

# Concrete Poetry

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The origins of the Concrete movement in poetry are briefly traced, with early manifestoes included as appendices. Three perceptual approaches, classified as *optic*, *kinetic*, and *phonetic*, are distinguished by means of twenty-one illustrations. The emphasis falls on the development of a new fixed form consonant with our age.

In December, 1959, Georges Mathieu delivered a lecture in São Paulo in which he attacked the “professor-impostors” of the Bauhaus and suggested that their Argentinian disciples be confined in Stuttgart or in Ulm with the “intellectuals” of the *Journal do Brasil*. Max Bill’s visit to Brazil (he lectured in Rio and São Paulo in 1953) was regarded by Mathieu as an omen of “pseudo-morphosis”: “And that grieves me because Brazil is neither Switzerland nor Germany. Concretism or neo-concretism constitutes the strangest anomaly of Brazil.”<sup>1</sup>

Max Bense is actually named by Mathieu; Tomas Maldonado is attacked by implication; but Max Bill is recognized as the most important single figure in the concrete movement. Having edited Kandinsky’s and Klee’s writings, his own form a direct link with Van Doesburg’s magazine, *Art Concret* (1930).<sup>2</sup> In 1944 Bill organized the first international exhibition of concrete art in Basle. As a student in Berne, Eugen Gomringer wrote positively about the exhibition. Gomringer was Bill’s secretary at the Hochschule für Gestaltung at Ulm from the spring of 1954 until Bill left in 1957. Gomringer stayed with Bill until 1958; his first manifesto on concrete poetry had appeared in 1954.<sup>3</sup>

Three years after Bill’s visit (in December, 1956) there was a

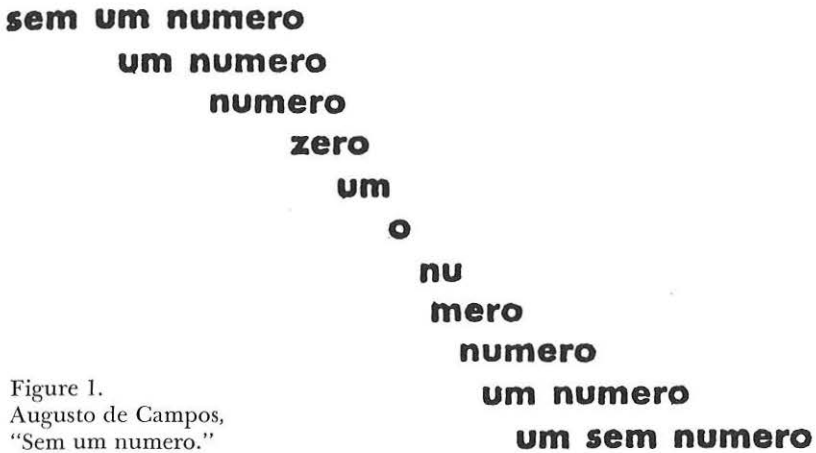


Figure 1.  
 Augusto de Campos,  
 "Sem um numero."

National Exhibition of Concrete Art in São Paulo. Within another two years the Noigandres group presented its Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry (Appendix A). In tracing a literary tradition for itself, it mentioned as forerunners certain expressionist writers quite outside the constructivist tradition in art. Furthermore, in emphasizing the visual aspect of concrete poetry the Pilot Plan neglected its phonetic aspect.

The act of perception itself is the first preoccupation of concrete poetry. The *optic* or visual poet offers the poem as a constellation in space; the *kinetic* poet offers it as a visual succession; the *phonetic* poet offers it as an auditory succession. These categories represent an abstraction of tendencies; in practice the concrete poet has adopted all these approaches, either singly or in combination. In concrete poetry the experimental emphasis falls on the micro-aesthetic of perception rather than on the macro-aesthetic of attitude. Energy is directed towards solving problems of scale, movement, sequential relations, time, stamina, and, above all, the identification of forms. Concrete poetry is an aesthetic movement in poetry, only indirectly concerned with moral, social, and psychological values. This is not to say that concrete art and poetry are not fully committed to the improvement of the environment,<sup>4</sup> but only the Brazilians and Czechs have shown any inclination for social or political engagement. The main emphasis has fallen on formal values. Augusto de Campos' poem "Sem um

numero” (Fig. 1) combines the strictest concrete practice with commitment to the peasants in the Brazilian interior, who are both without number (identification) and numberless. Their life, and the form of the poem, is a zero; inwardly and outwardly.

All that is asked of the perceiver (the former “reader”) is that he should possess unimpaired sensory organs and an undamaged brain; a capacity for fantasy, or self-stimulation of the notoriously “literary” kind, is not required. To participate in the concrete poem means no more (no less) than paying active attention in perceiving. Theo Van Doesburg wrote, “In matters of art, comprehension is always impossible; as soon as it is comprehended, art ceases to be art. Poetry cannot be comprehended—it is prehensible.”<sup>5</sup>

Grasping with the senses, perceptually, means *being grasped* by the aesthetic object, directly. Grasping with the mind, psychologically, means *being grasped* by some information (historical, theological, or social) prior to the aesthetic communication. The best concrete poems maintain a subtle balance between form-perception and memory-perception; the materials of poetry consist (apart from neologisms) of prior information stored by the memory. These terms may, if necessary, be reduced to “form” and “message,” but the emphasis in concrete poetry on perception, rather than attitude, abjures anything as apparently reducible as message. Its concern is to say the unsayable through form alone.

The identification of form in concrete poetry varies according to the predominant tendency of the perceptual requirements. In *optic* poems the distinction between form and ground is made in response to a surface (page, poster, glass or ceramic surface) which is perceived as a whole, instantaneously. In *kinetic* poems the dimensions of the visual figure are extended to produce a temporal configuration only possible by virtue of the sense of succession. In *phonetic* poems the figure (sound) rises off the ground (silence) producing a configuration of filled time against emptied time. But in all concrete poems, to use Koffka’s formulation, “intermetric intervals belong quite as much to the whole experience as do the intrametric intervals.”<sup>6</sup>

The configuration of emptiness—the negative of a positive form—can represent the most significant formal element in a work.



This is especially true of optic painting where the foreground (or form) depends upon intermetric intervals for its appearance. Optic poems are seldom productive of such marked perceptual effects as optic paintings. Ladislav Novák's "Eva" (Fig. 2) is an exception. Here the vibration of the print about the *glory*, the diamond-shaped white space symbolizing the vulva (the First Mother) and heavenly light (the Virgin), complements the associative force of the verbal material. But usually, as might be expected from a verbal medium, effects of instability are more mental than physical. In Pierre Garnier's "Grains de Pollen" (Fig. 3) the sun only exists by what it strikes; the activity of the motes, indicated by the title but not present in the poem, defines the sun's presence, not its beam which the emptied space of the page might have represented in a calligrammic poem. Optic poems exploit, in this way, the mind's capacity for reversal of the image. "The creative reader," said Van Doesburg, "always adds a projection to the given text. The uncreative, passive reader, on the other hand, takes one away; it is lost, as with a photographic negative (as against reality)." <sup>7</sup> In the case of Garnier's poem, the negative *is* reality; its positive is banality.

Van Doesburg's "fourth dimension," the reader's capacity for projection, is perfectly complemented in the concrete poem by a structural method which results in a wholly constructed work, a projection itself. The intervals may be arrived at either by calculation or by intuition, or by both. Calculation places the emphasis on the exact disposition of material according to a structural principle; intuition relies on the fusing power of the individual sensibility. It is not hard to find poets strictly outside the concrete movement speaking of the tension between inter- and intra-metric intervals: "Rhythm is the trot of the intonations that one hears; there is rhythm that one sees and that one does not hear: rays of an inner grouping towards a constellation of order. Rhythm was, till now, the beating of a dehydrated heart, a measly, muffled, wooden bell." <sup>8</sup> Tzara's ambiguous use of a visual analogy to describe a predominantly auditory experience underlines the equivocal relation between ear and eye that concrete poets exploit. It is, moreover, an instance of the widespread tendency to spatialize temporal experience which kinetic and phonetic poems normally resist.

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 l a c k b l o c k b l a c k b  
 l o c k b l a c k b l o c k b  
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 l o c k b l a c k b l o c k b  
 l a c k b l o c k b l a c k b

Figure 4.  
 Ian Hamilton Finlay,  
 "Homage to Malevich."

Garnier's poem is intuitively structured, a witty construction in the mind transferred to paper; Ian Hamilton Finlay's "Homage to Malevich" (Fig. 4) is structured methodically. Two constants (*lock*, *lack*) are modified by a variable (*b*) to form another pair of constants (*block*, *black*). Graphically, the orientation of the poem is vertical; the lines (*l*, *k*) running from top to bottom, fended apart by the circles (*o*, *c*). Linguistically, its orientation is horizontal, working from left to right; the asymmetric graphic elements (*b*, *k*) slightly reinforcing the reading convention. Semantically, the interaction of the graphic and linguistic elements expresses in this special way the dependence of form upon the distinction between *black* (figure) against *block* (ground), *lock* (constancy) against *lack* (instability). The subject of the poem is the search for formal invention, but this content is so tightly bound up with the poem's own form that the explanations of gestalt are only a hieratic gloss on a hieroglyph which speaks for itself, once and for all.

Finlay's basic tenet that "the mind will always try to make words out of letters—to create movement"<sup>9</sup> suggests the single

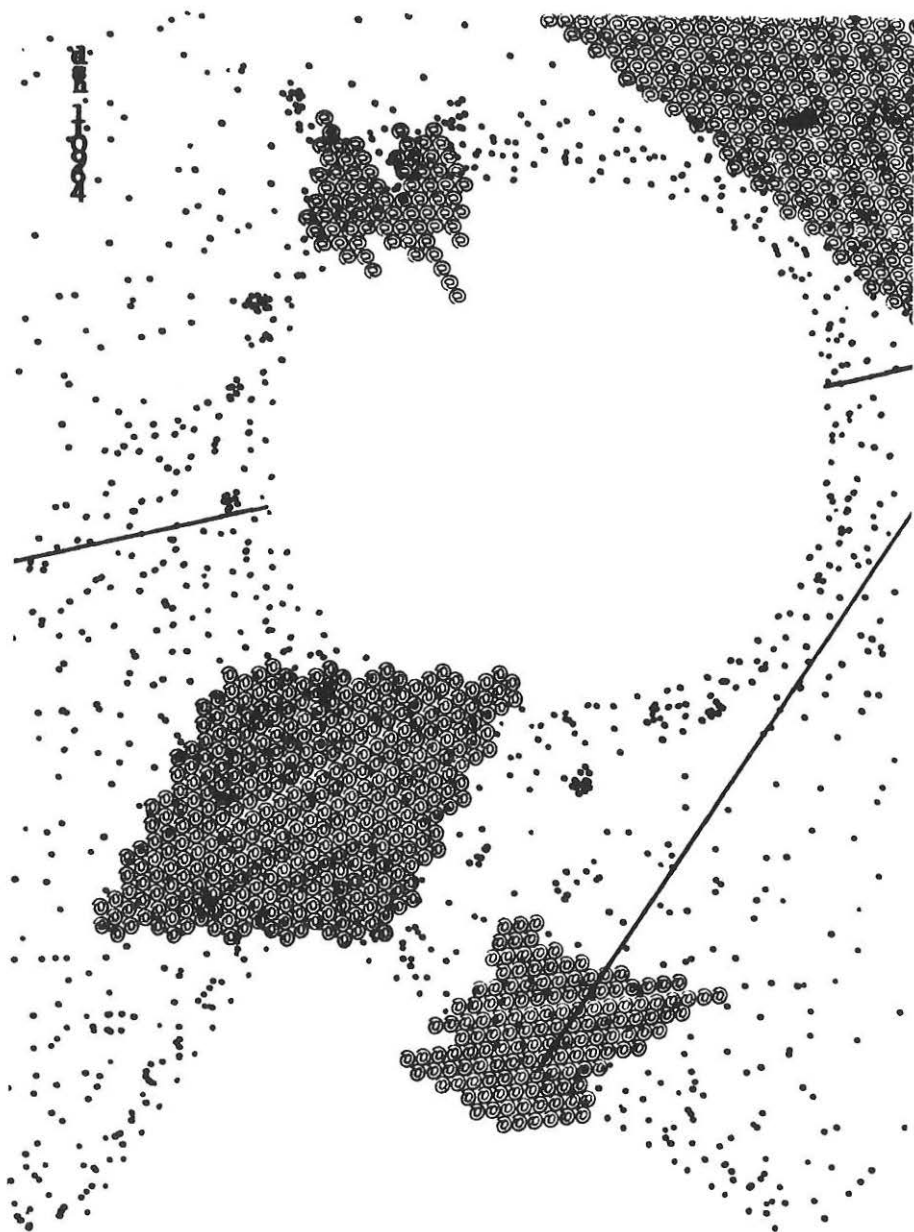


Figure 5. Dom Sylvester Houédard.

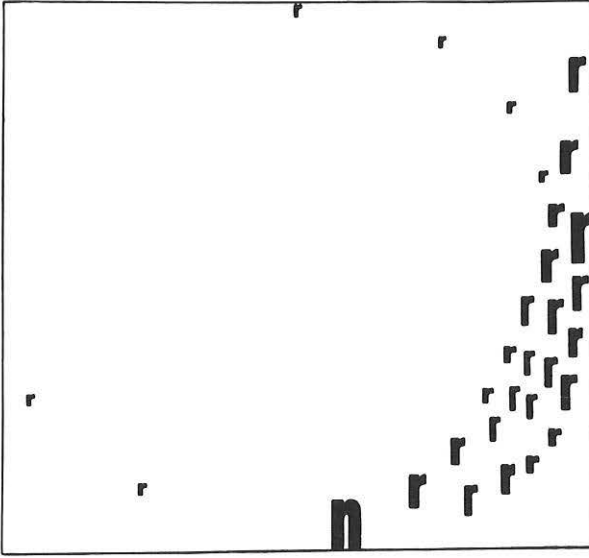


Figure 6. Gerhard Rühm.

Figure 7. Gerhard Rühm.



word as the smallest unit of material in concrete poetry. It is certainly a most useful unit, stimulating a phonetic as well as a graphic reaction. The letter has an attraction for gifted graphic artists like Dom Sylvester Houédard who also uses the commercial repertoire of the typewriter (Fig. 5). Gerhard Rühm's poem (Fig. 6) exploits the visual constant in the letters *n* and *r*. They both appear stable enough in isolation, but their disposition here raises in the reader the uneasy doubt as to whether the *r*'s are not in fact amputated *n*'s; alternatively, the predicament of *r* is that only once (the ambiguity of the relation is most apparent where the largest *r* meets the edge of the poem) does it attain the sure two-footedness of *n*.

But the most useful unit for all kinds of concrete poetry is the one generally employed in the teaching of reading; the spelling-sound relation. In the optic poem the sense of simultaneity and multidirectionality—a spatial order—inhibits a successive, phonetic response to the verbal units. Nevertheless, where phonetic elements are distinguishable, they evoke a response at the motor level even when undetectable at the conscious level. So “Eva” (Fig. 2) has a powerful phonetic force, especially in the somewhat ornamental frieze at the top and bottom of the poem. Rühm's “Du” (Fig. 7) while literally unutterable, nevertheless carries a suppressed phonetic charge.

Finlay's “To the Painter, Juan Gris” (Fig. 8) is an elliptical figure on a rectangular ground, a stylized representation of the apple; but its function is to serve the linguistic implications of the spoken *happy/apple*, where the *p* divides the syllables. The relation between the stylized apple and the syllabic break demands semantic confirmation, so the joyful *pip* (the *i* in serene blue against the dull gold of the other letters in the original) takes us literally to the core of the happiness of apple.

The facts of Finlay's poem are experiential, not objective; a spelling-sound relation is worked intuitively to achieve an expressive form. Ronaldo Azeredo's “Ruasol” (Fig. 9) uses two words in the same grammatical class and of the same number, according to a constructional method, which achieves two objective facts or analyzable contributions within the experience. Purely graphically, the *l*'s step in a precisely measured fashion, from top-right

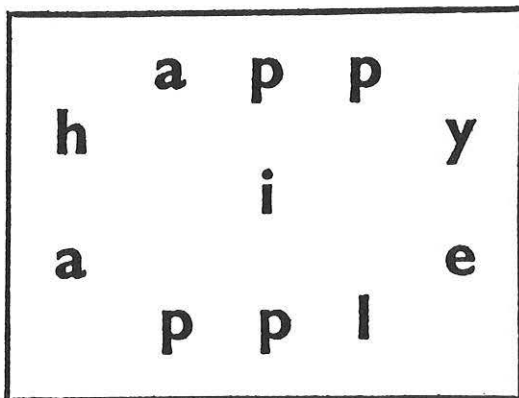


Figure 8.  
 Ian Hamilton Finlay,  
 "To the painter, Juan Gris."

to bottom-left, suggestive of the sun's progress; when no more are visible, the street falls into the plurality of darkness.

In these poems Finlay and Azeredo have used two different ways of avoiding the mere reproduction of nature's linguistic appearances. Since 1916, Vincent Huidobro had been reiterating that "Man has never been nearer Nature than now when he no longer seeks to imitate her appearances, but to do as she does by imitating her profoundly constructive laws."<sup>10</sup> Charles Biederman is perhaps the finest modern exponent of such a view.<sup>11</sup> Gillo Dorfles has also spoken recently (and in the context of kinetic art) of "not making art scientific or aestheticising science," but putting forward the view that "an analogous formative principle is frequently (not always) at the root of the most diverse human interests."<sup>12</sup>

This formative principle or structural process abstracted from nature is useful to the concrete artist, not as a system to be applied to no matter what materials, but as a method, to be drawn upon according to the inherent demands of carefully chosen materials. For the verbal work of art—the poem—is as far removed from linguistic mathematics as it is from casual speech. Bill's method is to find a geometric structure within which the imagination may free itself in accordance with the demands of the materials, but he concedes that concrete art may find its expression in various ways; constructive art is just one of them. Arp, for

**r u a r u a r u a s o l**  
**r u a r u a s o l r u a**  
**r u a s o l r u a r u a**  
**s o l r u a r u a r u a**  
**r u a r u a r u a s**

Figure 9. Ronaldo Azeredo, "Ruasol."

instance, claimed that "Certain 'surrealist objects' are equally concrete works. Deprived of all descriptive content they seem to me to be important in the evolution of concrete art, for they know how to bring to this art, by way of allusion, the psychic emotion which makes it live."<sup>13</sup>

The surrealist-constructivist polarity of the later Dada movement made it possible for Paul Dermée to write—in the same number of *L'Esprit Nouveau* as the De Stijl literary manifesto was reprinted—of his aim "to make the lyric flux pour itself out into the consciousness of the reader."<sup>14</sup> But this expressive, rather than concrete, notion of communication denies Van Doesburg's theories of projection and construction: "The reader is always, to a greater or lesser extent, the subject of the poem. The poet is always the cool constructor, who arranges the material with the utmost economy."<sup>15</sup> If the range is from cool (concrete) to warm (expressive) in psychological terms, it may be said that the stable introvert seeks concretion; the less stable, expression. But both share a quite practical concern. Expansive or manic types, on the other hand, find the whole range (which avoids harsh extremes) rigid, and lacking in feeling; sociable types reject its orderliness and precision. Mathieu's attack must be seen in this light.

The desire for a comprehensive view of concrete antecedents has regrettably blurred the fact that typographic exactitude—machine precision—is the Western medium for printed poetry,

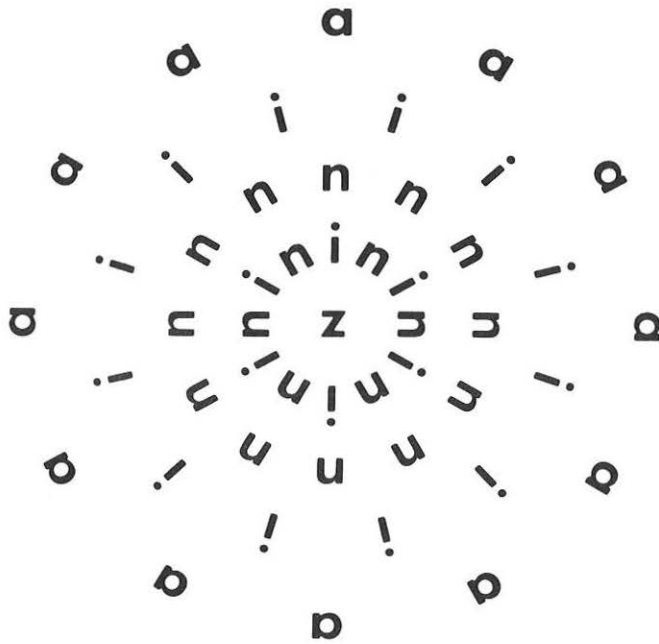


Figure 10. Mary Ellen Solt, "Zinnia." Version by Hansjörg Mayer.

not calligraphy. Expressive poets like Louis Zukofsky consider this a disadvantage: "It is questionable . . . whether the letters of the alphabet can be felt as the Chinese feel their written characters."<sup>16</sup> Poundians in North as well as South America value calligraphic and hieroglyphic writing for its individuality and spontaneity. Concrete poets, however, avoid handwriting for machine forms, believing that functional precision has its own secrets to reveal. The two settings of Mary Ellen Solt's "Zinnia," one by John Dearstyne and one by Hansjörg Mayer (Fig. 10), reflect the differing dimensions of feeling which Western typographers can bring to a beautifully simple, mimetic theme.

Azeredo's poem (Fig. 9) and Seiichi Niikuni's "Children's Castle" (Fig. 11) represent two different attitudes towards printed means. The Japanese poem is a freely expressive work; one in which, according to Niikuni's own general description of his visual poems, "a *motif* is developed, using Chinese characters,



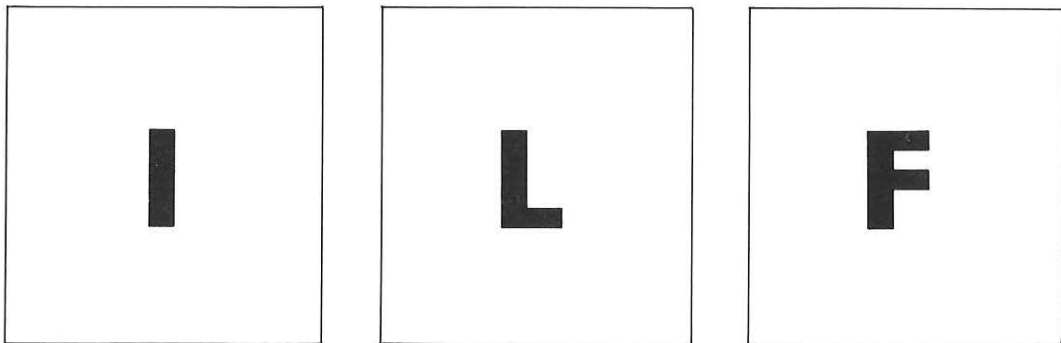


Figure 12. Décio Pignatari, "Life."

as a unit of an extremely *symbolic* nature."<sup>17</sup> He places himself in a poetic tradition of Western expressionism (he refers to Cummings and Eliot, translating "objective correlative" by the Japanese word for "symbolic"), and uses printed forms of calligraphy in different sizes in an expressive way. Katué Kitasono has, on occasion, employed uniform shapes in a serial manner, but the Japanese medium seems, on the whole, more suited to expression rather than concretion. Fusion is achieved by the power of suggestion rather than by the juxtaposition of weighed material.

Décio Pignatari's "Life" (Fig. 12 represents a spatialized version of this kinetic poem, whose psycho-physical effect cannot be illustrated without recourse to the turning pages of the original) is based on a vertical typographic constant which extends itself horizontally until the play of horizontal against vertical encloses itself in a sign which is a squared form of the Chinese sign for "sun." In this way, a metaphor is made in purely plastic terms according to the inherent possibilities of the type. The poem is an interesting exercise on the relations between machine type and written characters.

The successive nature of kinetic poems introduces perceptual problems into concrete poetry. In representational poetry using the naturalistic syntax of speech or discursive writing, the temporal "object" is the grammatical sequence. Even so, the representational poet uses it mainly as a pretext, since the poem is more important to him than the "object." The concrete poet, however, abandons it altogether in order to achieve expressiveness entirely

**E**

**B**

**LIFE**

**WAIT FOR ME**

*... give a man his  
I said to her,*

*manliness; provide  
what you want I*

*creature comfort  
want only*

*for him and herself;  
more so. You*

*preserve essential  
think marriage is*

*hypocrisies —  
everything?*

*in short, make a  
O well,*

*home for herself.  
I said.*

**A**

*... blue boat  
a brown sail*

**LITTLE POEM**

*a brown boat  
a green sail*

**TO PUT**

*a green boat  
a black sail*

**YOUR EYES**

*a black boat  
a blue sail*

**TO SLEEP**

*a ...*

**LITTLE ...**

Figure 13. Robert Creeley,  
"Wait For Me."

Figure 14. Ian Hamilton Finlay.



		HAYBOAT	
	hayboat		
		CATHEDRAL	
	cathedral		
		HOUSEMILL	
	housemill		
		WINDSTACK	
	windstack		
		HAYMILL	
	haymill		
		CATHEDRAL	
	cathedral		
		HOUSESTACK	
	housestack		
		WINDBOAT	
	windboat		
		HAYSTACK	
	haystack		
		CATHEDRAL	
	cathedral		
		HOUSEBOAT	
	houseboat		
HAYSTACK	CATHEDRAL	HOUSEBOAT	WINDMILL

Figure 15. Ian Hamilton Finlay, "Canal stripe series 3."

baum    mann    hund    berg    wolke

          frau                    land                    haus

          kind    vogel                    wind

see

Figure 16.  
Eugen Gomringer,  
"5 mal 1 konstellation."

Gomringer's "5 mal 1 konstellation," as the title suggests, retains the exact typographical disposition of its schema (Fig. 16) through five methodical variations of its pattern:

1. Left to right vertically—*baum; mann FRAU kind; etc.*
2. Left to right horizontally—*baum MANNhund berg wolke; etc.*
3. Lattice (diamonds) + triangle—*HUND frau vogel land; wolke land HAUS wind; land vogel wind see (land common to all); the unused words form the triangle baum mann berg KIND.*
4. Diagonal slant—*baum; mann; hund frau; BERG kind; etc.*
5. The original schema, placed last.

This then is the structure of the poem; its form is not reducible either to analysis or explanation. Once the poem is in progress, its temporal form admits us to a world prior to the knowledge of which reason speaks. This is Van Doesburg's fourth dimension of projection. It is hinted at in the "sixth" constellation, which is composed of the relations set up in double-sized type (capitalized above) which, in the first four sequences are as follows: *BAUM FRAU WIND; MANN LAND VOGEL; HUND HAUS KIND; BERG WOLKE SEE.* What this total configuration "means"

comes not so much from association (that woman is rooted tree-like in the wind, etc.) as from reflex (that houses “mean” dogs and children, etc.). This inter-metrical set of relations requires typographic accentuation in order to be perceptible.

Whether a visual rhythm can result in a kinaesthetic effect—that is, affect the potential perceiver of visual rhythm at the motor level—seems very doubtful. According to Paul Fraisse, “we perceive change better with our sense of touch and hearing than with sight, the latter being better adapted for spatial discrimination than for the apprehension of the temporal modification of stimuli.”<sup>19</sup> In a simple series—one word to a page, like Finlay’s (Fig. 15)—the elements are phoneticized by some readers; in Gomringer’s (Fig. 16), a complex series with several words to the page, the visual aspect inhibits a spoken response. But both poems are without the support of a representational syntax, a concrete syntax being composed of a series of independent or related items usually of the same grammatical class. This involves a learning process of quite a special order, since material which is serially structured is not already organized into probable forms like material which is naturalistically structured. The presence of pattern, however, does encourage a systematic approach to the serial poem, and furthers learning by this means.

Experiments by Fraisse have shown that logical representations—such as counting, upon which the analyses above are based; mental representations, such as the spatialization of a temporal order (Fig. 12); and auditory representations, such as the transcription of visual patterns into sound patterns—are necessary for the perception of visual rhythm.<sup>20</sup> The kinetic poem is therefore subject to assimilation by various processes of transcription, and intellection of the structure may be mistaken for perception of the form. Kinetic art also suffers in this way.<sup>21</sup>

By contrast with the purely local reflex actions produced by kinetic poems, phonetic poems result in a completely general reflex action. Fraisse cites one of his earlier experiments which showed that adults find great difficulty in following even a simple visual cadence, whereas children follow a metronome, beating at the same rate, perfectly spontaneously. But if phonetic poems are easily perceived and rapidly learnt, they are, nevertheless, limited

by duration. If a sequence is short enough (this applies also to the traditional lyric) recency and primacy complement each other, but longer sequences cannot interact without some spatial representation. The simple answer to the problem is to compensate for poor perception of succession by complex phrasal enrichment of each instant. Creeley's poem (Fig. 13) does this within a representational syntax. But simultaneous techniques have, of course, been used experimentally outside the immediate context of concrete and American poetry. Henri-Martin Barzun's "Voix, Rythmes, et Chants Simultanés—Esthétique de la Poésie Dramatique"<sup>22</sup> led him into controversy with Apollinaire on the visual and auditory claims to the term "simultaneity." The use of several voices in addition to the gramophone did not prevent Barzun's work from being a succession. Apollinaire put forward as a contrast his calligrams, "in which simultaneity existed in the mind, even in the letter, since it is impossible to read them without immediately conceiving the simultaneity of what they express. . . ." <sup>23</sup>

Pound considered Barzun's work briefly in *The New Age*. Barzun, he said, offered a mode of synthesis which was not to be despised. But he believed that art involved selection: "If you insist in being apperception and all sorts of apperception at once, you are in danger of paralysing thought; of bringing all your other faculties to a stand-still."<sup>24</sup> If Pound was still concerned primarily with thought, Van Doesburg was speaking of "the recovery of the poetic membranes of our ears, which are weakened to such a point that long phono-gymnastic exercises are necessary."<sup>25</sup>

Out of Barzun's polyphonic innovation come modern phonetic poets like Pétronio, Chopin, Heidsieck, and the Garniers. It is essentially a French tradition. But there was, and is, an alternative approach; that of a predominantly German-speaking tradition in which Hausmann and Schwitters are the innovators, and Ernst Jandl their modern successor.

Barzun's tradition does not take much account either of the constructive method implicit in Schwitters' manifesto "Konsequente Dichtkunst"<sup>26</sup> or of Van Doesburg's claim that his verses "are strictly bound to laws of tempo, relationship, and contrasting

S K I b a a n

S K Y l i n e

STIP

STIP

stijgt

BLI nkt

BLI kt

BLIK

BLIK

G L I J b a a n

G L I J vlucht

GLEIS

G L I nstert

G L I mt

G L I st

G L I pt

de wing

de wong

de wimper

strijkt

strekt zich de horizon

HORIZON

woeng

G R O N D

Figure 17.

Paul de Vree,  
"Vertigo Gli."

effects of sound, whereas every troublesome, pathetic secondary gesture has been avoided."<sup>27</sup> French phonic poetry, however, is the nearest to come to a definition of concrete as *musique concrète*; a misnomer in terms of the concrete-expressive polarity, for it uses the human voice-range without regard for a clear linguistic element, modifying it electronically, and making new acoustic effects by means of cutting, speeding, slowing, and multiple re-recording. In other words, it applies electronic techniques to non-electronic material in a highly rhetorical way.

Performative electronic techniques are used by the Flemish poet, Paul de Vree, who works with the composer Jan Bruyndonckx. "Vertigo Gli" (Fig. 17 shows the text before sono-

lepn  
 nepl  
 lepn  
 nepl  
 lepn  
 nepl  
 o lepn  
 o nepl  
 nnnnnnnn  
 lopn  
 paa  
 lopn  
 paa  
 o nepl  
 o lepn  
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 oooooon  
 oooooon  
 |||||

Figure 18. Ernst Jandl, "Ode auf N."

rization) is based on the phonic and associative relation in *ski*, *bli*, and *gli*; the consonantal changes suggesting sky, looking, and sliding. Life is conceived as an air-trip; the plane takes off (*stijgt*) at birth to land again (*strijkt*, strikes sail) at death when the body meets the earth (*GROND*). The life between is an illusion, a dream, an erotic adventure. In the dazzling brightness of the upper air, the lover's glances (*BLIK*, *BLIK*) are heady, inducing giddiness. Flying into orbit (*GLIJbaan*), their bodies (and the plane's) glitter, glimmer, glide, and slide through space, transfigured as shining faience (*GLEIS*). The analogy plane-body is extended freely in wing/arm (*de wing*), engine-noise/cheek (*de wong* represents an onomatopoeic liberty with *de wang*), and whirring propeller/eye-lash (*de wimper*).<sup>28</sup> By means of continuous loops of the three basic syllables, Bruyndonckx has brought to the performance full realization of their overlapping associations. A wholly performative or rhetorical effect, however, is incorporated in the falling tone and lengthening of *HORIZON*, which suggests a headlong dive towards the earth, although this is averted in the quiet landing of *GROND*. Intuitive method produces a fine expressive phonetic poem.

Concrete phonetic poems, on the other hand, approach the definition of music as the followers of Webern understand it, except that they do not employ electronic techniques. Their purely constructive method is serial, and their means are purely phonetic. Ernst Jandl's "Ode auf N" (Fig. 18) uses both syllable and letter (*lep-n*) according to a method of counter-composition (*lep-n/nepl*)—which is the basis of a purely phonetic ode on the letter *n*—but in the course of the succession, distorted versions of the word *Napoleon* emerge. This is never pronounced as the man's name is pronounced (the "meaning" of the poem is not localized at one particular point in time) but offers an auditory analogy for Finlay's comment about the eye's natural attempt to make words out of letters: the ear tries to make words out of syllables. The disgust in the rising intensity of *naaaa*, held at the level *naaaaaaaaaaaaa* to produce a sense of crisis and impending solution, is artistically—rather than linguistically—released in *pooleon*. In this way, a constructive use of non-sense syllables achieves an effect which, while beyond the limits of common sense, is not *nonsense*.<sup>29</sup>

eile mit feile	falfischbauch
eile mit feile	falfischbauch
eile mit feile	
durch den fald	eile mit feile
	auf den fellen
durch die füste	feiter meere
durch die füste	feiter meere
bläst der find	
	falfischbauch
falfischbauch	falfischbauch
falfischbauch	fen ferd ich fiedersehn
	falfischbauch
eile mit feile	falfischbauch
eile mit feile	fen ferd ich fiedersehn
auf den fellen	fen ferd ich fiedersehn
feiter meere	falfischbauch
	fen ferd ich fiedersehn
auf den fellen	falfischbauch
feiter meere	falfischbauch
eile mit feile	
auf den fellen	ach die heimat
	ach die heimat
	fen ferd ich fiedersehn
	ist so feit

Figure 19. Ernest Jandl, "Étude in f."

But if such a method can give rise to verbal proportions, it can also transform established proportions into new ones by consonantal disfigurement and vocalic mutation. Humorous associative effects can then be combined with purely perceptual effects to produce a more traditional kind of nonsense verse using a conventional syntax. Jandl's "Étude in f" (Fig. 19) quickly establishes a variable stress-pattern based on time-lengths of equal duration, and maintains it as far as *fen ferd ich fiedersehn*. This longer duration stimulates a faster reading-rate than that of the established (and by now preferred) duration. This increase in tempo leads, in turn, to the *apparent shortening* of the objectively-given length of *falfischbauch*. Subjective shortening is an experiential, rather than an objective, fact; in this case its effect is literally to *quicken* the meaning of the *falfischbauch* predica-

ment, and force the sentimental cry *ach die heimat* from the parodist's lips. To this extent, the perception of temporal displacement is analogous to the perception of inter-metrical figure.

The De Stijl literary manifesto proclaimed that "the duality of form and content can no longer be maintained, so for the modern writer, form will have a directly spiritual meaning; it will not describe events; it will not *describe* at all, but *escribe*" (Appendix B). The only hint in that manifesto as to how this would be achieved was in phonetic terms: "It is necessary that the word be reconstituted as much according to sound as idea." If there are many poets outside a constructivist tradition who would approve of this, few have adopted constructive techniques of contrast-analogy, deviation, dislocation, and repetition in series—in the way that concrete poets have.

Concrete poetry represents polemically the search for a new metric pattern. Committed to an aesthetic favoring material-construction rather than self-expression, it seeks a meter which will produce measure. If quantities can be structured in new ways, according to a "meter" consistent with the scientific spirit of an epoch, the sensibility of the individual poet will make qualities of them. In this way he will arrive at a "measure" consistent with himself and with his time.

Some of the Brazilians see the future of concrete poetry in the arbitrary signs of semiotic poetry (see Luiz Ângelo Pinto, Fig. 20); others among them represent the referent directly by means of photographs and "ready-mades."<sup>30</sup> But Eugen Gomringer's latest work proposes the restitution of the phrase as a unit: "It's my future after ten years' constellations. But it's a normal development I think. 'Informations' is No. 1 of 3 or 4 poems which altogether will show at once my new way to find out and find in life's network."<sup>31</sup>

The search for the closest possible rapport between poetry and constructive art involved an austerity of means and material which Gomringer seems no longer prepared to bear. The word, which is pared down to its bare lexical meaning, is as close as it can get to the univocal (or unequivocal) value of a unit in a non-verbal medium. In enriching the instant by means of the phrase within a freely serial syntax, Gomringer's "Informations" (Fig. 21)

**lexical key**



**male**



**female**

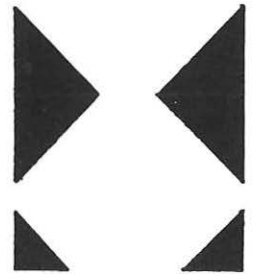
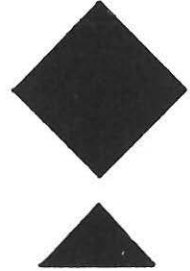
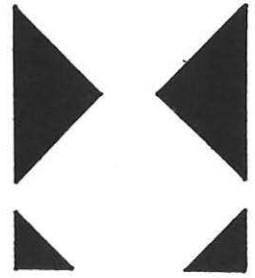


Figure 20. Luis Ângelo Pinto.

1

reflex for a time  
was it you

yet the lemon-blossom  
yet the early-evening line  
yet the waves' beat against the house

was it you  
reflex for a time

no games of chance  
no tragedy of the south  
no future in words

just the unintention of all things crossed  
just reflex for a time  
just the early-evening line

2

light filtered through filaments  
changes in the mimosa bough  
young swallow on the bough, a swing  
soundless pattern of the tortoise's walk  
twiggy wood rhythmically brought near  
daggery point snapped off  
glory of the leathery glistening leaf  
the dumb girl from magadino  
the mountain's early-evening line  
noon it was

3

light filtered through millions of filaments  
was it you

young swallow on the bough, a swing  
was it you

soundless pattern of the tortoise's walk  
was it you

daggery point snapped off  
was it you

Figure 21.  
Eugen Gomringer,  
"Informations"  
(trans. M.W.).

4

no games of chance  
yet the lemon-blossom

no tragedy of the south  
yet the early-evening line

no future in words  
yet the waves' beat against the house

5

twiggy wood rhythmically brought near  
reflex for a time

noon it was  
reflex for a time

6

the dumb girl from magadino  
yet changes in the mimosa bough

7

just the unintention of all things crossed

admits a limited amount of flow within an otherwise discontinuous structure. The generous associative force of noun and verb phrases is checked by the metric, which is supported by conjunctions. These grammatical representations combine with the phrasal imagery to concede a "subject matter" beyond the artistic "subject" of the poem. So the poem may be said to have a "theme," *The unintention of all things crossed*. In a complex "network" of reactions, images of East and West cross in conflict; Zen "reflex" crosses with Catholic "words." Perceptual and linguistic proportions modify each other aesthetically and discursively to produce verbal forms or "informations."

As concrete poetry enters its second decade, it is Gomringer, the innovator of the movement, who initiates its most important recent developments—an expansion of material, the return from a

supranational language to a native one requiring translation, and a freer rein for sensibility. Now that the new metric is established, certain freedoms are possible, even desirable, which were not so before. Its strength as art allows concrete poetry to admit the discursiveness of literature without serious loss, and occasionally with felicitous gain. No concessions to the rôle of sensibility as Mathieu conceives it need be made beyond that. Poems have a way of showing themselves as made by men, and by particular men, come what may.

<sup>1</sup>G. Mathieu, *Au delà du Tachisme* (Paris, 1963), p. 217.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, "Konkrete Kunst," *Werk*, XXV (Aug. 1938), 250-254.

<sup>3</sup>"Vom vers zur konstellation: zweck und form einer neuen dichtung," *Augenblick*, 2 (1954); translated into English in *Image* [Nov. 1964], pp. 12-13.

<sup>4</sup>See Robert Sowers, *The Lost Art: A Survey of One Thousand Years of Stained Glass* (London, 1954), p. 67: "The never-never land between the decorative and the symbolic has now become the battlefield on which the artist must cry for a *place*, literally, in our environment—where art can gain that meaning it only has when celebrating vital human activities." Visual poems such as Finlay's projects for glass are a response to such a situation.

<sup>5</sup>"Over het nieuwe vers en het aaneegeknootte touw," by I. K. Bonset [Van Doesburg], *De Stijl*, 3rd Year (1919-20), pp. 70-72; p. 71.

<sup>6</sup>*Psychological Bulletin*, XIX (Oct. 1922), 553.

<sup>7</sup>"Symptomen eener reconstructie der dichtkunst in Holland" by I. K. Bonset [Van Doesburg], *De Stijl*, 6th Year (1923-24), pp. 44-50; p. 48.

<sup>8</sup>*Anthologie Dada*, note 14 "Sur la Poésie" (Zürich, Feb. 1919); by Tzara, the editor.

<sup>9</sup>Letter to the present writer, June 14, 1964.

<sup>10</sup>"La Création Pure," *L'Esprit Nouveau*, 7 (1920), p. 773.

<sup>11</sup>C. Biederman, *Letters on the New Art* (Red Wing, Minn., 1951), p. 87: ". . . we can define the Structural Process as that which we abstract from nature pertaining to how things are constructed, which knowledge is translated into the requirements of the art inventions of man. HERE THE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN ART AND NATURE IS IN STRUCTURE ONLY, THEY ARE SIMILAR IN 'STRUCTURE' BUT NOT IN 'FORM'."

<sup>12</sup>See *L'Instabilité*, issued by the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (Paris, 1963) [n.p.].

<sup>13</sup>*Réalités Nouvelles*, 1 (1947), p. 10; or H. Arp, *Unsern täglichen Traum* (Zürich, 1955), pp. 80-81. Cf. "Poetry is a means of communicating a certain quantity of humanity—of the vitality one possesses." Tzara, *Merz* (Juli 1923), 40.

<sup>14</sup>*L'Esprit Nouveau*, 1 [1920], p. 37.

<sup>15</sup>See note 7; p. 47.

<sup>16</sup>Reprinted from *An 'Objectivists' Anthology* (1932) in *Kulchur*, 2, 7 (Autumn 1962), p. 81.

<sup>17</sup>Seiichi Niikuni, *Zero-on* (Tokyo, 1963), p. 44.

<sup>18</sup>See *konkrete poesie* 3 [pp. 11-12].

<sup>19</sup>P. Fraisse, *The Psychology of Time*, trans. J. Leith (London, 1964), p. 97.

<sup>20</sup>See P. Fraisse, "Rythmes auditifs et rythmes visuels," *Année Psychologique*, 49 (1948b), pp. 21-42.

<sup>21</sup>See Jean Mitry, *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* (Paris, 1963), I, 329-346. Prof. Mitry's strictures on abstract film or cineplastic art apply equally to kinetic art. Kinetic poetry, which continues to use signs for objects, and only abandons objects for ideas, avoids the implication of Mitry's contention that "visual rhythm is deprived of the capacity for emotion and meaning from the moment when the forms which make up its rhythm are deprived of objective meaning and initial emotional power" (p. 341). The limits of the verbal medium are also its strength; it cannot fail to produce associative representations.

<sup>22</sup>*Poème et Drame*, 4 (mai 1913). The best account of Barzun's work is in Pär Bergman, "Modernolatría" et "Simultaneità" (Uppsala, 1962), pp. 291-306.

<sup>23</sup>Apollinaire, *Les Soirées de Paris*, 25 (15 juin 1914), p. 323.

<sup>24</sup>*The New Age*, XIII (16 Oct. 1913), 728. Pound continued ". . . there is no use blinding oneself to the fact that the next great work may be written in this manner. It is not an impossibility, and M. Barzun is not altogether an imbecile." Nevertheless, he did eventually call Barzun a "lunatic" in private (*The Letters of Ezra Pound*, ed. D. D. Paige [New York, 1950], p. 134).

<sup>25</sup>Quoted by H. L. C. Jaffé, *De Stijl, 1917-1931* (London [1956]), p. 186.

<sup>26</sup>Reprinted from *G*, 3 (1924), in Hans Richter, *DADA—Kunst und Antikunst* (Köln, 1964), pp. 150-152: "Abstract poetry detaches—and this is a great service—the word from its associations and weighs word against word, special idea against idea, in terms of sound" (p. 151).

<sup>27</sup>See note 25; Jaffé, *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup>This last point is admittedly fanciful, but M. de Vree did encourage me in a letter to see the poem "in a polyvalent way, as suggestion" (February 15, 1965).

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Hans Arp, *Unsern täglichen Traum . . .* (Zürich, 1955), p. 50: "Dada is for non-sense (Ohne-Sinn) in art, which does not mean nonsense (Unsinn). Dada is without meaning (ohne Sinn) like nature."

<sup>30</sup>See *Invenção*, Ano 3, 4 (Decembro 1964); Pinto and Pignatari, "Nova linguagem, nova poesia," pp. 79-91 (with English translation); A. de Campos, "popcretos—breve exposição sôbre uma explosão de expoemas," pp. 105-106 (with French translation).

<sup>31</sup>Letter to the present writer, June 5, 1965.

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## pilot plan for concrete poetry

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. qualified space: space-time structure instead of mere linear-temporistical development. hence the importance of ideogram concept, either in its general sense of spatial or visual syntax, or in its specific sense (*fenollosa/pound*) of method of composition based on direct—analogue, not logical-discursive—juxtaposition of elements. “il faut que notre intelligence s’habitue à comprendre synthético-idéographiquement au lieu de analytico-discursivement” (*apollinaire*). *eisenstein*: ideogram and montage.

forerunners: *mallarmé* (*un coup de dés*, 1897): the first qualitative jumps: “subdivisions prismatiques de l’idée”; space (“blancs”) and typographical devices as substantive elements of composition. *pound* (the *cantos*): ideogramic method. *joyce* (*ulysses* and *finnegans wake*): word-ideogram; organic interpenetration of time and space. *cummings*: atomization of words, physiognomical typography; expressionistic emphasis on space. *apollinaire* (*calligrammes*): the vision, rather than the praxis. futurism, dadaism: contributions to the life of the problem. in brazil: *oswald de andrade* (1890-1954): “in pills, minutes of poetry”. *joão cabral de melo neto* (born 1920—the engineer and the psychology of composition plus anti-ode): direct speech, economy and functional architecture of verse.

concrete poetry: tension of things-words in space-time. dynamic structure: multiplicity of concomitant movements. so in music—by definition, a time art—space intervenes (*webern* and his followers: *boulez* and *stockhausen*; concrete and electronic music); in visual arts—spatial, by definition—time intervenes (*mondrian* and his *boogie-woogie* series; *max bill*; *albers* and perceptive ambivalence; concrete art in general).

ideogram: appeal to nonverbal communication. concrete poem is an object in and by itself, not an interpreter of exterior objects and/or more or less subjective feelings. its material: word (sound, visual form, semantical charge). its problem: a problem of functions-relations of this material. factors of proximity and similitude, gestalt psychology. rhythm: relational force. concrete poem, by using the phonetical system (digits) and analogical syntax, creates a specific linguistical area—“verbivocovisual”—which shares the advantages of nonverbal communication, without giving up word’s virtualities. with the concrete poem occurs the phenomenon of

metacommunication: coincidence and simultaneity of verbal and nonverbal communication; only—it must be noted—it deals with a communication of forms, of a structure-content, not with the usual message communication.

concrete poetry aims at the least common multiple of language. hence its tendency to nounising and verbification. “the concrete wherewithal of speech” (sapir). hence its affinities with the so-called isolating languages (chinese): “the less outward grammar the chinese language possesses, the more inner grammar inheres in it” (humboldt via cassirer). chinese offers an example of pure relational syntax, based exclusively on word order (see fenollosa, sapir and cassirer).

the conflict form-subject looking for identification, we call isomorphism. parallel to form-subject isomorphism, there is a space-time isomorphism, which creates movement. in a first moment of concrete poetry pragmatics, isomorphism tends to physiognomy, that is a movement imitation natural appearance (motion); organic form and phenomenology of composition prevail. in a more advanced stage, isomorphism tends to resolve itself into pure structural movement (movement properly said); at this phase, geometric form and mathematics of composition (sensible rationalism) prevail.

renouncing the struggle for “absolute”, concrete poetry remains in the magnetic field of perennial relativity. chronomicrometering of hazard. control, cybernetics. 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.

augusto de campos  
décio pignatari  
haroldo de campos

APPENDIX B

(translated by the present writer from *De Stijl*, 3rd year, 1919-20, pp. 49-54)

Manifesto II of *De Stijl* 1920: Literature

The organism of contemporary literature feeds on the sentimentality  
of an enfeebled generation

THE WORD IS DEAD

hackneyed naturalism and verbal film dramas  
    which book-manufacturers supply  
    by the yard and by the pound  
show nothing of the bold new moves of our day

THE WORD IS IMPOTENT

asthmatic and sentimental poetry  
the "me" and "it"  
    which is still in common use everywhere  
    and most of all in Holland  
is influenced by an individualism fearful of space  
    the dregs of an exhausted era  
and fills us with disgust

The psychology of our romantic literature  
rests on nothing but subjective imagination  
psychological analysis  
and clumsy rhetoric

have KILLED THE MEANING OF THE WORD

those phrases carefully set down one after another and one below another

that dry **FRONTAL** phraseology  
    by which the old realists presented their experiences  
    limited to themselves alone  
and completely impotent and incapable of expressing the common  
experience of our day.

To the extent that the old conception of life  
bases books on

**LENGTH DURATION**

they are

**VOLUMINOUS**

the new conception of life resides in

**DEPTH and INTENSITY**

and so we want poetry

to construct in a literary way the multiple situations  
    about us and in us

the word must be reconstructed

    to follow the **SOUND** as well as the **IDEA**

if in the old poetry  
    by the dominance of relative and subjective feelings  
the intrinsic meaning of the word is destroyed  
we want by all possible means  
    syntax  
    prosody  
    typography  
    arithmetic  
    orthography  
to give new meaning to the word and new force to expression

the duality between prose and poetry 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  
but **ESCRIBE**  
it will recreate in the word the common meaning of events  
a constructive unity of form and content

we count on the moral and aesthetic support of those who are  
collaborating for the spiritual renovation of the word

Leiden, Holland, April 1920. theo van doesburg/piet mondriaan/anthony kok.

## VISION 67: Survival and Growth

October 19, 20, and 21, 1967.

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