

Perhaps the linguists have unconsciously answered this question in concentrating their attention not on the "disorder" of spoken language but on "language organized for visual presentation."

But to answer Abercrombie: the reason attention has seldom been drawn to "this curious fact" is that the linguists' theory of the primacy of speech has hardened into a dominating myth. Earlier we agreed to go along—for the sake of argument—in the assumption that in making this interpretation the linguists were right. But what if the linguists are wrong?

What if a more fruitful interpretation of "primacy" in this case is being preparatory to something higher, as in "primary school"? Isn't it just possible that speech in early childhood, speech by primitive man, and speech in conversation provide the purchase for man's development and utilization of a more distinct and, perhaps in some ways, a more sophisticated visible language system? We don't know yet. But let's leave the door ajar. No, let's do more than that:

Let's recycle pertinent research and theory from the disciplines that impinge on language—setting aside foregone conclusions—and try to sort out the underlying relationship among language, per se, and its two media of visible and audible expression.

Let's acknowledge at least the possibility that writing is not just speech written down, and design some crucial experiments that will concentrate on phoneme/grapheme *differences*.

Let's acknowledge the lack of fit between our written forms and our spoken forms, and examine ways to make our visible verbal expression a more efficient notation system for *language*.

Let's ease the pendulum back, and make the study of visible language as a distinct phenomenon respectable linguistic research again.

Merald E. Wrolstad, Editor

1. See, for example, the periodical *Kroklok*, edited by Dom Silvester Houedard and published by Writers Forum (262 Randolph Avenue, London W9).

2. London: Oxford University Press, 1965, pp. 6–7.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 5. 4. *Ibid.*, p. 4. 5. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

6. San Francisco, *et al.*: Chandler Publishing, 1972, pp. 7 and 180.

7. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972.

8. "Neanderthal Man Gets Downgrading," *The New York Times*, April 7, 1972.

9. Abercrombie, p. 4. 10. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

Typography and the Visual Concrete Poem

Mary Ellen Solt

The visual concrete poet is concerned with the relationship of typography to meaning. Constructive concrete poetry uses the lower-case, sans-serif letter almost exclusively. Increasingly poets are finding this practice too restrictive and are following the example of Mallarmé, who used typography expressively. The early manifestoes of concrete poetry emphasized Mallarmé's influence in the direction of spatial syntax and ideogrammic construction. It needs to be recognized that visual concrete poetry relates to *all* the stages of ideogrammic development and that the kind of ideogram the poet is presenting will influence his typographical choices. If concrete poetry is to remain a viable new genre, its visual potential must be liberated rather than restricted.

It is not a matter of indifference how any poem looks on the page. When we see a traditional poem printed in neat, metrically-regulated stanzas or a free-verse poem of many words and a variety of line lengths, certain expectations relating to the nature of what we will be experiencing as formal expression are aroused in us before we have read a word. In other words, we grasp part of the abstract formal content of any poem as we perceive the image made by the words printed on the page. If the traditional poem happens to have been printed on fine paper and set in beautiful type by a master typographer who was able to realize the full visual potential of the text, we will perceive it as an image of higher aesthetic quality than if it had been given an ordinary printing; but this dimension of typographical beauty will be less related to content than in the visual concrete poem in which the aesthetic qualities of letter forms are consciously employed by the poet to intensify the meanings of words.

A new visual poetry began to appear in the early 1950s in the "constellations" of Eugen Gomringer of Switzerland and in the *verbivocovisual* "ideograms" of the Noigandres Group of Brazil (Augusto De Campos, Haroldo De Campos, and Décio Pignatari). In

with the lyric purity of his voice.⁹ Gomringer's typographical stance should be understood also as an act of integrity; for he sees as a central problem that when concrete poets try to be graphic artists and graphic artists try to be poets, the results are frequently inferior poetry, inferior design, or both.¹⁰

The Pilot Plan of the Noigandres Group also emphasizes the spatial-ideographic aspects of the debt to Mallarmé; however his use of "typographical devices" is mentioned along with the "physiological typography" of e. e. cummings as important in the evolution of concrete poetry. These points represent distillations of views of the Noigandres Group expressed by Augusto De Campos in an earlier essay "Points-Periphery-Concrete Poetry" (1956). In that essay De Campos stresses the importance of *Un Coup de dés*: "that 'great typographic and cosmogonic poem,' worth more by itself than all the vanguardist shoutings of some years later." He goes on to say: "the first corollary of the Mallarméan process is the necessity for a functional typography, reflecting with true efficiency the metamorphoses, or the ebb and flow of thought . . . the use of different typefaces." De Campos mentions also Marinetti's declaration against the "so-called typographic harmony of the page." And he notes that "without falling into *lettrisme*, or the forming of sonorous groups of letters without meaning, Cummings frees the word from its grapheme, and puts its formal, visual, and phonetic elements into focus."¹¹

What needs to be emphasized, as concrete poetry becomes increasingly visual and typographical, is that *Un Coup de dés* contains the leaven for a revolution in poetry that makes it possible for the concrete poem to ally itself legitimately with either of the main-streams of contemporary art: constructivist or expressionist. The early critical-typographical stance which questions the "concreteness" of the expressive poem is in need of revision. Mike Weaver, for example, in his important article "Concrete Poetry" (1966) identifies "cool" with concrete and "warm" with expressive in "psychological terms." This leads him into such inconsistencies as admitting that Max Bill "concedes that concrete art may find expression in various ways" and that "constructive art is just one of them" and at the same time questioning the concreteness of expressive visual poetry. Seiichi Niikuni's use of characters expressively in space leads him to the conclusion

that "the Japanese medium seems, on the whole, more suited to expression rather than concretion." He seems here to forget that the members of the Noigandres Group based their ideogrammic method on the Chinese written character as its influence was felt in the work of Ezra Pound. To insist that the term "concrete" is ultimately legitimate only in relation to early constructive models, is to render it meaningless in relation to subsequent developments and to retard the acceptance of concrete poetry as a new literary genre which came into being as an important twentieth-century manifestation of a long tradition of visual forms which have appeared from time to time throughout the history of literature. When Weaver objects that "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 and not calligraphy,"¹² he overlooks the fact that the Chinese written character, upon which the Noigandres method of composition is ultimately based, is calligraphic in origin and that the calligraphic impulse underlies all spatial-ideographic manipulations of words. It is especially present where expressive uses of typography are concerned.

Recent studies of *Un Coup de dés* by David W. Seaman and Gerald L. Bruns have brought to our attention Mallarmé's concern with typography as a "rite."¹³ Both give us insights into the relationship between typography, structure, and meaning which do much to clarify the problem of typography in the concrete poem. Bruns states that Mallarmé's ultimate purpose was to "liberate poetic language" from the "mediating function" of "ordinary speech," which must bridge the gap between "the world of things and the universe of meaning." This liberation was to be accomplished through substitution of "the syntax of music for the syntax of speech." The syntax of music was "to be realized typographically . . . within the spatial field." Bruns goes on to say that the organization of the poem presents a "concurrence of themes that are distinguished chiefly by different points of type." Typography—"the technology of the written and finally printed word"—becomes "a principle of composition."¹⁴ Seaman's sample page based on the NRF edition of *Un Coup de dés* contains seven type styles and point sizes. He concludes that Mallarmé used different type sizes and faces expressionistically as well as structurally to "underscore different moods in the text."¹⁵

Both Seaman and Bruns present evidence which indicates that Mallarmé was to some extent preoccupied with letters as hieroglyphic signs: "In *Les Mots anglais*," according to Seaman, "Mallarmé lists as one of his aims a demonstration of 'le rapport qui existe entre le sens des mots . . . et leur configuration extérieure'." Certain letters are seen by Mallarmé as "initials" for the words in which they are used. The second letter of the alphabet, for example, appears to him to be "the initial of words for production, birth, and fecundity (among others)" such as: "build," "board," "bed," "breast," etc.¹⁶ Bruns' conclusion is, though, that while Mallarmé is interested in the hieroglyphic properties of letters, he "seems finally less concerned with the content of these hieroglyphs than with their function."¹⁷

We now have a large corpus of visual poetry which is generally referred to as "concrete." The legitimacy of that label can be defended if we are willing to accept *Un Coup de dés* as the crucial poem in the evolution of concrete poetry in terms of its full typographic dimension: structural and expressive. Mallarmé teaches us that type style can be organic with form and content, which in the fully-achieved concrete poem are "isomorphic": form = content/content = form.¹⁸ In the constructive concrete poem, which invites the reader to participate in its spatial-ideographic relationships, the neutral, unobtrusive typeface plays a functional role: it *facilitates expression*. This does not minimize the importance of its pleasing aesthetic quality nor the over-all sign quality of the poem. In the expressive concrete poem, type style is *expression*. The expressive concrete poet's use of the lines, curves, and sometimes colors of letterforms would seem to parallel Kandinsky's expressive use of color, line, and shape. Kandinsky has for so long been labelled an "abstract" painter that it is generally forgotten that he referred to his compositions which "had to wait for the dictates of the 'mysterious voice'" as "concrete," the "key" to whose "value" lay in "the force of expression."¹⁹ And it should be mentioned that the same calligraphic impulse that underlies the expressive use of typography is also evident in expressionist painting.

It is the representational poem that makes it most difficult to use the term "concrete" in its orthodox, constructive definition. Weaver quotes Vincent Huidobro to the effect 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."²⁰ The fact that so many words refer specifically to objects makes for particular problems where poetry is concerned. Also man's calligraphic impulse originates with the desire to represent in a form of writing what man sees. Visual concrete poetry can be viewed as an advanced, highly-sophisticated stage of writing, just as typography can be viewed as an advanced form of writing with machines. Critics have been reluctant to include calligraphic poems in the concrete canon. In his "Introduction" to the purest of all anthologies of concrete poetry, Stephen Bann objects that "Concrete Poetry is too often confused with the 'Calligrammes' of Apollinaire, and their modern equivalents, in which lines of text are ingeniously manipulated in order to imitate natural appearances."²¹ The Noigandres Pilot Plan, however, through its recognition that *there are degrees of concreteness*, makes it possible to see Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* and similar works as a primitive form of concrete poetry. The Pilot Plan speaks of a "first moment of concrete poetry pragmatics" when "isomorphism . . . the conflict form-subject looking for identification . . . tends to physiognomy, that is a movement imitating natural appearance."²² Elsewhere in the Pilot Plan Apollinaire is credited with having realized that it is now necessary that we learn to think ideographically rather than analytically and discursively: "Il faut que notre intelligence s'habitue à comprendre synthético-idéographiquement au lieu de analytico-discursivement."²³ Noigandres criticism of Apollinaire centers upon his failure to develop the "poetic ideogram" beyond the stage of "mere figurative representation of theme" with the result that "the structure is obviously imposed on the poem."²⁴ Apollinaire himself used the term "idéogramme" to define the form of his *Calligrammes*.²⁵

Sergei Eisenstein's discussion of "The Cinematic Principle and the Ideogram" is most clarifying when related to concrete poetry. Tracing the development of hieroglyphic writing from the early "naturalistic image of an object" to the later combinatorial or "copulative" stage in which hieroglyphs (which correspond to objects) are fused into ideograms (which correspond to concepts),²⁶ Eisenstein provides a basis for our seeing the various kinds of visual concrete poetry as related to a process of concretion that begins with attempts to depict reality by means of the calligraphic or typographic word

image and ends with complex structural combinations of words into ideograms.

When the concrete poem is thought of relative to different stages of ideogrammic development, much of the difficulty experienced in admitting expressive and representational poems to the concrete genre disappears. The fact that Seaman uses the term "concrete" in his historical survey of visual and other non-conventional forms from the third century B.C. to the present without apparent difficulty is significant. For we can see by this that poets, typographers, and critics involved in the international concrete poetry movement have tended to overstress the relationship to constructive art, forgetting that poetry is first and foremost a form of literature.

The possibility for the appearance of visual poetry on the literary scene is always present as witnessed by many examples from past centuries. The fact that the visual concrete poem made its appearance following World War II simultaneously in so many languages and cultures cannot be unrelated to the needs of contemporary man where language and communication are concerned. When the constructive and expressive visual poem are seen as two sides of the same coin, a satisfactory definition derived from the Noigandres Pilot Plan can be formulated: CONCRETE POETRY MEANS VERBIVOCOVISUAL POSSIBILITIES.²⁷ And these possibilities will be realized to an important degree by the poet's typographical choices.

1. Mary Ellen Solt, ed., *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1968), "A World Look at Concrete Poetry," pp. 8-16, 12; Eugen Gomringer, "From Line to Constellation," tr. Mike Weaver, p. 67; Augusto De Campos, Décio Pignatari, Haroldo De Campos, "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry," tr. by the authors, pp. 71-72. Hereafter referred to as *Solt*.
2. See "4 variationen zmu thema '4 = vier'" ; MONUMENTS DORÉS (3); "roads 68" in Eugen Gomringer, *Worte sind Schatten, Die Konstellationen 1951-1968* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowalt, 1969), pp. 45-50, 98-100, 129-130. Hereafter referred to as *Worte*.
3. Eugen Gomringer, "vom vers zur konstellationen," *Ibid.*, p. 277. Quoted phrases are from an unpublished translation by Mark Cory. (Long version of "From Line to Constellation.")
4. See Augusto De Campos "eis os amantes," LUXO, "Ôlho por Ôlho"; Haroldo De Campos, "ALEA I, Semantic Variations"; Décio Pignatari, LIFE, Semiotic Poem; Luiz Ângelo Pinto, Semiotic Poem; Ronaldo Azeredo, VELOCIDADE in *Solt*, inside cover poem and pp. 96, 98; 105-106; 109, 110, 111; 117.

5. Hansjörg Mayer, statement in *Between Poetry and Painting*, ed. Jasia Reichardt (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1966), p. 67 (exhibition catalogue).
6. "Pilot Plan," *Solt*, p. 71.
7. Eugen Gomringer, "The First Years of Concrete," tr. Stephen Bann, *Form*, 4 (1967), 18; "silencio," *Solt*, p. 91; "From Line to Constellation," *Solt*, p. 67.
8. Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, "Modern Typography. Aims, Practice, Criticism"; "Bauhaus and Typography" in Hans M. Wingler, *The Bauhaus*, tr. Wolfgang Jabs and Basil Gilbert, ed. Joseph Stein (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1969), pp. 80-81; 114-115.
9. Eugen Gomringer, *Die Konstellationen 1953-1962* (Frauenfeld, Switzerland: Eugen Gomringer Press, [1962]).
10. Eugen Gomringer, "Poesie als Mittel der Umweltgestaltung" ["Poetry as a Medium for the Structuring of a Social Environment"], Lecture delivered Youth Culture Week, Innsbruck, April 30, 1969. Published: Itzehoe, Hansen & Hansen, 1969. Unpublished translation by Mark Cory from carbon sent to author May 5, 1969.
11. "Pilot Plan," *Solt*, pp. 71-72; Augusto De Campos, "Points-Periphery= Concrete Poetry" from "Theory of Concrete Poetry: Introduction," tr. Jon M. Tolman from Augusto De Campos, Haroldo De Campos, Décio Pignatari, *Teoria de Poesia Concreta: Textos Críticos E Manifestos 1950-1960* (São Paulo: Edições Invenção, 1965) in *Studies in the Twentieth Century*, VII (1971), 39-40, 43, 47. Hereafter referred to as *Studies*.
12. Mike Weaver, "Concrete Poetry," *The Journal of Typographic Research*, I, 3 (1967), 302-303, 306. Reprinted from *The Lugano Review*, I, 5-6 (1966). Hereafter referred to as *Weaver*.
13. Gerald L. Bruns, "Mallarmé: The Transcendence of Language and the Aesthetics of the Book," *The Journal of Typographic Research*, III, 3 (1969), 228. Hereafter referred to as *Bruns*.
14. *Ibid.*, 219, 233, 291.
15. David William Seaman, *French Concrete Poetry: The Development of a Poetic Form, From Its Origins to the Present Day*, Stanford University, Ph.D., 1970 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms), 208, 209. Hereafter referred to as *Seaman*. See also Seaman's "The Development of Visual Poetry in France," *Visible Language*, VI (Winter 1972), 19-44.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 244.
17. *Bruns*, p. 228.
18. "Pilot Plan," *Solt*, p. 72.
19. Wassily Kandinsky, "The Value of a Concrete Work," *XX^e Siècle*, II, 1 (1939), unpagged.
20. Weaver, p. 302. Quote from: Vincent Huidobro, "La Création Pure," *L'Esprit Nouveau*, VII (1920), 773.
21. Stephen Bann, ed., "Introduction," *Concrete Poetry, An International Anthology* (London: London Magazine Editions, 1967), p. 11.
22. "Pilot Plan," *Solt*, p. 72.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
24. Augusto De Campos, *Studies*, p. 45.
25. *Seaman*, p. 291.
26. Sergei, Eisenstein, *Film Form, Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and tr. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1949), pp. 28-30.
27. "Pilot Plan," *Solt*, p. 72.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The poet's suggestions for typographic treatment normally do not accompany the printed poems, but are included here as an addendum to the preceding article.

leaf Mary Ellen Solt

"leaf" requires a graceful serif face so that the hieroglyphic "f" in subtly bolder type can be seen to fall through the poem. An italic face would overdo it, I feel. The poem should be placed upper-right on the page to suggest the poems written on Japanese scrolls. [Typeface: Garamond]

s Mary Ellen Solt

The words constellate around the letter "s" which serves as a kind of hieroglyphic rhyme. Perhaps a light gothic face with its sinuous "s" would be the best typographical solution. The "s" should not stand out too much from the rest of the text. An italic face would be too obviously expressive. [Typeface: Grotesque 215]

daughters Mary Ellen Solt

"daughters" plays upon sound contrasts: the hollow sound of "daughters" and "poppies" is modified by the introduction of "i" sounds: "night" "in." The tight visual pattern of the first two word groups is allowed to relax after "night," which has a softening effect on "daughters" and "poppies." The lyrical italic "night" should contrast typographically with the rest of the words. A sans-serif or simple serif face with round "o's" would best suit the sound textures. [Typeface: Bembo]

ZIGZAG Mary Ellen Solt, printed by Algar Dole

The original ZIGZAG was printed by the author on Japanese rice paper using wood type from the collection of the Fine Arts Department, Indiana University. The form of the poem is "orthodox" concrete, but the use of wood-type capitals departs from the customary machine printing and lower-case letter. I am willing to say that the poem had to be written in order to provide an excuse to use this "Z"—an initial for the word, as Mallarmé might say.

The original printing did not achieve the full optical effect I wanted. The letters were placed somewhat at an angle on the block making it extremely difficult to print a straight line (even with a ruler to push against). I had to start over several times. Also it was not possible to make the space between the letters precise enough. And I needed more space than the width of the rice paper to get the fullness of design needed. Another printing solution had to be found.

The ZIGZAG presented here was pasted up from photographed letters and printed by photo silkscreen process by Algar Dole. I would like to see the poem made into a rug.

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r o a d s

t r a c k s

r i v e r s

d r e a m s

daughters and
poppies and

poppies and
daughters and

night

in daughters and
poppies and

l e a f

f a l l

f a l l

l e a f

f a l l

i n g