

Book Reviews

1. Stephen Bann (Ed.). *Concrete Poetry*. An international anthology. London: London Magazine Editions No. 13, 1967. 19g pages. 30s.
2. Eugene Wildman (ed.). *The Chicago Review Anthology of Concretism*. Chicago: Swallow Press, 1967. 157 pages. \$2.00.
3. Emmett William (Ed.). *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*. New York: Something Else Press, 1967. X + 342 pages. \$10.00 (cloth), \$3.00 (paper).

There have been many attempts to define concrete poetry. None succeed. The search for definition can, in any case, lead to "over-definition," an all too familiar procrustian process in which the *defnata* are concentrated or expanded to fit the definition. The *defnata* are then ignored in favor of the definition. The label becomes a handle. This is a common vice among would-be gourmets who read the label rather than taste the wine and among protagonists of "art for the sake of criticism."

That concrete poetry should have defied(!) definition is hardly surprising when we come to examine a representative sample, such as any of the works under review, and there find an intimate mixture of : acrostics, anagrams, emblematic verse, onomatopoeia, palindromes, paronomasia, scissors verse, and other types of word play. These types of verse are well-known; e.g., C. C. Bombaugh's *Oddities and Curiosities of Literature*¹ and G. R. Hocke's *Manierismus in der Literatur, Sprach-Alchimie und esoterische Kombinationskunst*.² One does wonder why so few writers of and on concrete poetry have used the terminology used above and in these two books.

The majority of concrete poetry falls into these categories, which have been associated with poetastery rather than poetry or, to be less extreme,

1. (New York: Dover Publications, 1874 & 1961).
 2. (Hamburg: Rowolt, 1959).
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with verse rather than poetry, so that we have a case of that widespread phenomenon whereby a pastime becomes elevated into art; e.g., the progress of jazz from fun to ethnomusicology, college from a genteel Victorian pastime to an avantguard Cubo-Dada medium, and the recent cults of comics sci-fi and pop music among the more than statistically literate. This process has been characterized by Victor Shklovsky and other “formalists” as a “canonization of the cadet branch . . . whereby Dostoevsky took the detective story and made it into an artistic dogma. . . .” Max Lerner characterized the process as a “renewal of culture by rebarbarization.” Shklovsky’s formulation is the more useful of the two because not every rebarbarization is a renewal of culture; it is only some cadet branches which get canonized. There is a great difference between renewal of art and mere pastime of pop. With concrete poetry most of it uses the forms of “curiosities and oddities,” some of it for valuable communication but some of it is just odd and curious—stop. A distinction between the two will help us to steer a difficult course between the highly partisan views *pro et contra* concrete poetry; between those who reject the whole movement because of the manifest mediocrity it includes and those who embrace the whole because of the good. It is not easy to avoid being so onesided. Our judgment is only trained by appreciating the masterpieces of the past, so that we are at sea when faced with the complexity of a contemporary movement without the accustomed chart of carefully weeded anthologies and the usual compass in the form of a body of critical literature far outweighing the corpus of the literature it criticizes.

Shklovsky said, “The history of art is not a succession of masterpieces.” The missing links between masterpieces may be popular and unart forms—such as peasant art, playing cards, the pulp press, and advertising. In the case of concrete poetry the missing link may be poetasters rather than poets, and this missing link appears between the covers of anthologies with titles such as *Verse and Worse*, *A Whimsey Anthology*, *The Complete (?) Nonsense of Edward Lear*; *(-/More/Yet More) Comic and Curious Verse*; etc. If we ignore or do not know such works, we will be prone to find a canonized cadet branch as more “original” than it is or else to reject it as barbarous. But if we keep a sense of proportion, we will be able to see the thing for what it is, or may become, and not to take it for what it is not.

Neither of the first two of the books under review are in any sense as critical or selective as this, but this is not to denigrate them because the tendency is still too young (at least under the name concrete) for it to be

easy to make a “critical” anthology. Both these books are preaching to the already converted by works, and to the still unconverted by exhortation. It is also pleasant to see so many people being so kind to each other in print, even if the reason is that they are all members of a small, highly international and leaderless circle. But it does have the result that most of the literature on concrete poetry consists of eulogies. The recent article in the *Times Literary Supplement* and the ensuing correspondence is a refreshing exception.³ Of course, eventually someone will take it on himself to debunk the myth, to prick the bubble, and to tell us we have been fooled—for some mean little personal reason. But let us not be so naive as to be ready to hop onto the anti-bandwagon. Concrete poetry, before and after the use of the term concrete, is far more than a flash-in-the-pan gimmick.

At book level, concrete poetry has used alternative forms of the book, such as the pull-out (Pre-Columbian codices, Lisitsky, and numerous advertising brochures and children’s books) and the flip-book (Max Born’s *Restless Universe*⁴ and the *Michelin X Flipbook*). Both these devices let the reader see more than two pages at once. In the case of the pull-out it is possible to see half the book at one glance; the window book allows us to see right through to one page. The assignment of text to a given page is quasi-accidental, and the turning of a page is a decisive and dichotomous event, like the opening and closing of doors, &c, &c. For this reason, the pagination of books tends to interfere with the semantic total structure of the book. To misquote, one can’t see the book for the pages. Concrete poetry may yet down the reactionary attitude which relegates to advertising and children’s books valuable forms such as pull-outs, detailed thumb indices, mechanical (pop-up) or optical 3D (the later, so far, has only been used for covers and postcards), squeak books, combination books with divided pages (heads on the top section, trunks in the middle, and legs on the bottom which enable one to make Kangerphantosceros, Rhinophanteroo, Elekangerosceros, &c.), books with tactile appeal, &c. These forms have great unexplored possibilities for textbooks of all subjects as well as art.

At page level, concrete poetry can be seen as the first really thorough attempt outside advertising at designing print *ab initio* and not as some latter-day manuscript with margins justified left and right, even line

3. “Concrete Poetry,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 3,444 (February 29, 1968), pp. 193–195; (March 14 and March 21, 1968, numbers for correspondence).

4. (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1965).

spacing, and the rest of inherited “typographical” good manners, but rather as something which can take advantage of the freedom afforded by modern setting and printing techniques in which the position, size, style of each work—or even each letter—can be meaningful. Advertising has already blazed a trail in this respect by using every device in the history of script and picture for its own financial ends. Literature and informative writing have hardly started to follow this opening for their far more important ends.

These inherited typographical good manners—if they are applied to the use of contemporary cold-type, leadless techniques—exhibit MacLuhan’s “horseless carriage effect” by applying the canons of the medieval MS. not only to letterpress but to cold-type. Traditional letterpress disposes words on the page in a way which is essentially meaningless, with the exception of paragraph indention. Such printing is read by a monotonous, jerky, scanning motion of the eye. This process of silent reading is so rapid that in the case of the not merely statistically literate many sublime words of literature are only spoken about rather than read because we naturally find them indigestible at speeds of 200–1000 wpm. Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* is a case in point.

This is one grave disadvantage of silent reading which is, of course, very useful for scanning newspapers, journals, and reference books. Should we then take to reading aloud, following the text with our fingers? This would be retrograde, though useful for *Finnegan’s Wake*. The rational answer to the eye which tries to look at flowers while galloping on horseback is either to slow the eye down by playing a recording of an understanding reading of the text or by redesigning the format and layout of the book to enhance the meaning, slow down the eye, and also make skimming more rapid by using a thumb index or a pull-out format. The trouble with our present books is that, in cybernetic terms, they are too efficiently coded.

Concrete poetry has typographic implications which are a culmination of: (1) Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* with its graphic summary of the plot, blank pages to show nothing happened, black pages to show what the dead man saw, and a marbled page to illustrate confusion. (Shklovsky greatly admired *Tristram Shandy*, which is, perhaps, the first concrete novel—though *Gargantua et Pantagruel* also has some claim for this title); (2) James Joyce’s and Samuel Beckett’s use of unpunctuated, uncapitalized sentences to represent the speech of a flat, fast talker and to force the reader to concentrate if he really wants to read the book; (3) Mayakovsky’s use of echelon line breaking, which visually represents the periods of an oration or of a poet reciting in a football stadium or concert hall at the

top of his voice. The aim is to make writing what it was in the words of the Koran and of Freud, "Writing is the voice of one who is distant." Writing is synaesthesia; it is the connection of the senses of hearing and of sight and the evocation of the one by the other.

Unpunctuated sentences, avoiding upper-case letters, stepped lines, and concrete poetry may seem gimmicky because they are sometimes used capriciously rather than functionally. But they are not just gimmicks to be discarded like broken toys or yesterday's fashion. Concrete is a vital step towards articulate communication in terms of sight and sound; a vital step in investing our present, fairly rapid but superficial, communication by typewriter and letterpress with an acoustic dimension, a personal voice like a personal handwriting. We pay so little attention to reading and writing that it almost seems a joke to many people that reading and writing were once sacred acts preceded by ablutions and prayers. Our shallow letterpress communication is becoming a facile pigeonholing-recognition rather than articulate perception and thought. We recognize rather than hear and see; we hear what we expect to hear and exclude the rest. We do not "use our eyes" or "use our heads."

An Anthology of Concrete Poetry, edited by Emmett Williams, is the most comprehensive of the three anthologies reviewed here; it gives poems in the widest selection of media: calligraphy, typewriting, letterpress, photographic, and displays on an indoor and outdoor architectural scale. The poems come from a dozen or so countries. A wide range of typographic styles are illustrated. It is pleasant to see a cut-up by Brion Gysin with whom Gregory Corso and William Burroughs worked. This is one of the few cases in which writers well-known in "conventional" (= abstract) writing have done concrete work. Burroughs has written cut-up novels. The West German/British edition has a black passepartout spine like a German schoolbook and is bound in matt silver paper which has a horrible feel. The U.S. edition is more ordinary but neutral in its binding. This anthology has no table of contents and the pages are un-numbered between pages x and 330 which is mystifying, since there are occasional page references in the notes to the poems. There is a short introduction and biographical notes at the end of the book. The standard of the contents varies greatly, but this is a reflection of the state of concrete poetry which is well represented by this book.

Concrete Poetry, an International Anthology, edited by Stephen Bann, gives poems by three groups of authors: German, Brazilian, and Anglo-Saxon. All the poems are in letterpress or typewriting; the use of color (orange) on a few pages does not make up for the lack of other media.

Generally the typography is much less varied in this volume than in the Williams anthology. It is interesting to compare the presentations of poems which both books have in common. The table of contents is no such thing, merely being a list of the authors represented. The book has a ten-page introduction, and gives a few biographical details at the beginnings of the three sections. The book has a dust wrapper of greaseproof paper which slips off when the book is picked up. This would be immaterial if the wrapper were a throw-away. The fact that it has a poem on the back and a blurb on the front would indicate that it is not. This anthology is half the size and half the price of the Williams anthology; it has a third as many poets represented and a quarter as many countries.

The Chicago Review Anthology of Concretism, edited by Eugene Wildman, presents poems from ten countries by forty poets and in a concrete way by using black pages between sections in a way reminiscent of silent films (with their titles like "Meanwhile, back at the . . .") and presents some poems with film techniques, e.g., Bory pp. 130–41. There are no potted biographies and the book represents calligraphy, typewriting, and letterpress. Within the anthology's limitation of size and price, the standard of the poems is higher than that of either of the other two anthologies. The pagination is intermittent and begins at the table of contents rather than at the first sheet after the endpaper. This prevalent custom seems a cheap trick to inflate slightly the apparent number of pages in a book. The Williams and Bann anthologies both fall foul of this. To summarize, all three anthologies are more like catalogues of an unheld exhibition than anthologies. The Chicago anthology is most like a book (and a concrete one at that) and has the highest standard. If one were to buy one anthology, one should get the Chicago one. The Williams anthology—due to its size and an inclusion of architectural poems—is perhaps more representative of concrete both good and indifferent.

For those who require detailed documentation, *Between Poetry and Painting*⁵ (including the masterly telegraphese "Chronology" by Dom Sylvester Houedard) is recommended. The Chronology is a history of concrete poetry before and after the term concrete. The title of this publication is misleading because it implies that concrete poetry is a visual poetry. This is to ignore sound poetry and does not include the majority of concrete poetry which, if it is between any two things, is between poetry and typography rather than between poetry and painting.

Between Poetry and Painting is also valuable because it gives pre-concrete

5. (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1965).

concrete poetry, some of which is top flight poetry although less adventurous in form than contemporary work having a more significant content. This is to be expected because one can hardly expect three anthologies of poems containing works by 70, 20, and 40 poets, alive at the time, to contain more than a handful of works of the calibre of some of the best works of Apollinaire, Pierre Albert-Birot, Van Doesburg, Lewis Carroll, and Mallarmé whose lives span a century.

Bluntly speaking, concrete poetry could become far more concrete by transcending typewriter and letterpress, and it has room to become far more poetic. No doubt more poets with more to say will be attracted to concrete poetry when it has developed into the vacuum our muscle-bound typography has left due to its heritage of letterpress—provided, of course, that the centrifugal force of our wheel of fashion in art (driven as it is by a consumer-like thirst for novelty) has not tossed concrete poetry into the rubbish heap of history.

Peter Mayer

Peter Mayer (34a Lanhill Road, London W9, England) is a poet, a scholar in classical Chinese, and a Chinese calligrapher. His concrete poems have appeared in several periodicals, and his articles on letterforms and visual semantics have appeared in such publications as *Typographica*.

John Russell Taylor. *The Art Nouveau Book in Britain*. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1966, 175 pp. \$12.95.

The title of John Russell Taylor's monograph, *The Art Nouveau Book in Britain*, is unusual since it very accurately describes its contents, a rare occurrence today. Taylor deals with two closely related subjects, book illustration and book design. It is clearly the latter which particularly interests him, but since Aubrey Beardsley had to be included—though he was an illustrator who seems to have had little to do with the over-all design of the publications in which his works appeared—it was necessary, at least in part, to divorce illustration from design in its entirety. Illustration—or, more properly, decoration—does play a role in most of the material which Taylor covers, but certainly that is a result of its nature, not the author's bias.

Art historians have for some years been aware of the germinal importance of English book decoration in the development of the first phase of twentieth-century design, the movement popularity called the art nouveau style. But Taylor's is the first work to focus upon this material. The major figures of the movement are widely known, but in his investigation of the minor masters Taylor was mapping new territory, and he has succeeded both in pointing out all of the significant landmarks and also in indicating quite accurately their relative importance. Later travelers may quibble with him about details and insist that, after all, Jessie King is not so interesting an artist as he had led us to believe, or that Lucien Pissarro, as a book designer if not as a painter and print maker, was very much a part of the English tradition; but fundamentally, Taylor's opinions will, I think, prove to be sound. Perhaps of even greater importance is his stylistic analysis of English art nouveau books. He demonstrates quite conclusively that the curvilinear and rectilinear aspects of the style coexist in time from the beginning and are not successive, as has widely been presumed by critics who have concentrated their attention on the continental manifestations of the style. On the basis of this insight alone, Taylor's work should be widely influential.

He runs into problems, however, when he attempts to place English art nouveau books within a broader historical context. There are small errors of fact which are easily corrected. It was Lalique's jewelry, not his glass, in which "the sinuous lines run free." His glass, which he began to make only about 1910, was more tightly designed. The "cool domestic Wren" does not exist. For all practical purposes, nothing is known of his style in domestic buildings. There are also errors of stylistic interpretation which are more difficult to correct without lengthy argument. For example, his contention that "Continental art nouveau is a reaction against form itself . . ." is certainly debatable. To contest its validity, one need only mention the name Gaudi, but proof of its error would require a complete historical survey of the movement. This is but one example of several such generalizations which are much too broad and ill defined to be sustained.

For readers especially interested in Taylor's subject, a few additions and corrections to the core of his text may be of interest. On page 84 he states that each of Rickett's books was conceived freshly in terms of its literary materials. Though generally correct, an exception was the Vale Press Shakespeare in which the volumes were uniform in size, binding, and type, with borders of three designs for the tragedies, comedies, and histories. In his discussion of the books of Lucien Pissarro, pages 121-122, Taylor implies that color was an important factor in all of his productions,

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while, in fact, some were entirely in black and white, others in black and white with red marginal titles and chapter headings, quite in the fashion of Vale Press books. On page 144 Taylor presumes that the illustrations of Ricketts' *De Cupidinis et Psyche's Amoribus* were made at the time of publication, 1901, but in his *The Vale Press Bibliography* Ricketts states that the illustrations for this volume had been on hand for a considerable time. One of Taylor's few significant omissions is a mention of the picture books for adults illustrated by William Nicholson and published by William Heinemann in the 90's. They included *An Almanac of Twelve Sports* with texts by Rudyard Kipling, *An Alphabet*, and *London Types* with verses By W. E. Henley.

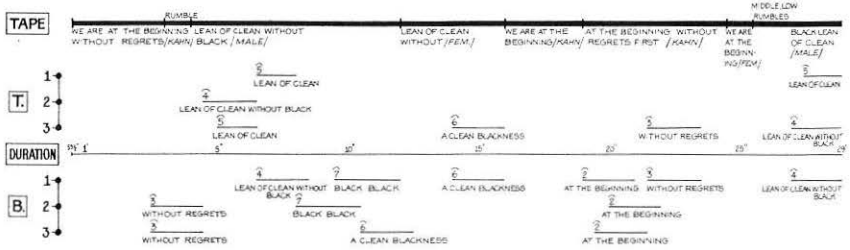
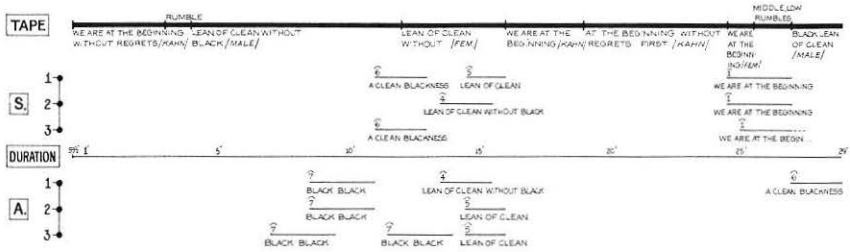
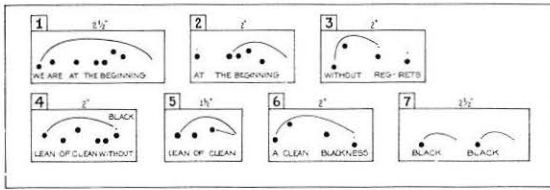
Henry Hawley

Henry Hawley (Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio 44106) is associate curator of decorative arts, in charge of post-Renaissance decorative arts of Europe and America (1600 to the present). He has lectured on the art nouveau style, a subject of particular interest to him. Privately, he collects books in that style.

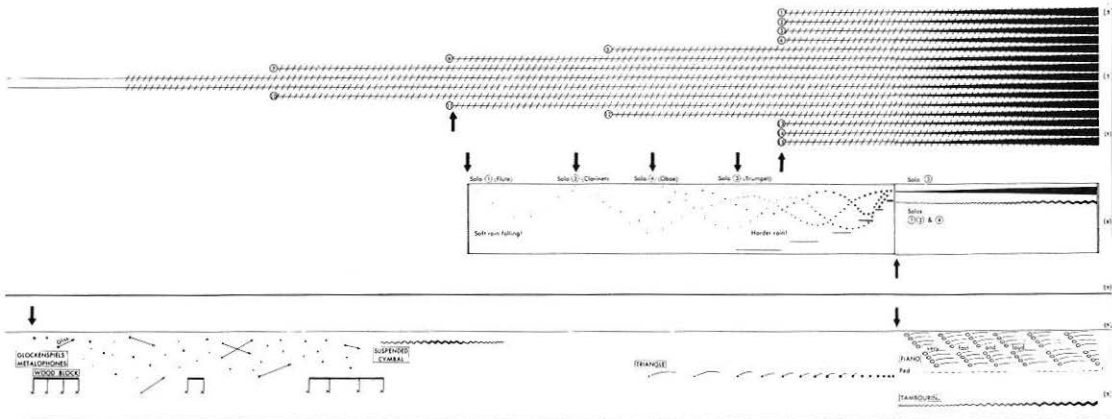
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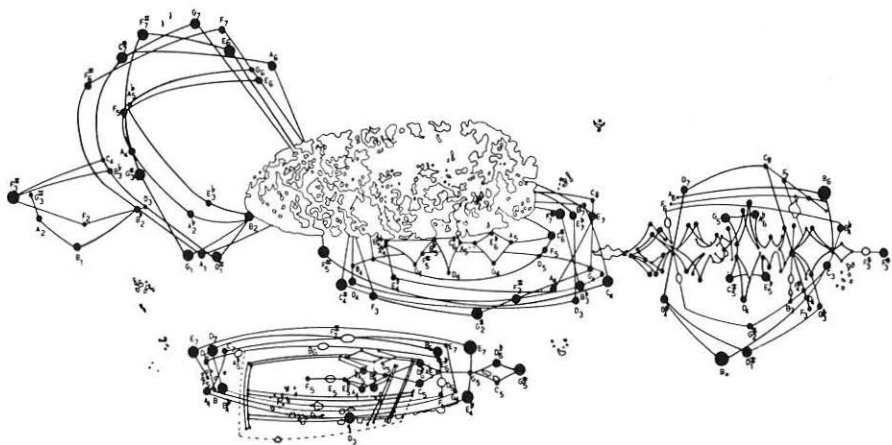
M. François Richaudeau has prepared an advance publication of *Le Processus de Lecture* (the reading process) and will be pleased to forward copies without charge to readers requesting them from: M. François Richaudeau, 114 Champs Elysées, Paris, France.

REPERTORY





Istvan Anhalt
Cento on Eldon Grier's "An Ecstasy" (Cantata Urbana), © 1968
 for twelve voices and magnetic tape





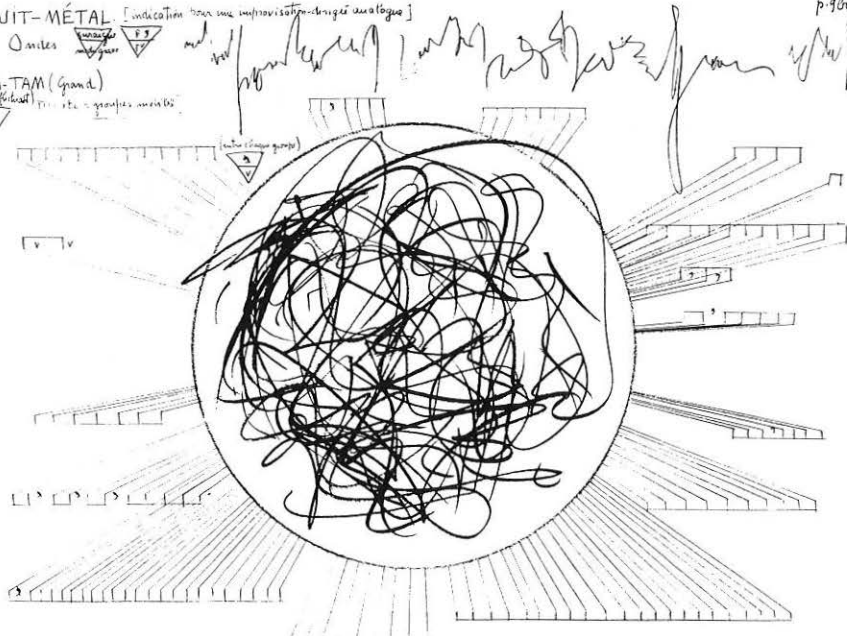
George Cacioppo
Cassiopeia (Pianopiece #3), © 1968

BRUIT-MÉTAL [indication pour une improvisation-désordre analogue]

Ombres  

TAM-TAM (Grand)
 (unif. / fort) p. 101 - 102 - 103 - 104 - 105 - 106 - 107 - 108 - 109 - 110 - 111 - 112 - 113 - 114 - 115 - 116 - 117 - 118 - 119 - 120

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Gilles Tremblay
Kekoba, © 1968
 for three solo voices, percussion and Ondes Martenot