, restaurants, and ethos of spatial self-containment – there is no need to venture into the dangerous, polluted city when everything you desire is within the hotel structure – in more traditionally Marxist terms, with the interests of the propertied superseding those of the working class, and doing so via cronyism and corruption. He sees in the idea of postmodernism only a greater entrenchment of class separation, and dismisses Jameson's call for a theorization of postmodernism as a site for collective organization or for a return of the didactic function of art. He rejects the dialectical argument that links culture to economics in favour of a territorial argument that presumes that what happens in Los Angeles begins and ends in Los Angeles. It is a strange but understandable reaction, however extreme, to a theoretical model that must have troubled those thinkers who had come to understand space and politics within the modernist tradition.<sup>3</sup> From the perspective of contemporary discourse, however, the resistance to a reading which links a local to the processes of globalization, both in economic and cultural

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<sup>3</sup> Jameson includes himself in this category, and sees it as the primary reason why he has such difficulty understanding the space of the Bonaventure. He uses that difficulty as a heuristic, though, which leads him to the formulation of a postmodern understanding of space.

domains, seems particularly naive, and is one that has impeded an approach to culture that identifies networks beyond the national, an approach that is necessary for even a basic understanding of the international concrete poetry movement.

David Harvey, in his book *The Condition of Postmodernity*, occupies a middle ground



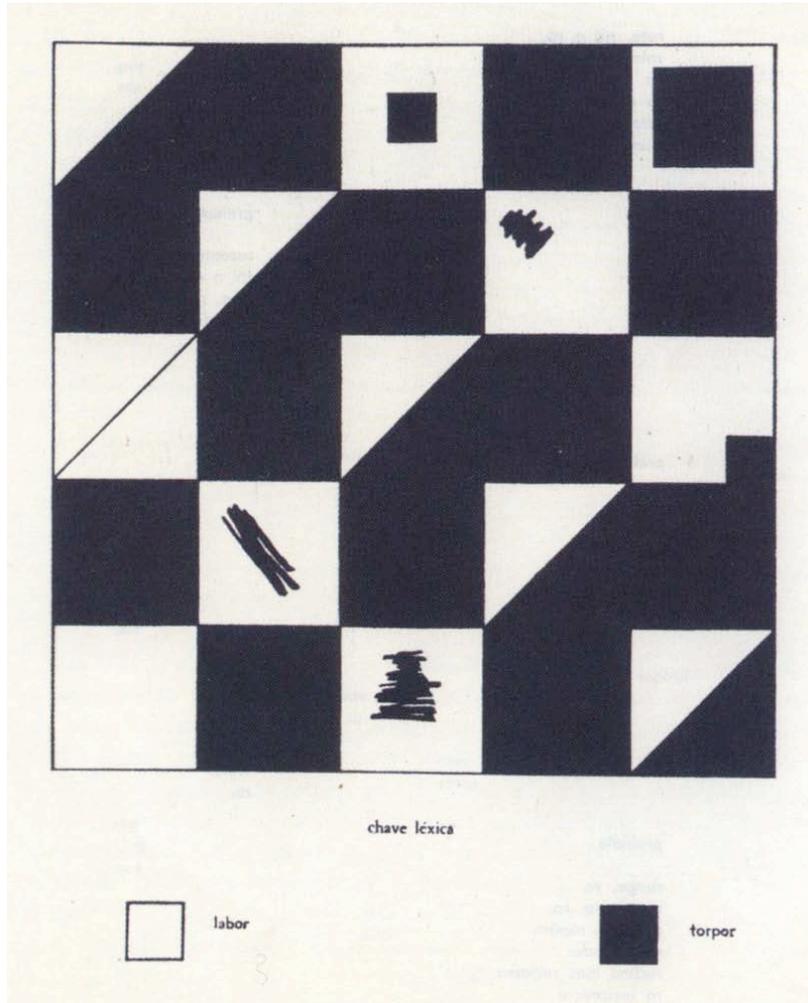
**Figure 5.2.**

**Decio Pignatari. “ChriSto e a soluçãõ.”**

between Davis and Jameson, taking seriously both the economic and cultural sectors as contributing to a particular historical understanding of the world. He sympathizes with Davis’s concern over place, but warns against positioning it in opposition to the new modes of post-Fordist capitalism: “The assertion of any place-bound identity has to rest at some point on the motivational power of tradition. It is difficult, however, to maintain any sense of historical continuity in the face of all the flux and ephemerality of flexible accumulation” (303). He offers a similar refutation of Jameson’s emphasis on cultural representations of postmodernism by warning against the fusion of aesthetic and social understanding of space, noting that it is not just in architecture that we can identify the effects of new forms of global capital in the very transformation of urban infrastructure to attract investment, and that postmodernist space also

produces geographies of uneven development.<sup>4</sup>

A characteristic of postmodern cultural production that also seemed to irritate those with



a modernist sensibility is the presence of a populism where pure order once was. In architecture, Jameson notes that the buildings take on a form that is meant to impress and entertain rather than shape and motivate. The postmodern architects, he argues in agreement with Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi, and Stephen Izenour, did in fact learn from Las Vegas. The paradigm of the architect / artist as genius is replaced by

**Figure 5.3.**  
**Ronaldo Azeredo's. "Labor torpor."**

the market as genius; the idea of history as linear and progressivist is refuted. Similarly, in concrete poetry there is a tension between the popular and austere styles that makes it difficult to position as either modern or postmodern; it is much better approached as both. There is a general trend in the Brazilians' work, at least, that moves from clean, ordered works that approach the popular in the form of the poster, or in reference to consumer goods, like Decio Pignatari's "Beba Coca Cola" or "LIFE," towards a more literally popular mode of poetic composition, one

<sup>4</sup> For a critique of both Harvey's and Jameson's approach to postmodernist space, particularly in regard to feminist cultural practice and theory, see Rosalyn Deutsche's *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*.

which implements photographic printing techniques or more illustrative methods, utilizing structures beyond the semantic possibilities of verbal language. Examples of the latter types of poem are Pignatari's "Chri\$to e a solução"(1963), Augusto de Campos's "Ôlho Por Ôlho" (1964), or Ronaldo Azeredo's semiotic poem "labor torpor"(1964) (see fig. 5.2-3). Pignatari even worked in the advertising sector, and has talked about how, at the same time he was writing concrete poems, he was creating word designs and acronyms for corporations and governmental departments, like LUBRAX, a word he came up with for the Brazilian national oil corporation Petrobras, and which refers to a type of motor oil (Donguy 451). He also used concrete poetry methods to compose an advertisement for a pharmaceutical company's anti-diarrhoeal medicine in which the phrase "PERTURBAÇÕES INTESTINAIS" (Digestive Troubles) is gradually squeezed together into a cohesive lump before being replaced by the encroaching brand name of the medicine, "DISENFÓRMIO" (1963) (see fig 5.4). In an interview in 1992, Pignatari claims with some pride that he and fellow concrete poet Luis Angelo Pinto were the first poets to work in the advertising industry in Brazil (Donguy 451). Though it was not necessarily rare for graphic designers to practice concrete poetry – Marcel Wyss and Diter Rot, Eugen Gomringer's collaborators on *Spirale*, a proto-concrete journal, were both trained and practising graphic designers<sup>5</sup> – the movement of a poet in the opposite direction speaks to the relationship concrete poetry wished to develop with the spectacle of contemporary global culture, even in its basest forms.<sup>6</sup> Explaining why this relationship might have exiled concrete poets from the dominant modernist critical apparatus, Jameson notes that postmodern cultural producers

no longer 'quote' the materials, the fragments and motifs, of a mass or popular culture, as Joyce (and Flaubert) began to do, or Mahler; they somehow

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<sup>5</sup> In this they parallel the Italian and Russian Futurists.

<sup>6</sup> See Max Bense's discussion of an advertisement for Dubonnet in comparison to a poem by Eugen Gomringer in chapter one (19).

incorporate them to the point where many of our older critical and evaluative categories (founded precisely on the radical differentiation of modernist and mass culture) no longer seem functional. (“The Politics of Theory” 57)

It would be inaccurate to accuse concrete poetry of a cynicism or capitulation, especially given



Figure 5.4.

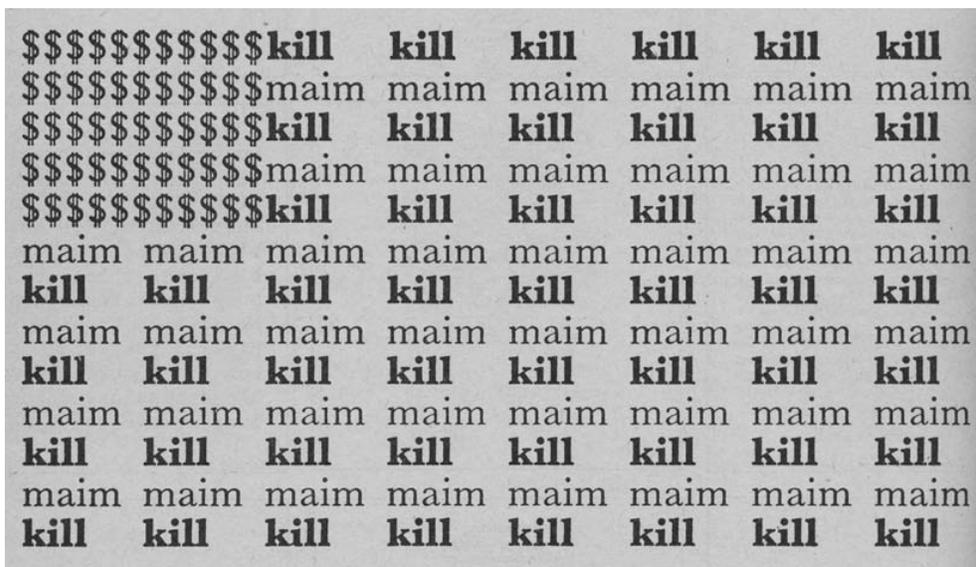
Decio Pignatari. “Disenformio [advertisement].”

perhaps, about the regularity of repeated words as lines of visual composition, especially the bold letters in “kill” against the regular letters in “maim” which is meant to evoke the red and white lines of the American flag. Likewise, the title of the piece, which could be pronounced “skill,” can refer to how efficient the United States had become at warfare. And perhaps the visual energy of the “\$” in place of the stars is meant to distract the reader from noticing there are fifty-five dollar signs replacing the fifty stars: a comment on the perceived colonial project of American-style capitalism or a compositional decision made to balance the image? It is possible that Sharkey's technique responds to what he saw as the blatant crimes of a military and

the history of the Brazilians' political work, but it would be just as irresponsible to believe that all reference to the lexicon of advertising is oppositional in the modernist tradition of the avant-garde. The poem “\$ kill” (1969), by the British poet John Sharkey, is visual in the simplest terms, mimetic and obviously positioned against the American imperialist state and its wars in Indochina. There is little else to see in “\$ Kill” (1969) than a reduced politics of protest, no doubt relevant at the time but not interesting as a poetic response (see fig 5.5). One could talk,

perhaps, about the regularity of repeated words as lines of visual composition, especially the bold

economic superpower, but rarely are things so simple, and it might be giving the poet too much credit to label his work a parody of the mass protests of late 1960s, a critique of the one to one relationship of image and word with a simplified, spectacularized good (socialism) versus bad (capitalism) politics. While it is true that the process of reading and comprehension had accelerated beyond early 20<sup>th</sup> century practices by the time of Sharkey's work, and that part of the project of concrete poetry from its early theorizations was to facilitate quick comprehension of poems across languages, a reduced poetic language was never meant to result in a reduced



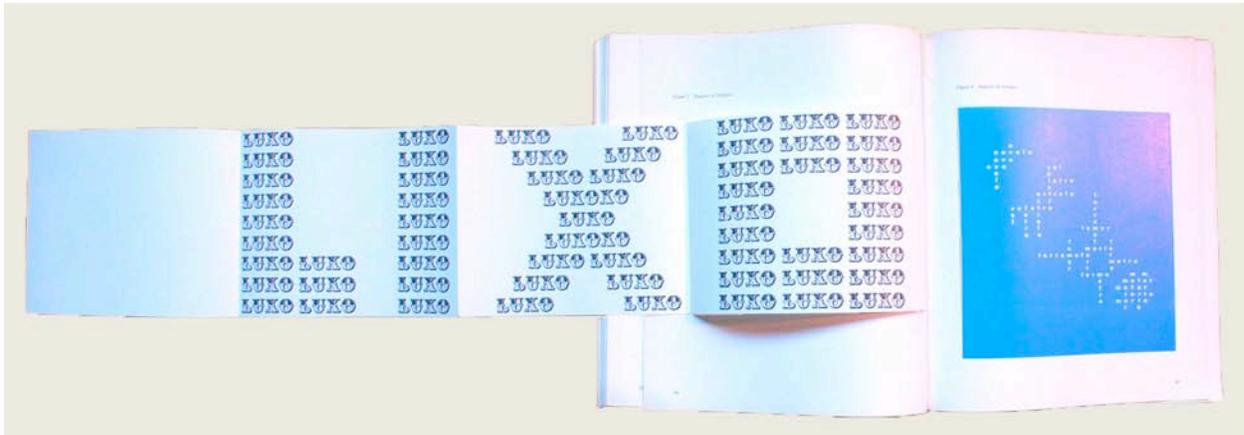
**Figure 5.5.**  
**John Sharkey. “Maim Kill.”**

understanding of  
the complexity of  
ideas. For an  
example of a  
protest poem that  
follows the  
understanding of  
concrete  
composition, one  
need only look at

Augusto de Campos's “Luxo Lixo” (1967) or Hansjörg Mayer's “USA” (1965), both of which use the structures of words to extract immanent critiques of social and geo-political power relations, the former dealing with the unequal distribution of wealth in developmentalist Brazil, and the latter with the cultural, economic, and military presence of the United States in post-WWII Europe (see fig. 5.6 and 4.3).

When looking at works like Franz Mon's in *Et 2* or Luigi Ferro's “Iconogram,” Jameson’s observations about how disjunction characterizes postmodern poetics become clearer; the position of the reader is physically fractured, and the text displays little information other than

the difficulty that comes with an unstable point of view, or field of representation (see fig. 3.11 and 5.7). This is not the collapsing of time and space Frank identifies in modernist literature, but



**Figure 5.6.**

**Augusto de Campos. “Luxo Lixo.”**

an explosion of them. Modernist simultaneity privileges time – everything appears in the present moment – while postmodernist simultaneity privileges space – everywhere is not now, but now is everywhere, in the manner of Harvey’s “time-space compression” – which makes it a ubiquity more than a simultaneity. This ubiquity rises from the uniformity of cultural forces in the world cities vying for attention in the flexible accumulation of late capitalism. Thus, in Jameson's example of a disjunctive poetics – Bob Perelman's “China,” a poem composed by the poet by using captions from a book of photographs of China he found while walking in San Francisco's Chinatown – China is no longer a place or culture, but has become dispersed via immigration patterns and modes of cultural reproduction. The concrete poems that utilize graphic techniques of collage or *décollage* operate within a similar spatial understanding. Jameson identifies a flatness within the cultural production of postmodernism, which he argues is a result of the rise of photography as the dominant commercial and artistic medium. He positions Andy Warhol's silkscreen painting “Diamond Dust Shoes” against Vincent Van Gogh's painting of peasant boots, making the point that Warhol's mechanically produced image does not invite a viewer into

it as much as the painting's record of human meditation and skill, and as a result there is reduced opportunity for engagement (Jameson, "Postmodernism" 59-60). As I have noted in chapter two, Marjorie Perloff traces a similar trajectory from the text-laden advertisements of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to those advertisements which are primarily, if not completely images, and makes the case for its effect on poetic production. Jameson writes in agreement:

The waning of affect <sup>7</sup>[...] might also [be] characterized [...] as the waning of the great high-modernist thematics of time and temporality, the elegiac mysteries of *durée* and of memory (something to be understood fully as a category of literary criticism associated as much with high modernism as with the works themselves). We have often been told, however, that we now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic, and I think it is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism proper. (63-4)

Concrete poetry, therefore, belongs somewhere between Andy Warhol's shoes and Perelman's poem, utilizing the flatness and simultaneity of the photographic image to herald the erosion of the unified, monadic ego of bourgeois capitalism. With that erosion, however, comes the insufficiency of critical lexicons to deal with structures beyond their purview: poetic Bonaventura Hotels. Jameson continues his metaphor of the psychological shift of subject in his description of Perelman's poem as schizophrenic, though he is aware of the problem of co-opting a psychologistic category for a critical project:

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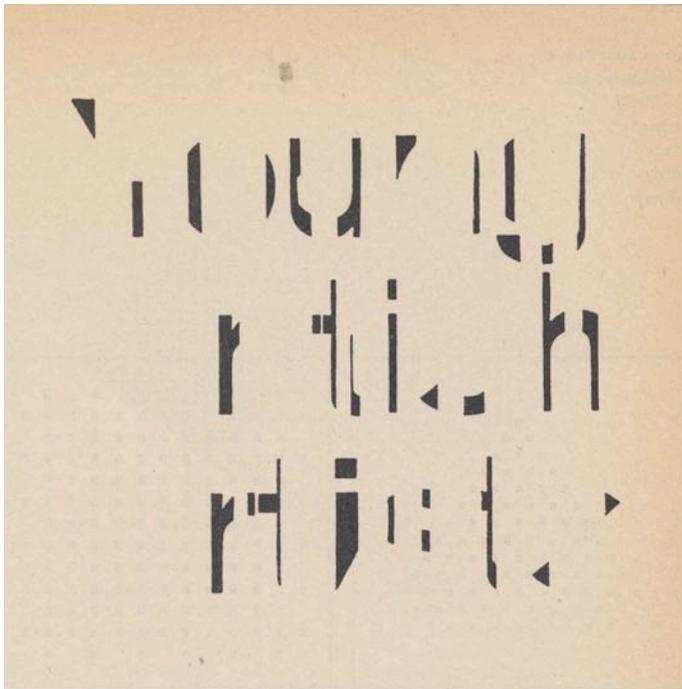
<sup>7</sup> The concept of the "waning of affect" has been taken up and refuted by a large body of scholarship in the past decade, specifically in the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Brian Massumi. Jameson himself has expressed regret of his use of the term "affect," and explained that he should have used the term "emotion," which implies a structured understanding of human responses that modernism imagined. Affect, on the other hand, is much more nuanced, and takes at its base the idea that "feelings" are socially constructed and historically situated (Jameson, "Postmodernism Revisited").

The way in which what I have been calling schizophrenic disjunction or *écriture*, when it becomes generalized as a cultural style, ceases to entertain a necessary relationship to the morbid content we associate with terms like schizophrenia, and becomes available for more joyous intensities, for precisely that euphoria which we saw displacing the older affects of anxiety and alienation (74).

The work of art, like the modernist subject, is now fractured, but the modernists who might panic at the untethering of a cultural project need not lose all hope. Jameson sees what Mike Davis cannot, the potential for a new understanding of the space of culture and the world that functions beyond the categories of modernism, of industrial and national development.

The didactic function of art is something that, according to Jameson, has been largely neglected by modernist critics, but can be positively located in the spatial transformations of postmodernist work; the spaces of postmodernism can be used to develop a new understanding of the globe. What he calls hyperspace, which replaces the temporal dimension modernism was so concerned with, is best approached not with a panicked nostalgia, but an openness to new organizations and structures. Again echoing Marshall McLuhan's work, this time on the bodily ramifications of electronic media, Jameson writes: "The newer architecture therefore [...] stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, as yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions" ("Postmodernism" 80). The same imperative is in concrete poetry and visual art, as well, though it comes earlier than Jameson's examples, and has been historically neglected. Concrete poetry required an altered reader, one who could use the skills developed through living in an increasingly mediated environment to comprehend language that rejected the order of the conventional poetic line, or the space of the page.

Kenneth Goldsmith, in his short essay “From (Command) Line to (Iconic) Constellation” (2001) argues that the attention that has recently been paid to concrete poetry – referring primarily to the Yale Conference in honour of Haroldo de Campos in 1999, and the exhibition



**Figure 5.7.**  
**Luigi Ferro. “Iconogram.”**

*Poetry Plastique*, curated by Charles Bernstein at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York in 2001 – can be understood by its proximity to the development of the internet, which delivers on concrete poetry's promise of a global, networked space. He says the idea came to him while listening to Decio Pignatari speak about the project of concrete poetry in Brazil and realizing that the lexicon Pignatari was using was

similar to that which is often used to describe the experience of the internet: interface, delivery, content, multi-media, distribution, etc. (Goldsmith n. p.). He notes that we, as readers and subjects produced by the internet, are now used to seeing texts in different formats, on different machines (standard monitors, cell phones, public information screens, ebook readers). More people now pay attention to fonts because of the rise of the computer; anyone who has had to create an event notification knows how fonts and layout contribute to meaning. Both students and teachers are likely conscious of how language can be manipulated visually to adhere to a specific page length, either via spacing, kerning, or font selection. To visually stretch an argument to appear longer, replace Times New Roman with Courier. To condense an argument into a determined page length, switch to Arial Narrow. The same strategies are often achieved, in ways that were once the trade secrets of typesetters, graphic designers and contract writers, by

the manipulation of font size. This is a relatively recent body of knowledge for the word processing public, but the emphasis on the space of the page and the shift between typesetting was at the fore of concrete poetry. Goldsmith points to the ways in which poems were published in several forms in different publications as anticipating the manipulation of language experienced by citizens of the computer age. Decio Pignatari's "LIFE", for example, appeared over six pages in Emmett Williams' anthology, on a single page in Mary Ellen Solt's, and as an eight page pamphlet in *Noigandres*. Likewise, Ronaldo Azeredo's "Velocidade" appears in an ornate, serifed font in Williams', but in Solt's is presented in a font much closer to its original, Futura.

Goldsmith cites Max Bense's argument, from his 1965 manifesto "Concrete Poetry," that concrete poetry does not separate languages, but unit@s them, as having specific relevance to the current global, cyberspatial condition. He notes that "Bense's insistence on a combinatory universally readable language predicts the types of distributive systems that the web enables. It insists on a poetics of pan-internationality or non-nationality, which finds its expression in the de-centred, constellation-oriented global networks where no one geographic entity has sole possession of content" (n. pag.). Goldsmith's optimism here – though it sounds dated, just nine years later, coming before the monetization of the internet and debates over net neutrality and digital piracy – argues forcefully for the re-examination of concrete poetry within larger cultural and historical contexts. In this sense concrete poetry parallels the concerns and conditions of a similarly neglected form within visual art, and one which operated contemporaneously with it: technology art. An examination of how technology art operated within its own spatial parameters will aid in understanding how cultural spaces operated differently at the end of a particular formulation of modernism.

### **Technology Art**

Whereas concrete poetry took up the nascent shift from the page to the screen in its

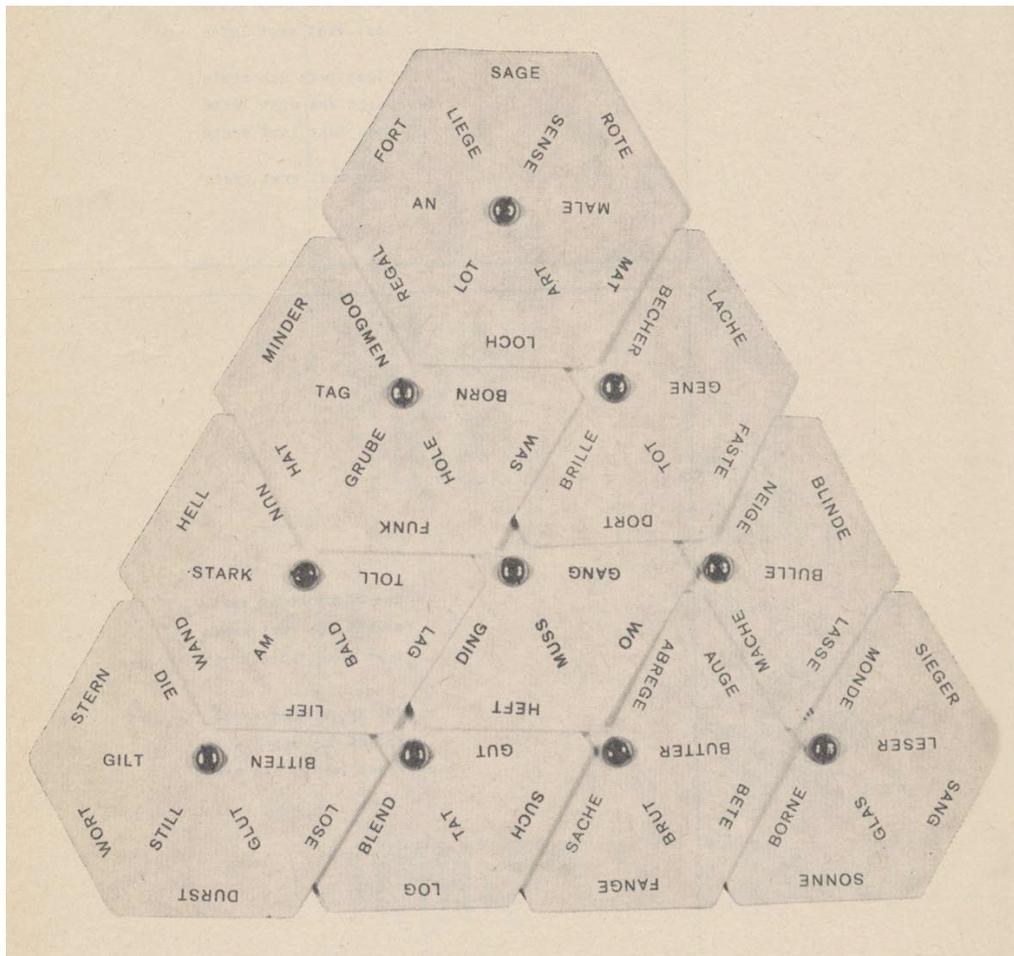
composition, technology art made a similar transformation in the realm of visual art. It poses difficulties for critical reception in much the same way as concrete poetry, deracinating the gallery visitor and confounding discourses of composition and sites of meaning. The critical project of technology art historian Edward Shanken recuperates the electronic, or cybernetic moment in art production that has been overshadowed by the contemporaneous, much more successful language-based conceptualism. In his essay “Art in the Information Age: Technology and Conceptual Art,” Shanken points to an exhibition not often mentioned in discussions of art and technology, *The Machine: As Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*, organized by Pontus Hultén at the Museum of Modern Art in 1968, an exhibition Hultén described “as a simultaneously nostalgic and futuristic exhibition on art and mechanical technology” (433). The impetus for the show was the collective feeling that the machine was giving way to electronics, and thus the space the machine occupied – traditionally the factory, farm, or some other specific geography of production – was being phased out in favour of a more dispersed, “post-industrial” space. This shift, from the mechanical to the electronic, is another example for the spatial hinge between modernity and postmodernity. The same year, Jasia Reichardt, who had curated the *concrete poetry britain canada united states* exhibition at the Institute for Contemporary Art in London in 1966, organized *Cybernetic Serendipity*, a show that included poets, artists, and engineers, and which would travel to Washington, D.C. and San Francisco in 1969-70. Reichardt's show would prove to be a primary influence on the two major exhibitions of technological art that were mounted in New York in 1970: Kynaston McShine's *Information*, at the Museum for Modern Art, and Jack Burnham's *Software*, at the Jewish Museum. It is Burnham's show that Shanken sees as the most interesting of them all, however, specifically in its embrace of software as a model for human interaction. He writes:

*Software* was predicated [...] on the ideas of 'software' and 'information technology' as metaphors for art. Burnham conceived of 'software' as parallel to

the aesthetic principles, concepts or programs that underlie the formal embodiment of actual art objects, which in turn parallel 'hardware.' In this regard, he interpreted contemporary experimental art practices, including conceptual art, as predominantly concerned with the software aspect of aesthetic production.

(434)

This passage offers an entrance into the relationship between technology art and conceptual art,



both of which have significant crossover and engagement with concrete poets and poetics. All three movements interrogated the ideological structures of art and literary production and

**Figure 5.8.**  
**Andre Thomkins. "Dogmat Mot."**

reception by questioning the formal relationship solidified within modernist discourse, and sought to reposition the relationship: technology art in the metaphor of electronic networks, conceptual art in the realm of linguistic positivism, and concrete poetry in the treatment of language as material.

In an essay in *Artforum* in 1968, Burnham writes of his concern over the growing polarity between high art and what he refers to as unobjects, or information-technology based artworks, and how each fits into an increasingly information-saturated culture. He compares the “‘new car’ of the automobile stylist” with the “syndrome of formalist invention in art, where ‘discoveries’ are made through visual manipulation,” emphasizing that repetition was passing for innovation at a time when technological innovation, in the form of software language, offered a real opportunity to alter the language and production of culture. As evidence he points to the practices of the artists Ad Reinhardt and Donald Judd, and the writer Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose attempts to describe their works as completely as possible, in spite of the risk of banality or loss of a literary style, he connects to the language that programmed the modern computer. Locating the root of this descriptive practice in Judd's writings between 1962 and 1965, Burnham argues that it “resembles what a computer programmer would call an entity's 'list structure' or all the enumerated properties needed to *physically* rebuild an object” (31). He gives the example of Robert Morris's contribution to the 68<sup>th</sup> American show in Chicago in 1966, which was two sans-serif L-shaped forms that had shown in New York the previous year. Burnham explains that the fact that Morris sent the plans to the Chicago museum's carpenters instead of shipping the forms, which would have been more expensive than rebuilding them, proves that “in the context of a systems esthetic possession of a privately fabricated work is no longer important. Accurate information takes priority over history and geographical location” (31). Although Morris is linked with conceptual art, not technology art, it is his mode of production in this instance, rather than the actual work produced, that Burnham links to a call for future art production which would emphasize greater technological interaction between artists and institutions, as well as audiences.

Such a radical break in art production would face serious opposition, of course. Even Sol LeWitt's definition of conceptual art, as an idea machine that makes the work, still has as its

ultimate embodiment a physical work of art. Likewise, as I outline in chapter four, even those artists who made nothing were still able to sell their ideas via gallerists like Seth Siegelau, who marketed objects of mass production (xeroxed pages, for example) as limited editions. On the whole, conceptual artists resisted computer technology as a site for their ideas, although they widely utilized the contemporaneous shifts in technologies of reproduction: the photocopier, telex, and snapshot photograph were all central to the distribution of much of the work. There are various concrete poems which occupy a middle ground between technology art and conceptual art methods, as composition that begins in a systematic approach ends up in a physical work, and encourages the production of further work: Haroldo de Campos's "Alea I – Variacões Semánticas" is one example; Swiss artist and poet Andre Thomkins' "Dogmat-Mot" (1955), in which various discs with words that function in German, French and English are attached to each other in order that an exponentially large sequence of cross-linguistic phrases might occur, is another (see fig. 5.8).<sup>8</sup>

Johanna Drucker is enthusiastic about Burnham's understanding of material as giving way to the systemic, and about his development of a "sculptural practice grounded in relationships" ("Interactive" 43). She agrees with Shanken about Burnham's approach to software, arguing that the difference between Burnham and McShine's exhibitions is that *Software* was about participation, while *Information* was about control (44). *Information* was better funded and had more institutional support. Its roster of artists drew heavily from the current stock of conceptual artists. *Software* was more experimental, and suffered for it; the exhibition ended up grossly over budget and had technical difficulties. The reception of both shows, both at the time and

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<sup>8</sup> The date of this work is disputed. According to Emmett Williams, who was a member of the Material Group in Darmstadt in the late 1950s with Thomkins, Daniel Spoerri, and Diter Rot, Thomkins made the piece in 1955. Williams uses this date in his *Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, where he publishes a list of the words with an explanation of how they would function on the actual word-disc object. He includes a note that "This 'game' for writing, speaking and reading several languages simultaneously – with all the attendant ambiguities – was published in 1965 by Galerie der Spiegel in Cologne" (n. pag). In the catalogue for the 1970 Stedelijk Museum exhibition, however, a photograph of the disc object is printed and dated as 1966.

throughout much of the interim, is of a certain character:

Critics opined that [technology-based art] was dominated by the materiality and spectacle of mechanical apparatus, which was anathema to the conceptual project. Technical failures of art and technology exhibitions, like *Software* (which, ironically, was plagued with software problems), contributed to waning public interest, just at the moment that a succession of large, successful exhibitions of conceptual art were mounted. Widespread skepticism towards the military-industrial complex after May 1968 and amidst the Vietnam War, the Cold War and mounting ecological concerns all contributed to problematizing the artistic use of technology – and the production of aesthetic objects in general – within the context of commodity capitalism. (Shanken, “Art in the Information Age” 436)

But there is something in Burnham's approach and in much of technology art that is worthy of recuperation, and it is important to realize that the institutional blitz of the 1970 exhibitions were neither the beginning nor the end of the movement. The British painter and educator Roy Ascott had been trying to fuse painting and cybernetics since the 1950s, and had by 1966 developed the Cybernetic Art Matrix (CAM), a network of artists and thinkers that would be regulated by a sort of social feedback between the members:

CAM was intended to provide a variety of functions, such as facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration between *geographically remote* artists and scientists, providing a pragmatic art education curriculum for the young, and enriching the lives of 'the new leisured class' by enhancing creative behavior and providing amenities and modes of aesthetic play. (Shanken, “Cybernetics” 274; emphasis added)

A similar impulse is present in Reichardt's exhibition *Cybernetic Serendipity*, where displays of poems created by computers and of formulae created to create images are presented side by side,

with no distinction made between the disciplines of the contributors: poet beside scientist, philosopher beside programmer.

In relating the work of this period to the innovations, both social and technological, brought about by internet, Drucker points to Ted Nelson and Ned Woodman's contribution to *Software, Labyrinth*, an interactive catalogue of the exhibition that allowed viewers to determine their own path through an interlinked database of texts, thus choosing their own non-linear narrative that would then be printed out for them (Shanken, "House"). This early use of hypertext heralds the shift of postmodernity described in Jameson's formulation of hyperspace: having replaced the single authorized text with a possibility of exponential texts within a compositional system, the rules of analysis become frustrated. This shift is an important one in the difference between modernism and postmodernism. Whereas modernist literature might have juxtaposed disparate scenes within a narrative structure, the *order* was still determined by a single author, and made solid by authorial intent. In postmodernism, such authority is abandoned to the vicissitudes of a program or system of meaning production, and a certain level of *uncontrol* is aimed for.

The form of Nelson and Woodman's project is not in the record of the printouts, but in the program for the potential production of the texts; it is written in a language that is at once quite simple, from the perspective of a computer programmer, and at the same time inaccessible to everyone else, going far beyond the modernist notion of difficulty in literature. As a result, work such as Nelson and Woodman's cannot be archived in the way that a traditional catalogue of an institutional exhibition might be, in book form with an essay by the curator and photographs of the installation. Although there are images of the software exhibition available, they are insufficient for documenting the participatory character of the exhibition, the very point of which was to challenge the print and image based dominance of art production and criticism. The challenge, it can be argued, was successful inasmuch as the critical legacy of the show has

been relatively small.

### **The Mathematical Way of Thinking**

Computer language therefore becomes one kind of technological Esperanto for a newly imagined community of mechanical subjects. The modernist subject is mathematicized by what Max Bense refers to as the project of “generative aesthetics” in an essay he contributed to Reichardt's exhibition. Bense, a professor of science and philosophy in Germany and a major figure in the Stuttgart concrete poetry scene since 1961, describes generative aesthetics as the “artificial production of probabilities, differing from the norm using theorems and programs” (Bense, “Generative” 58).<sup>9</sup> It is, he argues, “an aesthetics of production which makes possible the methodical production of aesthetic states, by dividing this process into a finite number of distinct and separate steps which are capable of formulation” (Bense 58). His “Statistical Poem” (1966), is an example of this strategy put to action, inasmuch as it takes a series of basic German words and runs them through a system of repetition, presenting the final poem in a block of text that does not adhere to ideas of line breaks or order beyond the compositional system. The words, “*es*” (it), “*ist*” (is), “*wenn*” (if), “*aber*” (but), “*doch*” (still), and “*nicht*” (not) are first presented as a list, then in combinations of two, then three, etc., until the final line, which uses all the words together in a phrase that translates as “but if it is still not” (Bense, “Statistical”; Solt 264). There is of course a tension in the poem's generative process that engages with the expectation of language to express coherent, syntactical meaning, and the last line participates in

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<sup>9</sup> Perhaps to highlight the role of machines in information production and control, Reichardt reprints a newspaper article on the page preceding Bense's essay that is dated 1 April, 1950, and which describes the Washington, D.C. unveiling of a machine the Americans captured from Nazi Germany during the war. Called the *Müllabfuhrwortmaschine*, it is referred to as “Hitler's most deadly secret weapon,” and functions by matching up semantic “entities,” “operators,” and “entity phrases” to develop sentences like “Subversive elements were revealed to be related by marriage to a well-known columnist,” or “Capitalist warmonger is a weak link in atomic security.” The source of the information on the machine is a relocated Nazi scientist whose name, Dr. Krankheit, in its similarity to Walter Cronkite, along with the date and absence of any specific newspaper citation, signals the article is a prank; but it is significant for its display of the types of anxiety around the production of meaning through the development of new, mechanical languages. (Reichardt, *Cybernetics*, Art 56)

the interrogation of language's function. If language can produce meaning without the human, or at least with the human in a reduced form (creating a formula, choosing the material, then implementing the formula), how does that meaning function, and what philosophical implications might it have? The process becomes metalinguistic, and the power of the work comes from not only the reader's frustration with the impeded meaning, but in the desire that impediment produces in her / him to complete the phrases, and thus become an active participant in the production of the poem.

The basis for Bense's approach to composition can be found, like that of the early concrete poets, in the ideas of the concrete artist Max Bill. In Bill's 1949 essay "The Mathematical Way of Thinking in the Visual Art of Our Time," he is not so explicit as to require the fusion of mathematic / mechanical and literary / artistic production, but he does call for a recognition of the role mathematical thought plays in modernist creativity and aesthetics. He responds to those critics who claim that mathematics lacks the emotional charge of aesthetics by emphasizing the need for reason to accompany feeling in art: "It is mankind's [sic] ability to reason which makes it possible to coordinate emotional values in such a way that what we call art ensues" (7). He points to the paintings of Piet Mondrian as a model of the successful removal of what is alien to the medium, specifically the "mere naturalistic replica of [a] subject" through perspective and figurative representation (5). He identifies the flourishing of the mathematical way of thinking in the twentieth century in the work of the Constructivists, which developed along side the proliferation of aerial photography and blueprints related to what Le Corbusier would call the "engineer's aesthetic." At the same time, he notes, "mathematics itself had arrived at a stage of evolution in which the proof of many apparently logical deductions ceased to be demonstrable and theorems were presented that the imagination proved incapable of grasping" (8). Einstein's Theory of Relativity would be the famous example of this type of mathematical shift; the German Bernhard Riemann and the Russians N.I. Lobatschewesky and Janus Bolyai's

refutation of Euclid's Fifth Postulate, which deals with parallel lines and terminal space, would be an earlier, lesser known but no less significant contribution (Whittaker 34). These approaches refute an idea of ordered, rational space, arguing that lines, when experienced on a scale beyond the human – on the level of the cosmos, for example – do not adhere to a conventional understanding of space, much in the same way that electronic media, by connecting disparate geographies, alter the understanding of space produced by the technology of the book, or the alphabet before that.

For Bense, mathematics provides a primary mode of cognition that determines not only spatial understanding, but emotional understanding as well. It allows subjects to apprehend their relationship to their physical surroundings, and therefore influences their appraisal of the “interactions of separate objects, or groups of objects, one to another. And again, since it is mathematics that lends significance to these relationships, it is only a natural step from having perceived them to desiring to portray them. This, in brief, is the genesis of a work of art” (7). However suspicious any claim to identify a genesis of a work of art might seem, Bill's ideas nevertheless had tremendous influence not only within the field of concrete art, but concrete poetry, as well, both through the work of Eugen Gomringer, his secretary at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, and his influence on the visual artists associated with the Noigandres group, including the “pualistas” Waldemar Cordeiro and Hermelindo Fiaminghi, who were accused by the Rio de Janeiro neo-concretists of being too rigid in their devotion to Max Bill's teaching (Mammí 22). While his examples are heavily weighted toward the visual realm, it is clear that certain poets followed his position, replacing the syntactic line with a grid and emphasizing the geometry of letters and their relationships to each other beyond semantic meaning. Bill's presentation of mathematics as a universal language also made its way into the transnational impulses of various poets' critical writing, as well, most explicitly – unsurprisingly – in the early texts of Gomringer.



imagined difficulties like key jams and programming errors in order to illustrate how computer technology and human creativity might influence and struggle with one another, need to be distinguished from projects like that of Robin McKinnon Wood and Margaret Masterman, who offer as an example of a computer poem a text that resulted from a programming bug that they could not replicate. It came out of a program meant to combine the physical with the literary to produce poetry mechanically: the program was meant to divide “continuous text into 'Phrasings' corresponding to the rhythmic divisions of speech or spoken prose. These units usually include two stress-points and a terminal intonation feature, forming breath-groups which are also sense-groups” (Wood and Masterman 55). This type of experiment is perhaps better positioned within the history of automata and linguistic standardization,<sup>10</sup> however, and displays the common practice, pointed to by Johanna Drucker, of engineers developing pleasing or curious results (more commonly in digital imagery, but also in language) and determining it 'art.' Artists and poets, though they might use technology, are aware that aesthetics is a discourse within history, and their work relies upon that knowledge (Drucker, “Interactive” 40). For early technology artists, it was the metaphor of software and networks that offered more promise and excitement than the images or texts the process produced.

In a text that examines the history of the role of the computer in humanities research and artistic production, Drucker expands on her distinction between the engineer and the artist, identifying two related methods of knowledge production: *aesthesis* and *mathesis*. *Aesthesis* refers to the role of the human in digital environments, and is used to describe the influence of

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<sup>10</sup> This history of experiments in linguistic automata is well documented. Friedrich Kittler, in his text *Discourse Networks 1800 / 1900*, describes an early mechanical approach to language: With the planned normalization of speech circa 1800, a campaign against all dialects began. In 1779 the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg offered prizes to mechanical engineers and organ builders for constructing an automaton that would be capable of purely pronouncing the five vowels. Antoine de Rivarol, not coincidentally the author of *A Treatise on the Universality of the French Language*, praised one of the machines subsequently developed and predicted that it would terrify all Gascon and Swiss language teachers and cause them to lose their jobs, because exact reproducibility would henceforth protect vowels from any idiomatic or historical denaturation. (36)

human thought and behaviour on the design of digital environments and vice versa. *Mathesis* is a term meant to describe an assumption of objectivity or autonomy from culture: “Knowledge forms are never stable or self-identical but always situated within conditions of use. Knowledge, then, is necessarily partial, subjective, and situated. Objectivity, we have long recognized, is the wish dream of an early rational age, one that was mechanistic in its approaches” (*Speclab* xiv). Bill makes a similar distinction in his call for a nuanced understanding of the connection between mathematics and creative production, rejecting the work that tries to fuse (computer) science and art, and which received so much opposition from the artistic sphere for its apparent

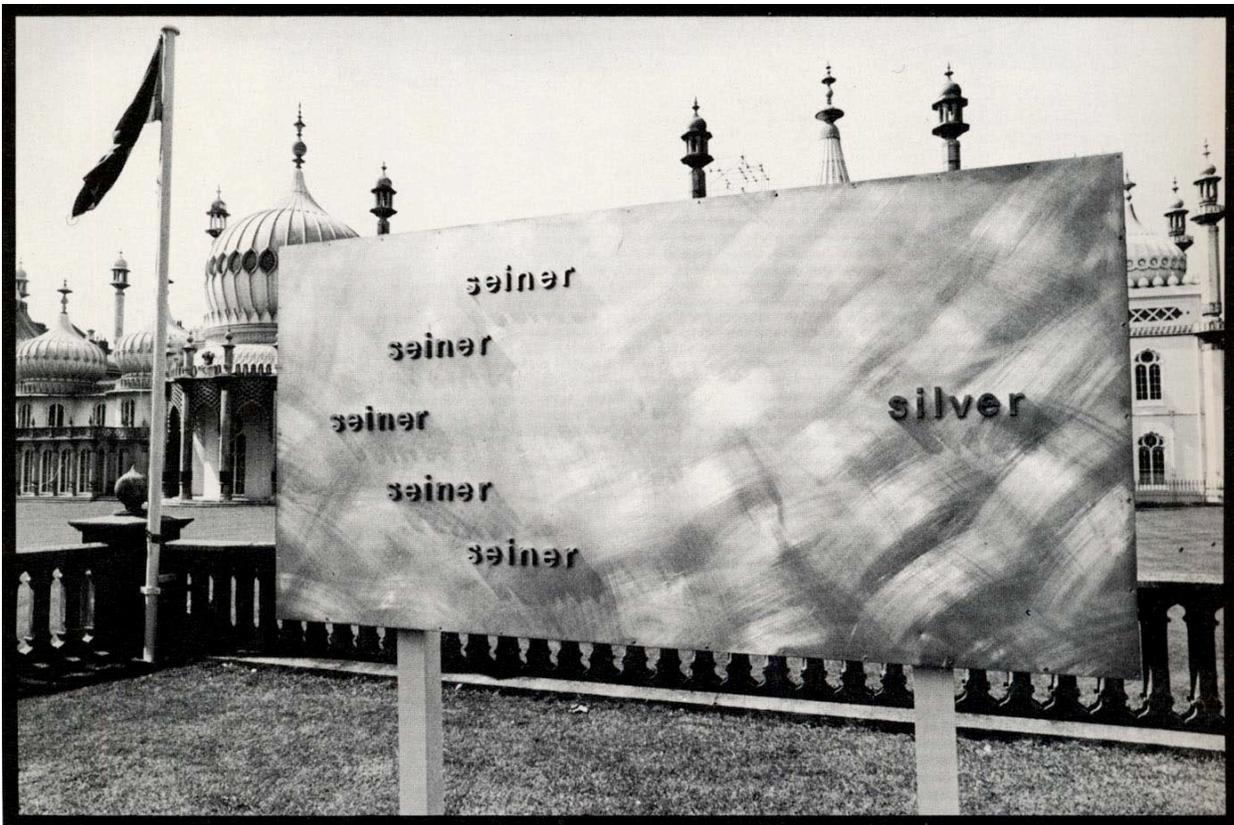


Figure 5.10.

**Ian Hamilton Finlay. “Purse-Net Boat.”**

lack of emotion or spirit. The scientific aleatoric, of which Wood and Masterman's work is an example, does not represent Bill's theory, and fits more in the category of *mathesis*. Bense's “Statistical Text,” de Campos's “Alea I,” and even Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová's “Developer” series, all of which begin with an investigation of the poetic relationship between

deliberately chosen words and semantemes and use procedural methods to extract them, are examples of the use of the mathematical way of thinking that results in *aesthesis*.

A poem that straddles the divide between the programmatic and the poetic, between the aleatoric and the composed, and combines the fields of concrete poetry and technology art, is Stephen Scobie's "Instructions for Computer Poem 3 – Night and Day." The piece, which was installed in the University of British Columbia's 1969 exhibition, *Concrete Poetry: An Exhibition in Four Parts*, is presented as a sheet outlining the rules of the piece, a series of computer printouts hung on the wall, and a printer installed in a room with a pile of paper collected at its base (see fig. 5.9). The poem's "rules" begin with two lists, labelled "List A – night," and "List B – day," each of which is made up of words that describe the concepts of night and day, but also contains words that are only slightly related. The list for night, for example, has words such as "night," "black," "darkness," and "midnight," but also includes words such as "dies," "under," "waste," and "far." Likewise, the list for day has "sun," "blue," and "radiant," but also includes "become," "leap," and "together" (Scobie n. pag.). Though setting up a binary between day and night, Scobie recognizes that language, even when selected from a condensed list by a computer, adheres to meanings which have been socially constructed, and which have aesthetic associations that are at times rooted in common use but also subject to the whims of the user, in this case one who is interested in the poetic possibilities of language. The curiosity of his word choice in his lists is contrasted with the calculated, mechanical language he uses to describe the production of the work.

Without including the actual programming data that would be entered into the machine, as Carl Fernbach-Flarsheim might do, or displaying potential failures of the computational approach to poetic composition, as Edwin Morgan might do, Scobie adopts a style that becomes opaque in its attempt at transparency. It challenges the reader, in its description of the computer's function, to imagine the poems from a mechanical perspective. The reader is therefore required

to shift her/his expectation of what poetry should be: first in the negotiation of the lists describing night and day, where poetry would likely be expected to be neither as binaristic nor as exhaustive or banal, and then again in trying to envision which words would or could be randomly selected from the list and positioned in lines which would potentially have some movement between the concepts of night and day, but also which might end up being obscured by overprinting:

One complete poem will consist of four “runs.” These four runs are all to be shown on one print-out sheet, over the same area. Thus it will be necessary to store the first three runs until all the selection is complete. The runs are to be superimposed: overprinting is allowed. Runs 1 and 2 will be from list A; runs 3 and 4 from list B – thus, in the event of any overprinting, list B words will always be printed over list A words. (Scobie)

More detailed description follows, prompting the question: where is the poetry located? And what is the relationship between the poet and the computer as creative subjects? The poem is arguably the lists and description of the potential work, which would satisfy a reader who demands creativity be located in a thinking, human subject. But Scobie's language complicates that position, positing that a “complete poem” only comes into being after it has been mechanically composed and printed. This is a shift from the aleatoric practices of Fluxus experiments with language, and even from Tristan Tzara's method for writing a dada poem – cutting up a newspaper article and then extracting the words one by one – in that it emphasizes both the human and the mechanical. Scobie chooses the concepts and the lists of words, and designs the software (in collaboration with a computer programmer), but the computer chooses and arranges the words as well as prints them onto a page: a level of composition and material production that departs significantly from previous experimental, procedural poetics, even those of Augusto de Campos, Bense, and Hiršal and Grögerová.

## **Situating Concrete Poetry**

Having outlined the shifts in conceptions of space that influenced the production, or poetics, of concrete poetry, I now want to emphasize the spaces in which the reader-viewer experiences the work: the spaces of distribution. Scobie's poetic proposition in itself disrupts ideas of poetic and linguistic material and meaning, but the form the work takes in the gallery offers an example of an equally radical gesture, and one which opens up questions of where concrete poetry belongs, and what borders it can cross before it becomes something different. The installation photograph included in the exhibition catalogue shows Scobie's work in a semi-chaotic state: a dot matrix printer sits on a high (reading level) plinth with paper cascading down from it, collecting on the floor where it looks like people have picked it up to view it then dropped it down again, crumpled and loose. Poems in sequence have been torn from the printer and hung on the wall, with notices and explanatory texts interspersed. Poems that, like Scobie's, require photographic documentation in order to be circulated, are commonly found in concrete poetry publications. The work of Ian Hamilton Finlay, to whom Scobie is connected as a critic and scholar, often takes sculptural form (see fig. 5.10). The series of "plastic poems" by Kitasono Katué, which are photographs of crumpled pages and other objects, is also an example. The necessity for a work to be documented from an original source is familiar to the sphere of visual art, but is rare for written poetry as it has taken form since the development of the printing press. Much of concrete poetry took advantage of new techniques in printing and design to depart from the authoritative line of typesetting, a compositional strategy which emphasized the visual material of language over its syntactic function, and it was a small shift from the disruption of the line to that of the page, and then the book. The placement of concrete poetry within a gallery therefore makes perfect sense. The space of the gallery allows for the juxtaposition of work in ways that the book – either fine press portfolio or mass printed anthology – is unable to perform. It allows for a simultaneity and disorder that consecutive pages

confound.<sup>11</sup>

This is not to say that the gallery is somehow superior to the book for the distribution of concrete poetry, but simply that the presentation of the work it allows contributes to the function of the work. The exhibition catalogue, though it in some ways documents the exhibition, is less an accurate representation than a recognition of the limitations of available spaces of distribution. The mass printed anthology, which has arguably been the dominant form of concrete poetry's distribution, performs a similar role.<sup>12</sup> Concrete poetry anthologies have contested the book form in varying ways, challenging the linear organization of information as well as their ability to contain a work in its original form, or, like an exhibition catalogue, simply to reproduce it. In this way they function similarly to an exhibition catalogue, though concrete poetry exhibitions are produced as a result of a collection, and not *vice versa*. The anthology becomes what the French author and Minister of Culture André Malraux, who was an active cultural figure in Europe around the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, championed as a "museum without walls." Malraux developed this term to describe the proliferation of books utilizing photographic printing techniques that opened up the experience of cultural artefacts to new, mass audiences who would benefit from the privilege that had previously been limited to populations of the grand urban centres of the west: another example of the collapsing of time and space instigated by technological advancement in

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<sup>11</sup> The gallery, like the book, undergoes significant transformation in the 20th century, and cannot be considered a historically homogenous space. What I am referring to here is the gallery as it took shape in the 20th century, insomuch as it functions in dialogue with the objects (or non-objects) placed within it. For a comprehensive analysis of the function of the gallery within modernist art production, see Brian O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*.

<sup>12</sup> The role of the anthology, and specifically the international anthology, in concrete poetry is at least equal to that of the gallery and exhibition catalogue. Gomringer's manifesto "Concrete Poetry," was written as an introduction to a planned anthology in 1956, and there were several anthologies (perhaps most importantly *Antologia Noigandres 5: do verso ã poesia concreta* [1962]) published during the years of the movement's peak activity, including the retrospective and mass-printed anthologies of the late 60s and early 70s. A list of just some of the more widely distributed anthologies is: Mary Ellen Solt's *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (1968/70); Emmett Williams *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967); Stephen Bann's *Concrete Poetry: An International Anthology* (1967); Eugene Wildman's *Anthology of Concretism* (1967); *Konkrete poesie international* (1965); Max Bense's *Konkrete poesie international 2* (1970); and Jean-Francois Bory's *Once Again: Concrete Poetry* (1968).

the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> Though Malraux had the masterpieces of European painting and sculpture primarily in mind, the idea that works functioned better via wider distribution than within a designated space of observation applies to the impulse found in the anthologies of concrete poetry. Concrete poetry anthologies departed from previous anthologies in their embrace of the visual and international characteristics of the work. In the way that Brian O'Doherty, in *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, argues that a gallery “viewer” is one who looks but also who is *looked through*, like a camera's viewfinder, in that s/he is produced by the gallery space, the reader of concrete poetry is *read through*, or produced by the space of the anthology: a space that aims for globality and hypertextuality to match the shifting spatial order at mid-century (O'Doherty 55; 61).

The anthology form is an ancient one; the word has its root in the Greek *anthologia*, the verb for flower gathering, which brings up bucolic imagery contemporary literary academicians may not associate with the term, having likely had the experience of assigning or being assigned various heavy and standardizing literary anthologies, and who likely remember or who still discuss the debates over the canonizing practices of the anthologies' compilers. Leah Price locates the print-based anthology, as we understand it today – as opposed to the oral collection of poems referred to in the Greek context – within the rise of the printing press, which in combination with the defeat of perpetual copyright in 1774 resulted in an exponential increase in the amount of writing that *could* be printed and accessed by a wide public (4). As early as the 1700s, there was a concern that the sheer amount of printed information available to the public might contribute to the dilution of high culture. Expansive novels such as George Eliot's *Middlemarch* or Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, themselves products of the print revolution, were

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<sup>13</sup> Malreaux's vision was primarily distributive, and rather conventional in that it aimed to continue European imperialism via culture, and imagined the book as simply a vessel for the images and the didactic essays that might accompany them. The form of the book is not challenged in the way McLuhan would in his experiments and theories fifteen years later.

popular sites for extraction, the implication being that a skilled anthologist can provide a more efficient experience of reading long texts, selecting choice passages to function synecdochally, and preventing the vast expenditures of time required to consume the entire work. Price cites the 18<sup>th</sup> century British anthologist Vicesimus Knox defending his practice: “the art of printing has multiplied books to such a degree, that ... it becomes necessary to read in the classical sense of the word, LEGERE, that is, to *pick out*... the best parts of books” (qtd. in Price 4). Francis Turner Palgrave described his motivation in the production of his authoritative 1861 anthology, *The Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language*, the text Ezra Pound loathed so much and at one point tried replace with a collection of his own choosing, as a project which aimed to improve a culture in which “everything is to be read, and everything only once” (qtd. in Price 4). The anthologist played the role of cultural surgeon, bleeding literary works in order to save them from being subsumed into some grand agglomerated literary corpus.

Friedrich Kittler writes that in Germany in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the anthology was used as a way to *reduce* reading. The accumulation of texts since the invention of movable type had resulted in a reading mania, where women, in particular, were reading *too much*. Anthologies such as *Education and Instruction for the Female Sex*, by Betty Gleim, an instructor at an all-girl's school, were specifically produced in order to narrow the scope of consumption, and to form taste in the reader, rather than to develop creative powers. Gender was not the only terrain that was to be managed by anthologies, however. The Bavarian Minister of Education, Immanuel Niethammer, sought to create, once and for all, an anthology that would end the reading mania for both sexes, and which would interpellate the readers into a grander cultural order: “Only because 'the Bible has ceased to be a unifying point for the education of all classes' and 'can hardly be expected to attain that position again, given the kind of thinking now in ascendancy' was there 'the need for a *National Book*’” (Kittler 149). No less grand a figure than Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was charged with collecting work for Niethammer's grand vision, but his

choices turned out to be too historical-empirical, and the text failed to live up to Niethammer's expectations for an anthologist's poetic: the works were flat against each other, and the arrangement displayed little of the energy and inspiration of Goethe's talent for language.

The responsibilities of the concrete poetry anthologists were not so grand, but they were still substantial. Like Dudley Fitts' 1942 anthology, *Contemporary Latin American Anthology*, which was funded in part by the United States' Office for the Coordination of Inter-American Affairs, and which attempted to use English translations alongside Spanish and Portuguese poetry to foster a Pan-American identity that would link Argentina to Alaska, the concrete poetry anthologies were tasked with producing a similar global connection, although expanded to include much of Europe, North and South America, and parts of Asia. And, again like Fitts' anthology, the works presented suffer for their breadth. In this way, the concrete poetry anthology becomes a kind of material contradiction. Works that are composed on a typewriter lose the indentation that the letter makes on the page; poster poems lose their scale. Booklets like Pignatari's "LIFE" are reduced to consecutive pages; longer poems, like Emmett Williams "Sweethearts," are excerpted. Three-dimensional works are represented by a single, authoritative photograph;<sup>14</sup> works in colour sometimes end up in black and white. Poetry which emphasizes the materiality of language and the alterations it had undergone during the emergence of a new global imaginary ends up contained within a book, the very space of the poetic tradition against which much of it is positioned. Some of the anthologies gesture toward recognizing the limitation of the book and the black and white page, most significantly in the inclusion of colour in Solt and Bann's anthologies, and in Augusto de Campos's fold-out poem "Luxo Lixo" in Solt's, but these are exceptions. Williams' and Wildman's texts are all in black and white, as is Bory's, though his contains considerably more photographs than the other two. These mass

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<sup>14</sup> This is sometimes not an issue, especially if the poem exists *as* photograph, like in the case of some of Kitasono Katué's "Plastic Poems."

printed, Anglo-American texts differentiate themselves from the large portfolios published by fine arts presses such as Eugen Gomringer Press in Switzerland, Edition Hansjörg Mayer in Germany, and the Noigandres Press in Brazil. Ian Hamilton Finlay's Wild Hawthorn Press in



**Figure 5.11.**  
**Julien Blaine. “Breuvage epandu.”**

Stonypath, Scotland produced ephemera and small runs, resisting the urge toward massification and the compromises it requires.

The order of the poems in the mass anthologies is curiously varied. All of the texts seem to advocate a hypertextual approach, as do most anthologies; the reader is not expected to consume the text from start to finish, but to follow her / his interest. The binding of the pages prevents an experience similar to that Nelson and Woodman created for the Software exhibition catalogue, however. Readers might flip through Solt's or Bann's texts, but even a basic engagement of the poetry would inform

them that it is organized by nation or language group. Williams' text is not paginated, but the poets appear in alphabetical order, which positions an idea of linguistic order versus that of a numerical order. Wildman's editorial presentation is more content-based, and seems to be organized by his taste, with the poets and their nations listed at the beginning, and then before each contribution. Bory's is similar, but he lists the poets and the poem titles at the end and, like the visual poetry collections that were typical of the early 1970s, particularly Klaus Peter Dencker's *Text-Bilder: Visuelle Poesie international*, Berjouhi Bowler's *The Word as Image*, and Massin's *The Word as Image*, and, as implied by the title – *Once Again* – positions concrete

poetry and the examples of *poesia visiva* within the ancient tradition of visual literature.<sup>15</sup>

Adding to this ahistoricity is his and Wildman's decision to present all of the texts without dates.<sup>16</sup>

A text that enacts concrete poetry's critique of the book in its content as well as its form is British-Canadian poet Steve McCaffery's *Carnival: The First Panel, 1967* (see fig. 5.12). Considering the time of its composition, it is difficult not to locate in the visual character of the work the stylistic influence of John Furnival and Henri Chopin. Furnival's *Tower of Babel* (1964) displays a busyness similar to McCaffery's text, and Chopin's use of the black and red ribbon on a typewriter to create patterns out of repeated words and letters is a precursor. The tendency to mix passages of more conventional, lined poetry amongst that patterns, especially with alternative spellings based on sound, gestures toward the work of the western Canadian visual poet bill bissett. McCaffery also includes as an epigraph a passage from the de Stijl manifesto (1920) that outlines what concrete art and concrete literature should be:

the duality between poetry and prose can no longer be maintained  
the duality between form and content can no longer be maintained  
thus for the modern writer form will have a directly spiritual meaning  
it will not describe events  
it will not describe at all

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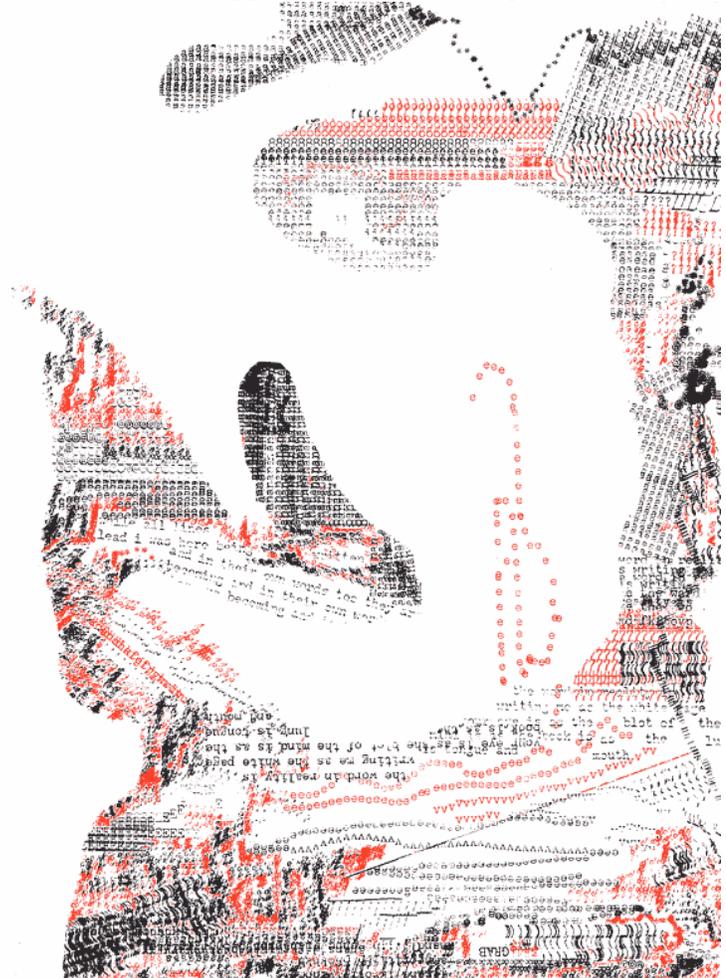
<sup>15</sup> *Poesia visiva* is at times difficult to distinguish from concrete poetry, but by the former I mean those works that generally do not engage with the page or the appearance of printed language as material, but which consist of language printed *onto* material. These are not discrete categories with consistent rules. While photographs may sometimes be used to document concrete poems that could not easily be represented otherwise, photography is almost always an integral part of *poesia visiva*. Julien Blaine's "Breuvage épandu" is an example of what I would consider *poesia visiva*, not concrete poetry (see fig. 5.11).

<sup>16</sup> I realize that claiming Bory and the other anthologists are ahistorical in their placement of concrete poetry within the lineage of visual literature stretching back to ancient times may sound paradoxical, but, as I argue in my introductory chapter under the concept of the "historical fallacy," the extraction of concrete poetry from its geo-historical context in order to connect it to the formal experiments of "writing" does the exact opposite of *historicizing* it. By making it common to all time, it makes it specific to no time.

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it will recreate in the word the common meaning of events a constructive  
unity of form and content. (McCaffery n. pag.)

The inclusion of this passage in combination with the apparent influences of previous concrete poets positions the work firmly within the concrete poetry genre, but in other ways McCaffery's text can be seen as a departure from the tradition. Like bissett, who despite producing visual based poetry and publishing other visual poets in his Vancouver blewintment press since the early 1960s went largely unrecognized by the International Concrete Poetry movement, McCaffery produced work that was more expressive than what concrete poetry had come to be known for. This poetry was visual, but not shaped, and for the most part the images that the letters, words, and symbols developed could not be related back to the subject of the poem as easily in a Furnival text, for example. Caroline Bayard has noted that the difference between Canadian concrete poetry and the more international work, dominated by the Europeans and South Americans, was that Canadian poets approached concrete poetry without the sophisticated printing techniques available to those poets



**Figure 5.12.**

**Steve McCaffery. From *Carnival: The First Panel: 1967-70.***

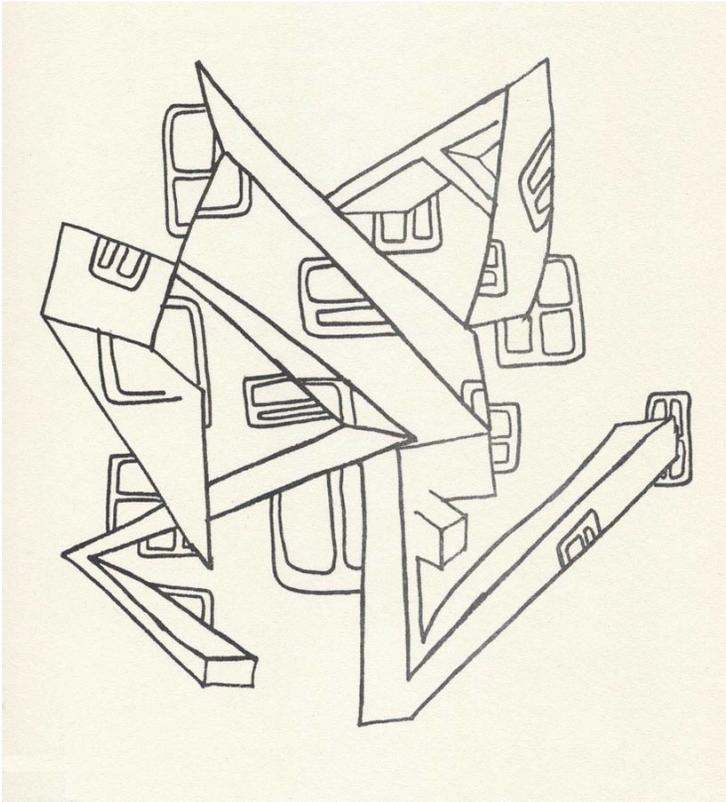
who were trained as graphic designers, and thus were less likely to emulate the type of visuality that linked the work to the altered linguistic landscape that came with the rise of advertising and communication networks. Canadian concrete poets were more likely to arrive at concrete poetry via poetic communities, and had more of a DIY aesthetic than those poets who produced fine art press editions. bpNichol is the only Canadian concrete poet to have had any real recognition by the international community, appearing in Solt's and William's anthologies and participating in the retrospective, movement – culminating exhibition at the Stedelijk museum in 1970. Though Nichol's style was varied, utilizing typewritten, handwritten, and cartoon-like language, it is only his cleanly printed work that appears in the anthologies and catalogue.

Where McCaffery's *Carnival* departs from concrete poetry most, however, is in its demand for the participation of the reader. The work comes with the pages bound at the top but perforated; in order to experience the composition of the piece as a whole, a reader must tear the pages out and arrange them. In this way the contradiction of the presentation of concrete poetry – a genre that emphasizes simultaneity – within book form is revealed, and the reader becomes active in the tactile refutation of the book, a physical analogue of the poetic line. Previous concrete poetry publications have performed a similar rejection through refusing to bind their pages, instead collecting them within a folding cover, specifically the large format portfolios printed by Edition Hansjörg Mayer and Eugen Gomringer Press, and the catalogue for the UBC exhibition, but none has performed the critique so effectively as McCaffery's, which forces the reader to choose: either keep the book intact, but know that the experience of it is vitiated by the technology of the book, or destroy the book in order to respect the poetry, and in doing so reject the physical benefits of the book form, like containment, order, and stability.

### **Moving Beyond Concrete**

McCaffery continued his critique of the book over a period of years, most productively in collaboration with bpNichol under the name of the Toronto Research Group (TRG). McCaffery,

who had come to Canada from England to do graduate work at York University, only met Nichol in 1969, and much of the research that they performed together took place in the 1970s, the



**Figure 5.13.**  
**Steve McCaffery. From *Transitions to the Beast*.**

publication of the TRG's manifesto coming in the spring 1973 issue of the journal *Open Letter*. This historical positioning places McCaffery and Nichol at the end of the International Concrete Poetry movement, and when considered alongside their poetic work of the same period, argues for treating them as initiators of a post-concrete poetics. McCaffery's 1970 *Transitions to the Beast*, published by Nichol's Ganglia Press, was written in direct counterposition to the semiotic poetry

that came out of Brazilian concrete poetry circles in the mid-60s. The short essay printed on the back of McCaffery's text identifies Pignatari and Pinto's work in particular, and diminishes its attempt at an alinear and nonlexical poetry inasmuch as it is dependent upon a lexical key for decoding its meaning. For McCaffery, the work of the Brazilians is too strictly semiotically influenced. His work rejects a direct relationship between his imagistic work and previously existing concepts. Whereas the Brazilians, in both the semiotic poems as well as the more orthodox concrete work, were concerned with the creation of new, collective language that can communicate quickly, a language to function in the new, rapidly developed world, McCaffery sought to frustrate equivalence:

the semiotic form acted only as the initial impulse to search for a nonlexical sign

language [sic] increasingly [...] im [sic] feeling the need for a more rawly human & a less technocratic approach to borderblur [sic] for a greater perceptual system [sic] entry in short of more personal feeling & due attention to our more simplistic responses to & in front of language. (McCaffery n. pag.)

The insertion of an idiosyncratic poetic subject is something that McCaffery shares with Nichol and bissett, both of whom developed a highly personalized poetic style that often utilized hand drawn letters and figures alongside or overtop of text. All of their work countered the distanced, technologically determined subject of much of concrete poetry: the procedural had given way to the performative. There is nothing more contrary to the tradition of concrete poetry as it sprang from Max Bill than the reference, let alone a transition to, a beast (see fig. 5.13).

This emphasis on the creative subject runs counter to not only the dominant poetic theories around concrete poetry at the time, but also the reception of concrete poetry exhibitions within art criticism. A year before, in an essay published in the catalogue that accompanied the UBC exhibition, Ian Wallace hailed concrete poetry as the final step in literary modernism, one that emphasized the opacity of language. He celebrates the work as doing what conventional literature was no longer capable of: “challeng[ing] the imagination in an era charged with powerful electronic media whose effects are most strongly felt in the appearance of things and our emotional identifications with these appearances” (n. pag.). The emphasis on the work is still on the material conditions that produce it. In a review of the show for *Artforum*, a twenty-two year old Jeff Wall emphasizes how intelligent the work is, picking out Hansjörg Mayer's *Alphabetenquadratbuch* as an example:

The fact that the finished product tells us a great deal about the medium in which [Mayer] is working, and the method of manipulation he employs upon the medium, and very little 'about' the artist himself is a result of the artist's realization of the most intelligent and valuable means of making contact with his

audience. (71)

Following this passage Wall places Mayer alongside the American conceptualists as a figure who is doing intelligent, philosophical work around language. But Wall's approach, like Wallace's, seems to come out of a Greenbergian emphasis on the expression of *form* that would soon be challenged by the post-structural theories of language McCaffery and Nichol were beginning to read, theories which elevated play and contingency, and the agency of the reader, over structural ideas of communication and form. While Wallace and Wall positioned concrete poetry at the end of modernism, McCaffery and Nichol located it in the beginning of post-modernism.

McCaffery and Nichol were perhaps the first concrete poets to engage with the critical theory around writing and language that emerged in the mid 1960s. Though claiming literary references similar to those of many concrete poets, specifically the grand modernist figures of Gertrude Stein and James Joyce, as well as those belonging to the tradition of shaped or visual literature like that of Rabelais or Madeline Gins, they also claimed inspiration from the ideas of Roland Barthes and other continental theorists (McCaffery and Nichol 15). In his introduction to the collected research reports of the TRG, McCaffery emphasizes how “important [it] is to realize the scope and context of our readings: [Edmond] Jabés, [Jacques] Derrida, Barthes and [Jacques] Lacan had all been read by 1974” (17). Their investigations into poststructural and postmodern theory contributed to their suspicion of the order implied by much concrete poetry, and specifically the mechanistic approach that resulted from engagements with new computer technology. In their 1972 “TRG Research Report 2: Narrative – The Book as Machine,” an excerpt from one Nichol's notebooks is printed as a mathematical formula Nichol composed in order to measure a reader's “ability to gain access to the book / machine” (75). The sardonic algebra is presented as hand-written in the midst of a typeset book, with variables representing the “degree of adherence to or antipathy towards traditional book / machine values on the part of

the reader” and “the degree to which the book / machine is utilized traditionally or in a non-traditional way by the writer” (75). The pages following apply the formula to various texts using playful hypothetical readers and texts, with all the calculations done in Nichol's distinctive hand. The resistance to the technological determinism comes out as well in their response to Kitasono Katué's self-portraits, in which the poet crumples a page of his own writing and then photographs it, offering the photo-documentation as a poem. McCaffery and Nichol argue that the poems participate in that modernist photographic mode of 'exact reportage,' and claim that it would have been more effective if the reader were asked to tear the page out themselves: “It is precisely because Katué does *not* choose to bypass photo-documentation and use the page as instruction leaflet or the subject-goal of intervention that his work is less effective than it might have been and remains allied to traditional, reified 'art'” (72). Their idea of concrete had become softer; they had inserted the subject back into the work in the forms of the writer as well as the reader, insisting on the practice of an engaged reception of the work to counter the early, orthodox concrete ideal of efficient, reduced language communicating across geographies. Concrete poetry aimed to create a reader; McCaffery and Nichol aimed to have readers create the work.

McCaffery positions the work he produced with Nichol as not limited to their national environment. After an anecdote about the Canadian poet Dorothy Livesay poking McCaffery in the stomach with an umbrella and accusing him, an English immigrant, of taking publishing space from Canadian writers, McCaffery defends the TRG's perspective: “Through the several intellectual differences of our writing lives both [bp] and myself maintained a common subscription to Gertrude Stein's credo that the writer's responsibility is to be contemporary. Contemporary for TRG was non-canonic and international” (18). But the TRG's internationalism is different than what the International Concrete Poetry movement knew as international. There had been a material and theoretical shift. For McCaffery and Nichol, internationalism was not so much the recognition of new networks of communication and cultural exchange opening up

terrain, an internationalism that was closely tied to the ideals of modernist development, but rather it was a non-nationalism, a theoretical space that was separate from the material conditions of global citizenry, and as such was never cosmopolitan. The internationalism that defined the experience of a figure like Eugen Gomringer, who left Bolivia as a child and moved to Switzerland, itself a polylinguistic space, or of Emmett Williams, an American living in Germany and collaborating with Daniel Spoerri, a Romanian, and other Europeans in the Material Group, is different than that of McCaffery, who moved from England to Canada, one of its colonies. Though Canada is bi-lingual, there is no evidence that McCaffery or Nichol were interested in the politics of national or international subject formation. In fact, the emphasis by Canadian poets in the late 60s and early 70s on the creation of a national identity was part of what Nichol and McCaffery were actively writing against. But anti-nationalism is not the same as internationalism. What they considered concrete poetry, as well, was not the same as what had been, up until then, been the dominant understanding of the form. It is appropriate that the bulk of their theoretical and poetic output comes within the period I have identified as the terminus of concrete poetry as an international project.

McCaffery and Nichol's work can therefore be viewed as completing the transition from modernism to postmodernism that the international concrete poetry movement had begun in the mid-50s, switching from a modernist internationalism to a postmodern globalism, and inserting the human subject and its accompanying need for contingency and play into a space where order and structure had previously ruled. The value of reading concrete poetry within postmodernism is not to claim that it was performing a postmodern function *avant la lettre*, but that its function as a movement, and the conditions which brought about its methods, are both linked to a cultural and economic historical position hinged between modernism and postmodernism. This obfuscating, uncomfortable position is the same one they occupy formally, between poetry and visual art, and between the corresponding distributive forms of the book and the gallery.

## – Conclusion: Designed Words in the World –

Approaching concrete poetry as “designed words” for a “designed world” provides a ground for reading the work spatially. By this I mean that by striving to understand the way the concrete poems signify across forms, nations, languages, and disciplines, readers come up against aesthetic characteristics that cannot be subsumed into a formalist or disciplinary discourse, and which require them to shift their critical terrain. The words are not fixed – rooted to a page or site – but neither do they float – they have histories and functions. They *mean* within a larger critical network, and the process of positioning them within a field of understanding has political implications. The modifier “designed” implies that the words are meant to serve a purpose, and challenges critics to question the technological and cultural bases of the work. How are the words instrumentalized in whichever space or sphere they operate? In the case of concrete poetry, the design of the work carries within it the residue of a moment that encountered a radically new way of imagining the world and its inhabitants. My critical project, which emphasizes the poetry’s historical, social, and artistic context, is designed to re-signify the term “concrete poetry,” so that when readers encounter it they will not be able to understand it simply as a mid-20th-century poetic eccentricity, or as synonymous with visual poetry in its various forms across history, but will have to also think about, for example, the effect of nuclear weapons on a world consciousness: how the threat of terrestrial annihilation might have produced new forms of international identity beyond whichever side – American, Soviet, non-aligned – a nation might be on. They will not be able to avoid the link between concrete poetry’s compositional strategies and the computational approaches to language made possible by early computer technology, or the connection between the International Style of modernist architecture, as it came to ground in Brasília, and the international ambitions of the Brazilian Noigandres group, whose preliminary output was greatly affected by their discovery of a formal

compatriot in the figure of Eugen Gomringer, half-way across the world in Switzerland. Nor will readers be able to ignore the relationship between concrete poetry and visual art, and not just the concrete art of Max Bill and the de Stijl group. Concrete poetry is intertwined with the work of the language-centered conceptual artists, as well as that of technology artists who sought to insert their work into new spaces, where the responsibility of the receiver would stand on equal footing of that of the sender. Readers will have to consider the form in which concrete poetry comes to them – by book (mass printed anthology, ephemera, or fine press edition), gallery, or sculpture – and remember that each has historical, spatial ramifications.

In Sianne Ngai's introduction to *Ugly Feelings*, she warns the reader that s/he might be thrown off balance by Ngai's willingness to read texts within what she calls "jarring juxtapositions": Martin Heidegger and Alfred Hitchcock with Herman Melville, for example. She defends her practice by arguing that "this method of disjunctive alignment is intended to allow the texts to become 'readable in new ways' and thus generate fresh examinations of historically tenacious problems" (8). This is a political position that stakes its ground against the disciplinary categories that continue to dominate the production of knowledge. Rosalyn Deutsche articulates a similar strategy in her work on the politics of space:

Radical interdisciplinary work [...] takes account of its own spatial relations. It interrogates the epistemological basis and political stakes of disciplinary authority. Less interdisciplinary than postdisciplinary, such work is based on the premise that objects of study are the effect rather than the ground of disciplinary knowledge. How these objects are constituted – through which exclusions or repressions, is itself a political question that conventional forms of interdisciplinarity disregard. Instead, they grant their objects of study an independent existence and therefore take for granted the existence of absolute foundations underlying distinct, specialized areas of

knowledge. Mere exchanges of data, of course, leave disciplinary identities intact.  
(208)

Figuring out how culture is designed within spaces which are also designed – that is, created by forces with a function *in mind*, be it the transformation of urban life by architecture or political influence via the imaging of terror – takes on the challenge of thinking across disciplinary and geographical spaces.

There is a risk that departing from disciplinary categories too enthusiastically might result in a generalized, vitiated field of knowledge. David Harvey warns of this in his critique of contemporary discourses surrounding cosmopolitanism. He does so by effectively juxtaposing Immanuel Kant's writing on cosmopolitanism, specifically his essay "Perpetual Peace," in which he calls for a "universal law of humanity," against his lesser-known *Geography*, which Harvey cites as an example of a text that fails to understand its subject, trafficking, as it does, in generalized racial stereotypes ("Cosmopolitanism" 532). Harvey draws from this example the conclusion that all cosmopolitanism has within it "an embedded geopolitical allegory," and expands on that point to advocate situated geographical research for analyses that stretch across disparate spaces (557). When dealing with poetry that comes out of Italy, France, Brazil, Canada, the United States, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and several others, and that seeks to operate in an international exchange, Harvey's warning would produce significant anxiety in even the most worldly critic. Franco Moretti, who works on a global scale, defends his practice of following forms across national and linguistic boundaries through the concept of "distant reading," a structural approach that uses literature as data in order to elucidate a systematic understanding ("Conjectures 57). However, there is also a value to a macro perspective that does not seek out a system, but rather critically juxtaposes cultural material in

spaces that are not fused completely with physical locations: cultural geographies. Concrete poetry, in its explicit desire to function globally, calls out for such an approach.

Determining how designed words function within a designed world, as a critical approach, offers a method for understanding contemporary poetic and artistic production, as well. The world and its words are not any less designed today than fifty years ago, although different strategies have appeared which allow for new paths of investigation. How, for example, should we (or could we) read Liam Gillick's recent text installation on the Fairmont Pacific Rim in the financial district of Vancouver? *The Vancouver Sun* tells us it is poetry, but what makes it so (Griffin)? Liam Gillick is a visual artist who has in the past worked with text, but he is not involved in discourses of contemporary poetics. The actual installation, which is a series of stainless steel, 61cm-tall Helvetica letters that reads "lyingontopofabuildingthecloudslooked-nonearertanwhenIwaslyingonthestreet," bears a slight formal resemblance to Augusto de Campos's 1963 "City poem," although the material – building vs. page – is vastly different. It is not the legacy of concrete poetry specifically that leads into a productive reading of the piece, but the concept of designed words that the study of concrete poetry invites.

What are we to make of the use of Helvetica, a ubiquitous, corporate typeface: a variation of Futura with the utopianism removed? How do we read the relationship between the words and the building – the text appears only on the fifth to the twenty-second stories, marking the floors housing the hotel from the luxury residential suites above – or the relationship between the building and the city of Vancouver, with its jarring uneven geographical development? The content of the text, specifically the reference to "lying in the street," can be localized within the context of Vancouver's hyper-inflated real estate market as well as its growing homeless population, which offers a path directly back to a hyper-inflated art market via Vancouver collectors whose fortunes have grown out of property development: Michael Audain, of Polygon

Homes; Bob Rennie, of Rennie Marketing Systems; and Ian Gillespie, of Westbank Projects, the developer of the Fairmont Pacific Rim from whom Gillick received his million dollar commission. How does the piece, in the service of making Vancouver a “world-class” city, integrate Vancouver and art into a contemporary global discourse? None of these routes are mandated for a critical engagement with Gillick’s piece – but being aware of the material conditions of the work’s production opens up avenues for understanding the function of its design within specific geographies.

The work of Kenneth Goldsmith similarly occupies a curious intersection between poetry and art, explicitly in his designation of it as “conceptual poetry,” after Sol LeWitt’s formulation of “conceptual art,” but also in relationship to Andy Warhol’s films and pieces by other artists that deal with information technologies. His *Day*, which is a transcription of the complete *text* – including page numbers, stock quotes, and any words found in advertisements – of the September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2000 edition of *The New York Times*, has a connection with Vito Acconci’s “Page / Pages: Reading the First Page of *The New York Times*, Saturday, June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1969,” although Goldsmith’s text, I am sure he would argue, is far less interesting. I make this point because Goldsmith himself admits to using boredom as a strategy; he aims for boredom (Goldsmith, “Being Boring”). He achieves this in part through collecting and archiving expired information, information that at one point was urgent enough to be printed or broadcast, but which loses its charge almost instantly. This strategy is clear in *Day*, but also in his American Trilogy: *The Weather*, in which he transcribes and arranges a year’s worth of weather reports from a New York radio station; *Traffic*, in which he transcribes a twenty-four hour period of New York traffic reports, broadcast every ten minutes; and *Sports*, in which he transcribes the commentary from the longest nine-inning Major League Baseball game on record, between the Boston Red Sox and New York Yankees on August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2006. What are we to make of these texts’ attitude toward information in the initial years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? How does Goldsmith’s approach to

language as excess relate to the conceptual artists' understanding of language as transparent? And what is a reader to take away from the centrality of New York City to Goldsmith and the production of conceptual art, considering the dramatically altered global context surrounding it? Goldsmith's work is readily available on the internet as well as in book form: how should we read them differently? Each has its particular material effects, especially considering the literary limbo created by ebook readers and online publications, a condition that has ramifications for ideas of intellectual property, distribution, and access. Where do we read, now? What are our languages, and how are they conditioned? How do we define literary space at this moment, and how does that allow us to theorize how we defined it in the past, when the question seemed less pressing?

The digital poetry of Brian Kim Stefans poses related questions in different form. He describes, in the introduction to his poem "The Dream Life of Letters," how he was dissatisfied with a poem he had written in response to a poem presented by the poet Rachel Blau DuPlessis. He composed a poem that transformed DuPlessis's work; he re-ordered all its words alphabetically, implementing a compositional strategy that has links to the statistical treatment of language in Max Bense's work. But, as Stefans points out in the introduction to the final version of his poem, he became dissatisfied with the work as it aged, and how it stubbornly insisted on a settled, still form: "as it was in a sort of antique 'concrete' mode, it resembled a much older aesthetic, one well explored by Gomringer, the De [sic] Campos brothers and numerous others in the past fifty years, and so it wasn't very interesting to me" (Stefans). He transformed the text by animating it with Flash, a program that the vast majority of internet users encounter on a daily basis without knowing it. In this way he goes a step further than a poet like Carl Fernbach-Flarsheim, who composed work in Fortran, the programming language developed by IBM in the 1950s, or the hypertextual experiments of Ted Nelson and Ned Woodman in their catalogue for the *Software* exhibition in 1970. The work that Stefans produces is visual, but it is not concrete.

It would be better described as a parallel infrastructural material: broadband. The conditions required to view Stefan's eleven to fourteen minute Flash-video-poem are recent, but no less significant than those which the development of reinforced concrete produced for the modernist project.

The dominant initial critical experience I feel when "reading" Gillick's, Goldsmith's, and Stefan's work is that, despite their familiarity, I lack the lexicon to engage them. I had the exact same experience when I first encountered concrete poetry. In the case of "The Dreamlife of Letters," to adequately engage with it I would have to learn more about Flash animation, and the way language has developed and is still developing on the internet. But a satisfactory reading would require a more expansive approach, one that would take into account the internet's demographic (literally, a writing of and by the *demos*, but a specific and exclusive *demos*), as well as the policies, both political and economic, that define what we commonly understand as an unmappable – to borrow a term from computer coding – space. There are new spaces in this world, but there are also old spaces. There are words in both. How should we read them, and what can our reading do?

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