

# An Introduction to the Visual Syntax of Concrete Poetry

Aaron Marcus

Many different forms of concrete poetry have emerged in the past twenty years. One way to appreciate, describe, and compare these works is to examine them in terms of their visual syntax. This includes emphasis on figure-field relationships, implied depth, spatial structure, and movement. Examples are presented which illustrate basic types of visual organization and are analyzed to relate their visual syntax to their total meaning. This initial classification could be elaborated and supplemented to provide a basis for a semiotic of concrete poetry.

After a period of quiescence following World War I, the awakening of the modern eye to the full potential for communication of the visible word began again in earnest with the emergence of the concrete poetry movement. This renaissance is credited primarily to the activities of the Noigandres group in Brazil and Eugen Gomringer in Germany. Manifestos of their intentions appeared in the middle of the 1950s stating that concrete poetry involved the "conscious study of the material and its structure . . . ; material means the sum of all the signs with which we make poems."<sup>1</sup> In particular this implied less dependence on the mimetic qualities of conventional narrative text and a greater attention to the development of new visual structure by examination of linguistic units.

The flourishing of the movement has brought forth an abundance of work in many countries. Anthologies have attempted to gather and, to some extent, analyze the work. The task has been difficult, however, for the collected body of recent concrete poetry has been exceedingly heterogeneous and has defied attempts at categorization. Several major anthologies have resorted to an ordering of the work by alphabetically listing the author/artist or by listing the geographical area of production. One anthology, the catalogue of an exhibit of concrete poetry in Amsterdam, did present a beginning section of

visual analysis entitled "some forms and working methods in visual poetry."<sup>2</sup> However, these concepts were not continued throughout the catalogue. The various themes emerging from these anthologies emphasize the following:

words	collages	color
letters	figured texts	surrealism
constellations	non-type	spatialism
sounds	newspapers	alphabets
typographic styles	found poems	political engagement
verbal semantics	poem objects	visual tautologies
phoneticism	kineticism	information

One is left in a confusion of claims and counter claims for the proper areas of concern of concrete poetry. There is a consequent difficulty in describing, comparing, and evaluating different works. Concrete poetry<sup>3</sup> has significance in terms of the advancement of poetic forms but also in terms of the development of all forms of text presentation which aim at documentation, persuasion, arousal, or expression condensed into a relatively limited visual formulation. The field of concrete poetry is a proving ground for developments of text forms in general. This supplements the pressure for change in verbal forms which arises from the poster, the magazine, movies, and television.

One approach to understanding concrete poetry is to return to the fundamentals of the work—its essential visual structure—for that is what it seeks first of all to affirm. This suggests examining the basic visual qualities of the work as a means of appreciating the poem's particular aesthetic stance. This essay is intended as a beginning study of this approach and utilizes work that has appeared in anthologies of concrete poetry.

This methodology accepts the conceptual structure of a visual semiotic<sup>4</sup> and seeks first of all a clarification of visual syntax in order to appreciate the important changes that concrete poetry is bringing to traditional linear text forms. This approach attempts to establish a descriptive and hopefully explicative taxonomy of forms of concrete poetry. In doing so it creates a strong basis for further analysis of the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of the work. To explore the visual syntax of a concrete poem suggests giving attention to several modes of visual statements: figure-field relationships, implication or direct

statement of depth, spatial structure, and movement. These concepts are explained and treated separately in later sections of this essay.

The accompanying diagrams (pages 356–360) are meant to indicate abstract, archetypal formal organizations. According to Wertheimer's principle of objective set<sup>5</sup> they can serve as a normative conceptual framework for describing and explaining the works shown in the accompanying figures. The square diagrams are meant to indicate figure-field relationships. The circular diagrams are meant to indicate particular text-figure relationships only. This analysis is not complete, in the sense that each diagrammatic possibility is not substantiated by an example. This is acceptable in the author's opinion because certain forms may not necessarily have been used to a great extent. In addition, the length of this initial presentation could become inordinately long, and a partial substantiation is sufficient to indicate the point of view of the analysis and to demonstrate its procedural validity.

### *Aspects of Visual Syntax*

Figure-field relationships are fundamental to the emergence of visual form. Every object is seen with respect to some background, and it establishes a particular visual presence in terms of its magnitude (size and shape), position, and orientation judged against this field. Some of the factors which influence the reading of figure-field relationships, as pointed out by Arnheim,<sup>6</sup> are the qualities of enclosed forms, spatial proximity, texture, suggestion of bottom vs. top, convexity of forms, horizontal vs. oblique positioning, constancy and simplicity of shape, and suggestions of overlap. The figure-field relationship is a distinctive and significant aspect of the syntactic meaning of a work.

An object is interpreted by the mind as existing in space within a two- or three-dimensional field. Even if the visual statement is physically two-dimensional, there are strong clues present that influence the viewer's mind and evoke a reading of implied depth. Such factors as perspective of position (i.e., textural and size gradients or linear perspective), blur or changes of color, and overlap (transparency, translucency, and opacity) are significant for the interpretation of depth.<sup>7</sup>

An object may have an internal organization or it may appear with other objects in a configuration of elements within a visual field. This arrangement can be described in terms of points, lines, and planes.

These are simple and straight-forward but useful conceptions. The point implies visual attention focused on a specific centralized area. The line suggests a beginning and an end to directed movement, and the plane implies a surface oriented in space. Of equal importance is the concept of regular or irregular divisions of the visual field stated explicitly or implied by the point, line, or plane elements of the composition. This structuring of the total visual field is as characteristic and significant as coloration or any other particular visual qualities of elements within the field.

The structure of the composition may change with time. This may be due to motion; i.e., actual physical or kinetic alteration of the figure or of the field. It may also be due to movement; i.e., the shifting of the viewer's attention and/or the dynamic sensation of directed tensions caused by some aspects within the composition that can be seen as shifts from a visually neutral state. Movement can arise from perceptual gradient (of shape, colors, and intervals), the kinaesthetic experience of wedges and oblique lines, incomplete figures, and various distortions of implied simple shapes, intervals, angles, etc.<sup>8</sup>

Traditional linear text forms of which poetry is a subset have developed over the centuries a consistent and powerful appearance that demands certain conventions of reading. The typography generally appears to exist upon a single abstract plane more or less centered within the field. The viewer is brought into the visual composition at the upper left (Diag. 1) and is directed to mechanically scan horizontal line after horizontal line, gaining rhythmic import visually from the length of lines and subordinately from certain qualities of the typographic forms. Emerging at the lower right, one is propelled from the field. The figure-field relationship of the poem usually connotes a sense of neutrality or emptiness of significance. Of course, this is a judgment relative to visual compositions in general and to concrete poetry in particular. The margins are usually large and relatively neutral. The interior of the poem figure itself is very neutral: the interlinear spacing is constant, the interword spacing is constant, the interletter spacing is constant, the intraletter spacing is constant. Not precisely constant, but the fluctuations are intended to be extremely subtle or non-existent.

In contrast, much of concrete poetry questions the assumptions about the size, shape, orientation, texture, physical material, grid

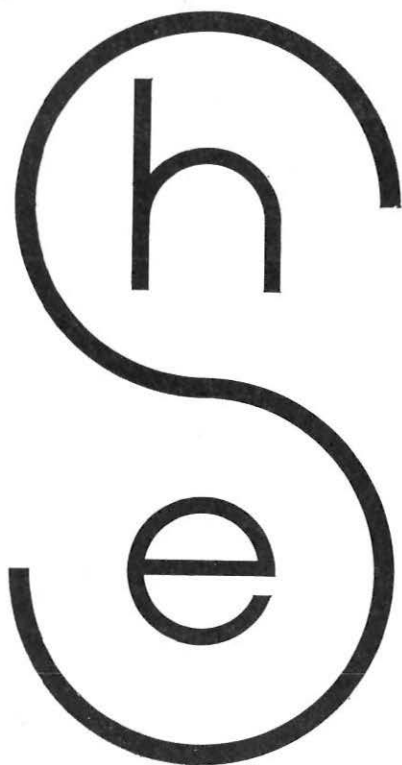
structure, color, depth, and movement of symbols in a field. The following part of this essay analyses examples of recent concrete poetry with respect to the categories stated earlier and under certain limitations or restrictions. The material is drawn from two major anthologies which have appeared in book form.<sup>9</sup> The reproductions have usually been single illustrations in black and white; variations of gray value or hue have been infrequent. Coloration and kineticism as primary visual factors have not, therefore, been treated although work in both areas has been done by some concrete poets.<sup>10</sup> The communication of the color work has suffered from financial limitations for color printing. This is unfortunate because of the relevance of the work to the increased use of color printing in many large-circulation books, newspapers, and magazines. The aspect of texture is also given subordinate importance in this essay. Its significance can usually be assimilated into a discussion of structure and movement. In the work published in the primary anthologies, relatively few examples approach the qualities of line texture that exist in the typographic innovations of M. Robson in *Transwhichics*.<sup>11</sup> The following discussion restricts itself to examples which do accept the tradition of a single physically flat field. While this may be viewed as unnecessarily limited, the examples are more abundant and the implications for future directions of mass printed texts are more immediate.

### *Figure-Field Relationships*

Some concrete poems are surprisingly undemanding of the potential for significance in placement of typographic elements within the field.<sup>12</sup> Many works concentrate on the interior of the figure and may show a traditional centered statement. This is often a completely justified approach to giving emphasis to the reduced quantity of text (Diag. 2; Fig. 1). In Figure 1 the title functions as the key to the meaning of the poem. The contrast between this first, varied set of elements and the uniform, relatively monotonous group of inverted *l*'s is enhanced by the total isolation of the poem in the center of the field.

Other works give much more importance to large scale asymmetries and dynamic qualities of the composition (Diag. 4; Fig. 2). Figure 2, one of a series of collages made from Hershey Bar wrappers,

individualista



he = éle  
& = e  
she = ela

S = serpens  
h = homo  
e = eva

Left above: Figure 1.  
Ladislav Novák,  
"Individualista"

Above: Figure 2.  
Al Hansen,  
Untitled, 1966

Left: Figure 3.  
Pedro Xisto,  
"Epithalamium II"

Right above: Figure 4.  
Arrigo Lora Totino,  
Untitled, 1966

Right: Figure 5.  
Augusto de Campos,  
Untitled, 1962

Far right: Figure 6.  
Carlo Belloli,  
Untitled, 1948

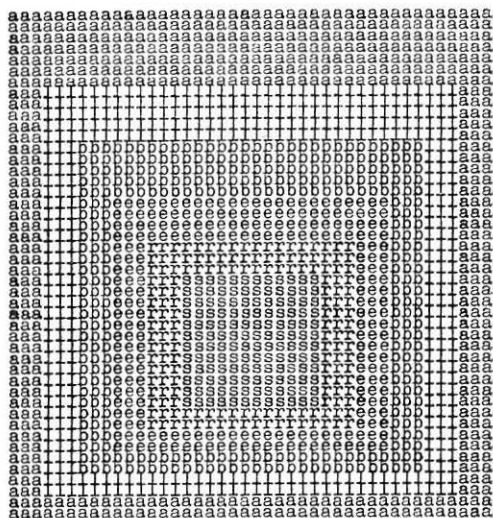
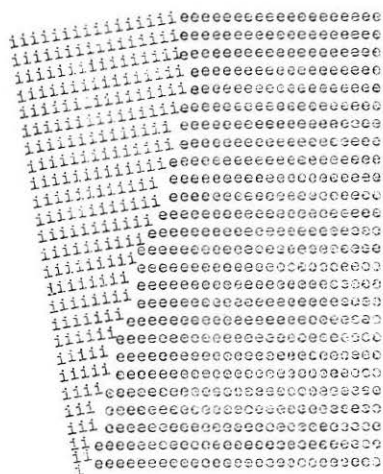
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Figure 22 is reprinted with the kind permission of Aram Saroyan.

Figure 23 is reprinted with the kind permission of Ronald Johnson.





Top left: Figure 7. Ilse and Pierre Garnier, Untitled, 1965  
Top right: Figure 8. Jiri Kolar, Untitled, 1962  
Bottom: Figure 9. Ernst Jandl, Untitled, 1964

creates powerful rhythms of letterforms across the field. The letterforms are in an implied three-dimensional space. They shout, echo, and whisper in a suggested and suggestive sound space. The work also indicates a reversal of traditionally positive and negative elements of a composition (Diag. 3). As in the situation of reduced text size, the presence of the formerly “empty” background is emphasized. The boundaries of the field (i.e., the poem’s “territory”) is exactly and dramatically stated, to the extent that some letter elements are altered by the field edge.

Another approach is to stress the interlinear interval of the traditional form (Diag. 5) or the interletter intervals (Diag. 6; Fig. 3). In Figure 3 the letter spacing of the *h* and *e* is precisely determined by the intermediate *s*. This connection and containment by the sinuous *s/line/snake* is crucial to the levels of meaning in the poem relating to the fall of man (according to the author: *s* = *serpens*, *h* = *homo*, *e* = *eva*) and male-female relationships.

### *Depth Relationships*

The possibility of re-orienting and/or fragmenting the plane of text in space (Diag. 7; Fig. 4) and within it the very line and point (or letter) elements (Diags. 8–9) allows for several modes of experimentation. In Figure 4 the varying typographic surfaces with their contrasting texture boundaries utilize a basic depth perception phenomenon, the texture gradient, to create planes readable at different positions in space (*spazio*). In this way, the poem manifests the idea of space known through tactile qualities and discontinuities in the fabric of sense experience. An oblique plane of text may be established through the convergence of ends of text lines (Fig. 5) or through a size gradient in letterforms (Fig. 6). This may establish a gradient of texture within a line or over the entire surface of a text. In Figure 5 the extra twist in space adds strength to the marching lines of this “social protest poem about the Brazilian peasant.”<sup>13</sup> The form contrasts the numberless (*um sem numero*) peasants with the powerless individual (*o* = the, zero). By the ambiguity of the spatial reading (top forward *vs.* bottom forward) there is a constant bivalence which continuously emphasizes the paradoxical nature of the extremes of the crucial pivot in terms of power. Through typographic size Figure 6 establishes a simple relationship between rhythm of vision

and music. It is possible to consider this the implied spatial separation between large and small versions of the same visual elements. Here again, as in Figure 5, the effect of the work is enhanced if one understands it to be stated in an implied three-dimensional space.

The text may constitute more than a single plane (Diags. 10-13) and thereby enable parallel or intersecting configurations (Fig. 7). About the confrontation in Figure 7 the author comments, "light and shadow, vertical and horizontal, the card game of creation: the *i* is the letter that stands out, rises up; the *e* is the gray letter, always turned in on itself. The two fields of letters confront one another across a breach, that of the 'nothingness' between existences."<sup>14</sup> Again the contrast is heightened by the possibility of a spatial separation in depth as well as the flat two-dimensional disjunction. Situations of phenomenal opacity, translucency, and transparency may arise.<sup>15</sup>

In Figure 8 the "opaque" overlapping planes of similar letterforms fluctuate ambiguously while the sequence of letters establishes another order through a semantic relationship. The tension between these two modes of reading the text constitutes the primary meaning of the work and makes appropriate the exact semantic referent, paintings of Joseph Albers. By using the elements of the typewriter's writing to create subtle color and boundary effects, the piece is additionally suggestive of Albers' work which uses elements of colored paint for the same purposes. As Albers reduces the number of shape elements within his work, so has Jiri Kolar reduced word elements to a minimum.

In an extremely potent manner the middle area of Figure 9 creates a phonetic and visual translucency between two planes of letters. In addition to the transformation of *o* plus *e* into *ö*, there is the visual transformation of the crossbar of the *e* into its endpoints specified by the two dots of the *umlaut*.<sup>16</sup> As an example of working with elemental awareness the work ingeniously balances the square, the circle, and the triangle in its composition.

### *Spatial Structure*

Because the concepts of point, line, and plane are abstract and geometric, there is always a certain lack of fit between any of these categories and a particular example. A geometrical line has no width,

no color, but any visual line may exhibit these phenomena. The geometrical point has no shape, but the visual point may have a noticeably circular or rectilinear perimeter. A particular example may not evidence merely one or another of these categories but rather multiple interactions. In all cases judgment is required and explanation of the reader/viewer's scale of attention may be necessary to posit any one of these concepts upon a particular configuration. It is usually necessary to make clear the context against which the form as point, line, or plane configuration emerges.

Point configurations emphasize a visual center (not necessarily the geometrical center) of the field. Diagrams 16–20 indicate several primary ways in which this can be accomplished. In Figure 10 a density gradient of letterforms is established which, together with the orientation of the letters in circular rings, radiates outward from the center. The text is an example of “*sehtexte*” or visual texts developed by the author/artist, Ferdinand Kriwet.<sup>17</sup> It reads in a directed, but multiply connected way suggested by “. . . oder . . . oder . . .” (. . . or . . . or . . . ) within the initial, innermost ring.

Line configurations of importance are those in which the text figure condenses in one direction to emphasize a linear shape or in which a primary line emerges within the text because of changes of size, position, orientation, etc., of certain letterforms. Diagrams 21–24 indicate typical forms. When multiple linear aspects are introduced, the basic configurations are those shown in Diagrams 25 and 26. In Figure 11 the reduced text has a linear form which immediately denotes the verbal referent *film*. The meaning is reinforced by the repetition of slightly altered “frames” in which the letters *i* and *l* change places, appear, and disappear. A sense of implied movement is thereby established that conveys the phenomenon of still images transformed into moving pictures. A variant of syntax with a variety of similar semantic relationships to *film* is shown in Figure 12. Instead of the strip of frames, the flickering light and dark surface of the projected image is immediately suggested. The repetition of the words in two-dimensions manages to express the abundance of images in the film strip which are needed to create even one picture over time. Additionally, the letterforms create diagonal bands of different gray values that emphasize visually the manner in which the word *cinéma* is pronounced.





Figure 13 illustrates an example of Diagram 25 in which the two parallel axes serve to stabilize the fluttering areas of type that appear to flip back and forth across the axes as well as to appear to twist in space. The verbal text provides a confirmation of the visual form. The horizontal lines of text (symbolically of any text) flow in their accustomed direction, creating patches of gray. The lines change in size and appear to grow from point elements to lines, then back to point elements. The visible form of the poem shows what the poem means. The text areas can be seen as flag-like elements that are light or flexible enough to move in the wind. This suggests the movement, play, or restructuring of the conventional text which the author, Eugen Gomringer, urged in his manifestos. Figure 14 shows an organization of the intersection type (Diag. 25) in which the night and day, sun and earth, the constant and the changing are viewed as a confrontation of the archetypal horizontal and vertical.

Planar aspects of interest are those which alter the conventional text by establishing gridded organizations within the surface. Gridding the visual field may be accomplished through the disposition of point, line, and/or plane elements (Diags. 27-29). This is equivalent to letter, word, and text area organizations. The interval sequence may be regular, irregular, or mixed and need not necessarily exhibit an orthogonal or rectilinear orientation (Diags. 30-32).

A word grid example is shown in Figure 15. The reinforcement by repetition of the word unit emphasizes the missing element *silence*. It is an essential dialectic of the kind which Mallarmé dealt with in *Un Coup de Dés* in which he, too, emphasized the white space of his poetry, the silence between words, the cosmic silence into which words are inserted. By calling attention to the formerly silent white field, the relatively stentorian presence of any symbols is emphasized in contrast to the semantic referent of the word itself. The text appears in a large empty field which creates a double relationship of small words in a large silent field *vs.* a small silent area in a field of non-silent words.

Figure 16 shows a letter grid arrangement that uses repetition to lose the diminutive but significant variant letter in a sea of conformity. Through a semantic link a new unit is formed, *du* (= you), which accepts the visual statement of an overwhelming array of echo-like

individuals, but contrasts it with the identity of the verbal unit which distinguishes itself from the surrounding letters. The power of the verbal unit to separate itself from ordinary letterforms and the power of the individual cohesive psyche to separate itself from the masses are simultaneously asserted.

Figure 17 represents a mixture of gridded organizations. Seen as intersecting grid structures (with an implied center element), the two subsets of the complete work interact to produce a mirrored word relationship, *tu* and *ut*. At the same time one corner element *u* is emphasized while the *t* corner is hidden in the joined elements. This poem has been justly called ambiguous. In attempting a decipherment, the concrete poet Daniel Spoerri recalls that the poem appeared in a review which intended “to eliminate the subjective point of view of the author, and present poetic material that the reader could do with as he saw fit,” and he proposes the decipherment “that there is no meeting without reciprocal influences.”<sup>18</sup> The following elaboration on this theme is possible: the Latin words *tu* (= you) and *ut* (= in the manner that, to the end that, in order that) suggest a maxim or pronouncement. An individual is defined by interaction of one reference frame, or personality, with another. *In order that/you* exist, a relationship with others must be effected.

### *Movement*

One of the strongest differences between much of concrete poetry and traditional linear forms is the movement of the reader's eyes while scanning the text. Instead of the more regular cycle of horizontal right sweep and downward-left return, many other movements are required or implied: circular, random, vertical, etc. In traditional material there is a strong distinction between the movement when reading words within lines and the movement when shifting between the lines. In the newer work there is often no standard entry point and no compulsive visual exit. The reader may be brought back into the text in a cyclic manner. Once again conceptions of point, line, and plane organizations serve as one useful means for discussing the dynamic qualities of these works.

Diagrams 33–35 indicate basic movements to, from, or around a center. Similar to Figure 10, discussed above, is Figure 18 by the same author/artist, in which a casual spiral of large letterforms is established

leading the viewer toward the center. Still another example of point-oriented movement is Figure 19. The partially circular, partially spiral text revolves about the center point which semantically offers the central theme of the work: *mandala*. The beginning and end of the journey to the center—outwards to the perimeter, then collapsing back into the center—is aided by the partially obliterated letterforms that leave remaining the vertical letter strokes as a visual bridge to the center. Rather than continuing beyond the field edges, the perimeter reinforces the center and isolates the total configuration from the edges, allowing the viewer to become re-involved with the interior. An example of center-radial construction of the type indicated in Diagram 34 is that shown in Figure 20. The reader must pivot about the center to view the poem. The staccato repetition of the words is like a propagandistic broadcast which matches the polemic of its verbal message, “not only/to inform/ (but) to provoke/ (changes in) attitudes.” This poem by Claus Bremer is an example of his “engaged texts” in which “the reader must move either the poem or himself.”<sup>19</sup> In this manner one enhances his appreciation of the meaning of the poem.

The line in space focuses an implied linear movement from point to point. It may follow a complex path, it may pulsate in some way, and it is inevitably bidirectional, although asymmetries and habit can create a preferred reading direction. It may stand for movement in time or movement in space. These basic qualities of linear movement and primary differences of orientation are shown in Diagrams 36–47.

The complex path is stated very directly in Figure 21, a poem called “Estrangement.” The two end points have an approximate syntactic equality. A semantic referent to the Czech word *ja* (= I) gives a preferred direction, and the process of complicated search begins within the field, finally uniting the two end points. Figure 22 indicates a pulsation within a general linear movement accomplished through changes of type size. The relative change in visual strength is clearly related to an acoustic referent, and the multiple statement conveys visually the mass sound source and its droning quality. The diagonality of the work is important. If the poem were oriented differently, it would be difficult to make the appropriately simple shift to *s* (implying silence), while at the same time suggesting the massive change from noise to silence, silence to noise by the use of the vertical







line of differentiation. The vertical line emphasizes the downward movement of the poem and the vertical change of type size within the “noisy” sections.<sup>20</sup>

Figure 23 is representative of some palindrome poems that acknowledge the visually bi-directional quality of the line (Diag. 38). The beginning and end in this work are the two human eyes that reinforce the kinaesthetic experience of the horizontal.

Figure 11 may be mentioned again as an example of essentially downward movement. A series of letter shifts transforms the original set of elements. Although the horizontal word unit is maintained, its singular presence and brevity makes it subordinate to the total vertical movement.

Strong examples of linear movements are not frequent among the work presented in the major anthologies. Figure 23 may be considered again as essentially of the type shown in Diagram 43. The types shown in Diagrams 42–46 can be found in parts of works but are particularly difficult to find as the primary structure. This is no doubt due to their strong opposition to normal reading directions for words or lines.

Aspects of movement within the plane, however, have been more thoroughly explored. Basic configurations are shown which indicate non-gridded random movement through the field (Diag. 48) and variations of movement within grids (Diags. 49–56). One combined form is also indicated (Diag. 57). An example similar to Diagram 48 is shown in Figure 24. Each element competes for attention equally, causing the reader’s attention to shift constantly. There is no center, there is no preferred hierarchy. This randomness is appropriate to the idea of a cosmic force (the sun) being realized over time and space in a flickering unpredictable way.

Gridded structures present a rich variety of possibilities for moving through the text figure. Many poets, working on standard spacing typewriters were inevitably led to experiment with the built-in grid of their “drawing” equipment.

An example with strong vertical emphasis is shown in Figure 25 in which the verticality of the rectangle subdues the horizontality of the word element. The eye, attracted to the bold letters moving downward through a two-part center, leaves this complex, involved, quickly shifting area and proceeds further downward in a cool, orderly

fashion. In the meantime, the word unit *acqua* has been altered into a lighter weight of type. This work is praised by M. E. Solt for its balance of semantic and syntactic play. The transition of *acqua* (= water) from bold to light occurs near the center of the poem and within the center of the word group *nava acqua homine* (= ship water man). The flickering presence of dark and light words is actually mirrored above and below this position. "With a reversal of typeface, which reverses the meaning, the poet, nearly inundated by the word 'acqua,' suddenly returns by way of his words themselves to the world of men, women, children and things where, an equal among them, water finds its place. The kinetic typographical play in the shifting of 'acqua' from bold to light to bold in the phrases 'nave acqua uomini'/'uomini acqua nave' as the poet arrives at the moment of spiritual illumination should be noted. For he looks into the water as a great mirror from which objective reality, faintly visible for a time, comes to the surface into the sunlight of 'palma sole voci'/'voci sole palma' at the center of the poem."<sup>21</sup>

An interesting example of double movement horizontally and vertically, within a gridded framework (Diag. 57), is shown in Figure 26. The poem moves from upper left to lower right across the field creating a flowing surface of letterforms that suggest the reflections, the droplets, the slow transformation of color and substance in flowing oil. Another mixed movement is exemplified in Figure 27 in which the verticality of the text figure and the arrow-like *v*'s establish a downward movement in contrast to the gradual leftward shift of the word *velocidade* in the line. This creates diagonal rows of similar letterforms which overlay their implied movement onto the already active grid. In the final stage of internal sequencing the completed word, having achieved its far left position, quickly moves the reader's eyes to the right through conventional reading of the word or propels them back through the word element sequence now seen as a shifting movement upward and to the right. The sense of movement that is established in several ways is perfectly attuned to the connotative experience of *velocity* which the poem postulates.

### Summary

The preceding analysis has presented an introductory classification and description of concrete poetry according to primary qualities of

visual syntax and has attempted to relate structural qualities to the over-all meaning of the poetry. The examples drawn from major anthologies of work in concrete poetry have limited themselves to western forms and to typographical examples in order to show more simply and clearly the basic abstract, formal categories. There exists much room for elaboration of such a syntactic analysis, for example, to document the categories more completely to include texture, color, and motion. At the same time, clarification of visual semantics could be attempted—for example, the study of the use of visual/verbal metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, etc. A thorough analysis of ideogrammatic and phonetic relationships would allow a well-structured understanding of visual syntax to serve as an armature for appreciating, describing, and comparing a wide range of experimentation in concrete poetry. One goal of such a complete analysis of visual semiotic in concrete poetry would be to add substantively to the understanding of the visual/spatial aspects of the architecture of meaning.

1. The quotation is from "The Poem as a Functional Object" by Eugen Gomringer, 1960, which appears translated in Solt (1970, p. 69). Two primary manifestos are "From Line to Constellation" by Eugen Gomringer, 1954, and "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry" by Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatari, and Haroldo de Campos, 1958. Both of these manifestos appear in translation in Solt (pp. 67, 71-72).
2. *Concrete Poetry*. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1971, pp. 36-42.
3. The term "concrete" has been applied to poetry which emphasizes either visual or oral communication. Anthologies have attempted to make some references to the latter works, but they are understood better through tapes or records which are available. Because this present article investigates visual syntax, only visual works are mentioned, and "concrete poetry" is used in this more limited sense.
4. Semiotic, or the science of signs, is a theoretical study of the ways in which forms are meaningful. It is succinctly presented in Buchler (1950, pp. 98-119).
5. Wertheimer's principles of visual organization include the factor of objective set. This means the tendency to view a particular configuration as stronger or more "objectively" given, and to see or judge other similar configurations as identical to or as variants of the stronger one. See Wertheimer, M., "Untersuchungen zur Lehre von der Gestalt," *Psychologische Forschungen*, II, No. 4 (1923), pp. 301-350.
6. Arnheim (1954, Chapter II, pp. 32-81).
7. For a detailed listing, see "A Summary of James Gibson's Thirteen Varieties of Perspective as Abstracted from the Perception of the Visual World" in Hall, E. T., *The Hidden Dimension*. New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday and Company, 1969, pp. 191-195.

8. Arnheim (Chapter VIII, p. 360-395).
9. The two anthologies are those edited by Solt (1970) and by Williams (1967).
10. The work of Tom Ockerse, for example, is characteristic of these facets of concrete poetry. His color-oriented work loses most of its impact if reduced to black and white presentations. See Ockerse (1970).
11. Robson, E. M., *Transwhichics*. Chester: DuFour Editions, 1970. This book contains poems in which a unique combination of letters within the line indicates duration, intensity, and pitch of oral poetry.
12. This vagueness parallels the ambiguous position of some concrete poets with respect to the typographic realization of their work. Most anthologies do not appear to be sensitive to the poem placement within the field. A given poem in several anthologies will not appear with a consistent figure-field relationship.
13. Solt (p. 254).
14. Williams (p. 117).
15. For a discussion of this type of phenomenon in relation to architectural space, see Rowe, C., and Slutsky, R. "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal," *Perspecta* 8, New Haven: Yale School of Architecture, 1964, pp. 45-54.
16. In Williams (p. 163) the author/artist, Ernst Jandl comments: "This is an altogether German poem, of which Norbert Lynton remarked in *Art International* (IX/9-10, 1965, page 24): 'A very nice visual-cum-linguistic joke is Ernst Jandl's filtering of a column of e's through a battalion of o's: where e and o meet they become, of course, ö.' Which is about all you could say about this poem." The author of this article disagrees and finds additional significance.
17. Kriwet has developed an extensive theory of reading such texts. See *Tri-Quarterly*, No. 20 (Winter 1971), pp. 209-252.
18. Spoorri, D. *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*. New York: Something Else Press, 1966, p. 81.
19. Williams (p. 43).
20. The poem used here is actually a typographic variation of the original rectangular typewritten version. Both versions are shown in Solt (pp. 236-7). In the opinion of the author of this article, the typographic variant is superior to the original and has been used to illustrate the point of the argument.
21. Solt (pp. 39-40).

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*Elements of Visual Syntax Selected for an Analysis of Concrete Poetry*

*Figure-Field Relationships*

Emphasis	1. traditional (figure)	2. Figure	3. Field
Scale	4. Field (plane)	5. Interlinear (line)	6. Intralinear (point)

*Depth Relationships*

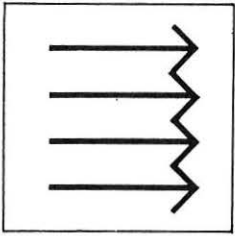
Element	7. Plane	8. Line	9. Point
Parallelism	10. Opaque	11. Translucent	12. Transparent
Intersection	13. Opaque	14. Translucent	15. Transparent

*Structural Relationships*

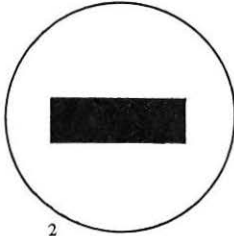
Centroidal (point)	16. Point 18. Line intersection	17. Field 19. Spiral	20. Rings
Linear	21. Horizontal 23. Diagonal (135°) 25. Parallel	22. Vertical 24. Diagonal (45°) 26. Intersecting	
Planar, grid element	27. Point	28. Line	29. Plane
Planar, grid rhythm	30. Regular	31. Irregular	32. Combination

*Movement Relationships*

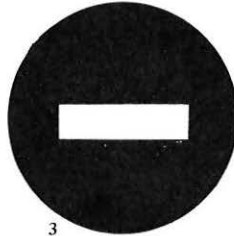
Centroidal (point)	33. Spiral	34. Radial	35. Peripheral
Linear, complexity	36. Path	37. Pulsation	38. Bidirectionality
Linear, orientation	39. Right 41. Lower-right 43. Left 45. Upper-left 47. Combination	40. Down 42. Upper-right 44. Up 46. Lower-left	
Planar, ungridded	48. Random		
Planar, grid orientation	49. Right 51. Lower-right 53. Left 55. Lower-left 57. Combination	50. Down 52. Upper-right 54. Up 56. Upper-left	



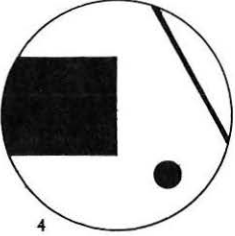
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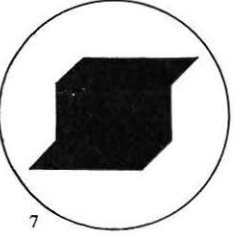
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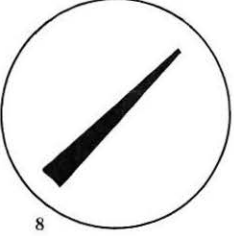
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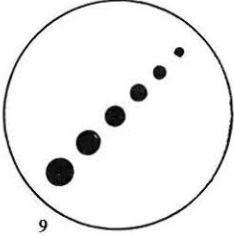
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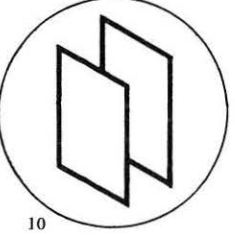
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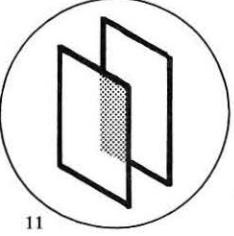
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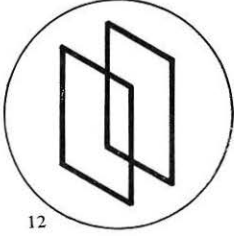
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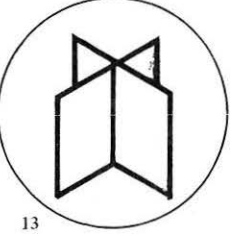
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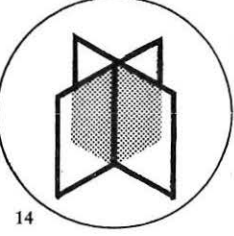
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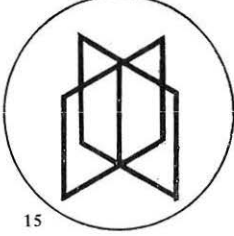
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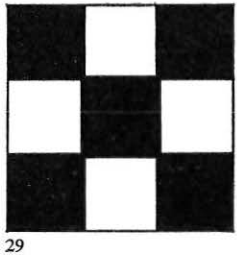
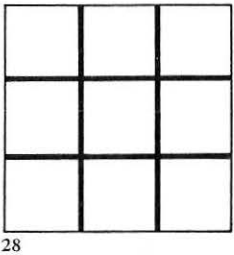
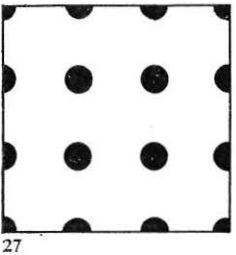
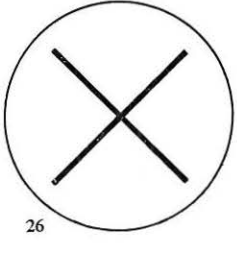
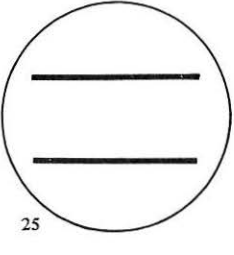
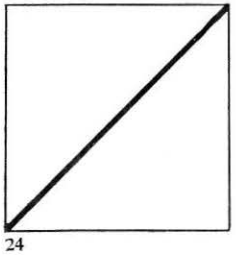
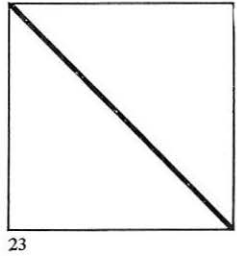
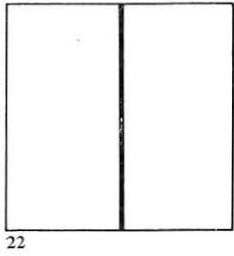
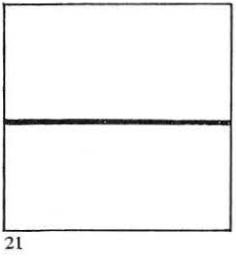
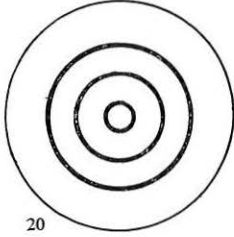
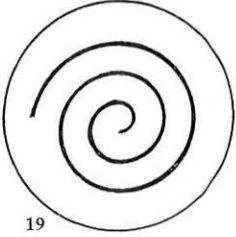
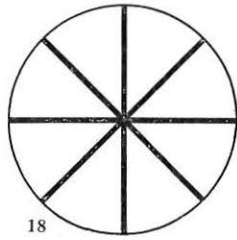
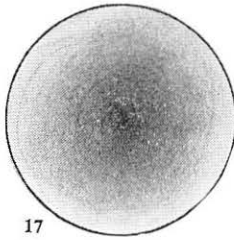
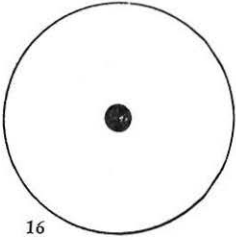
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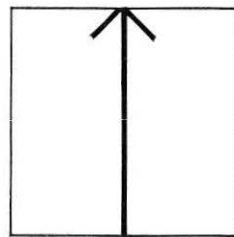
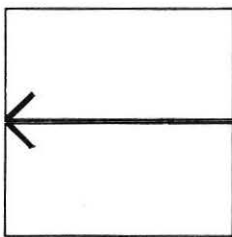
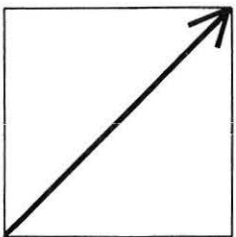
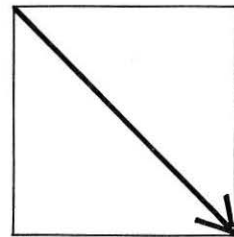
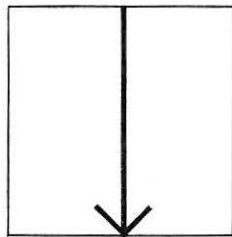
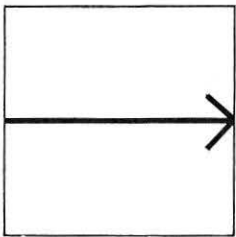
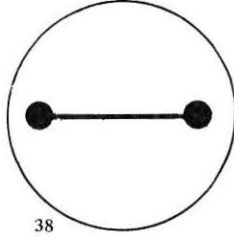
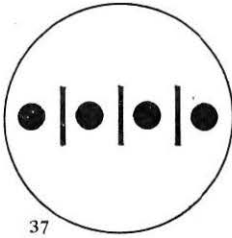
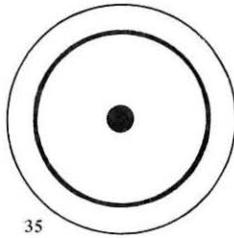
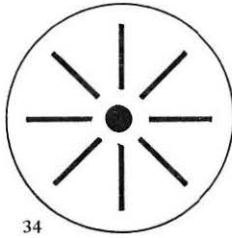
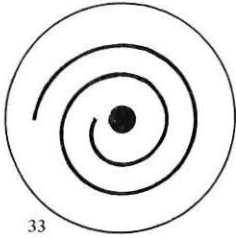
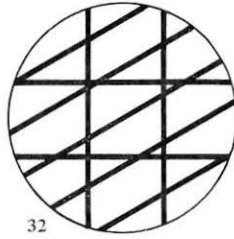
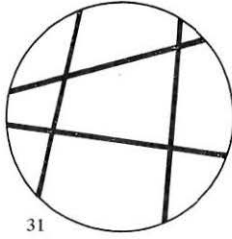
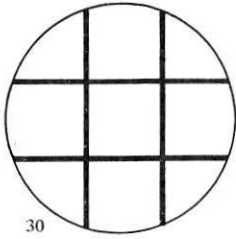


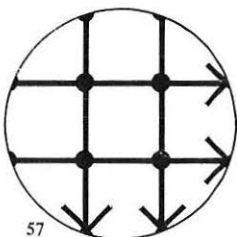
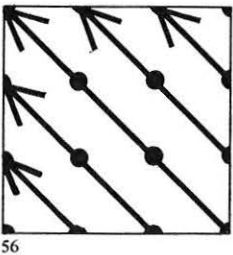
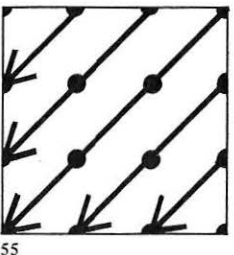
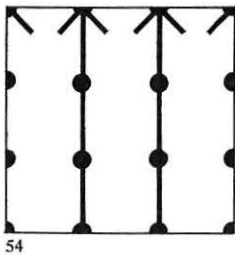
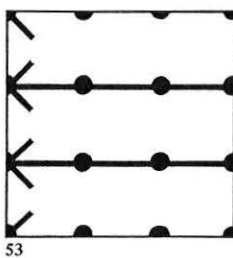
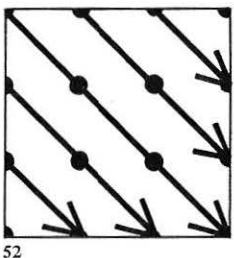
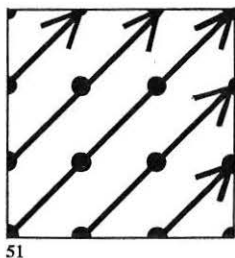
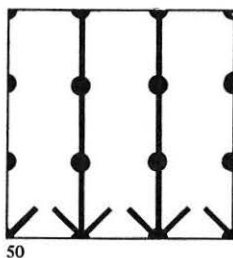
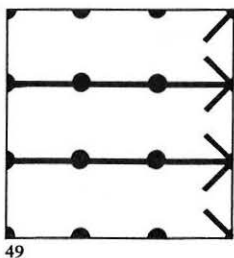
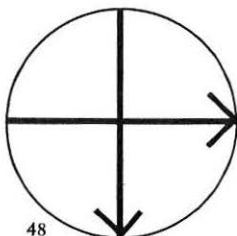
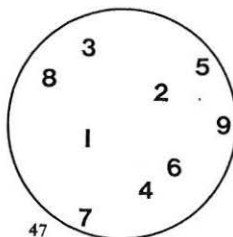
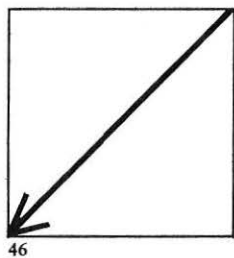
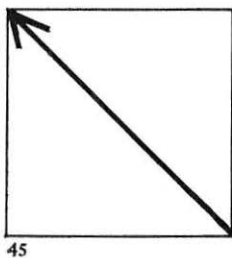
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15







## **excerpt: towards a three-dimensional poultry**

**herman damen**

**1.1. in order to become a symbol, visible (and tangible), independent of time (and to a certain extent also of place), sound and notion (or object) need material; i.e., either the underlying material or the writing- or drawing-material. And in order to become a figure-symbol, they need a contrasting ground (light or dark).**

**1.2. in the traditional conception and in the traditional use, phonogram (letter) and ideogram are two-dimensional: they "are" a flat, a form of the material (graphite, ink, underlying matter, etc.); their length and width are defined—with a certain freedom of variation—by agreement. depth, the third dimension is of no importance: only visibility matters, a visible means of communication (to produce and to read efficiently). the operative printing types are ordered horizontally and are characterized by repetition of the form.**

**1.3. *verbal plasticism wants to consider letter and ideogram not only as one side of the matter, but also wants to see (consider) and feel them as material, as a concrete three-dimensional symbol, not only visible but also tangible. it prefers to press sound and notion out of the matter more than to express them in matter.***

**1.4. the incised letter, e.g., exists by the grace of the absence of the underlying material as matter. the pencil makes a certain notch in the material, but more than fills it with graphite. chisel, nail, finger, etc.,**

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produce language, in stone or sand, by knocking off or pushing away these matters. through the light-dark contrast the letter becomes visible. this letter is not only to be considered as two-dimensional, but also as three-dimensional matter. just like the completely cut out letter, it consists of air; the concrete tangibility is very little.

remark: the air can also form the "background": viz., when writing in the air. this distinguishes itself furthermore by a restraint of place and time: the visibility has a minimum duration (for it is momentary), while there is no tangibility (evaporation). this form of communication has a special didactic function.

1.5. taking the criterion of the tangibility of the letter into consideration, i can distinguish:  
small letter - big letter; line letter - flat letter (open or filled up); shadow letter - letter-with-shadow (suggestion of independent depth letter); monoletter - stereoletter; monochrome letter - letter with graphic accentuation of three-dimensionality (light-shadow effect within the letter); letter that is necessarily fixed to the underlying material (e.g., the deepened or cut out air letter or the relief letter)—independent depth letter, only in its visibility tied to the contrast of the background.

2. the striving for a bigger/better concreteness of letter and ideogram realizes itself in two ways: graphical and plastical.

2.1. *graphical*: one can distinguish:

a. pouims ("ideograms") with an appropriate form, color or matter, on neutral underlying material (paper): the (sometimes) deformed letters fit into the outer form, for instance, the (section-)contour of a concrete part of the be-symbol-ed; the content is already partially referred to in the ideographic form (figuredicht, technopaegnia).

b. pouims which have or have not an appropriate form, color, or matter, with a functional underlying

material (also according to form, color, or matter): the underlying material starts to participate with content and form of the text; i.e., plays, if possible, a greater part than only its primary function of contrast. remark: as for the underlying-material-letter this function of contrast is realized by a contrasting matter round the letter. for this letter, however, it is necessary that the surface is smaller than the surface of the underlying material.

### 2.2. *plastic*:

now we enter the field of the concrete pouims (tangible and visible matters), of the word-object or the letter-plastic. the letters and ideograms consist of a natural or artificial material; are (pre)fabricated or discovered.

2.3 the question is whether with the above-mentioned pouims the—from my point of view—“one sided view of the letter” is done away with. with most letters of the roman alphabet the back side of a letter-structure is not the same as the appointed understandable front side (only A - H - I - M - O - T - U - V - W - X - Y have no reverse at the back side). starting from the surface-letter—i.e., the conventional two-dimensional form—I want to *create such an alphabet that as many as possible points of view and touch will be considered to be of equal value.* the mobility of the participant (looker-on/feeler-for) has to be stimulated.

3. *a first step*: creating an alphabet of letter-objects, the back side of which has the same form as the front side.

3.1. the possibilities are: an overlapping or an overlapping connection of the traditional symbol with its reverse (before or behind it) or a turning of the letter from a standing to a lying position.

3.2. the letter can become so thick that when looking from the side, one cannot see either the front or the back side; therefore:

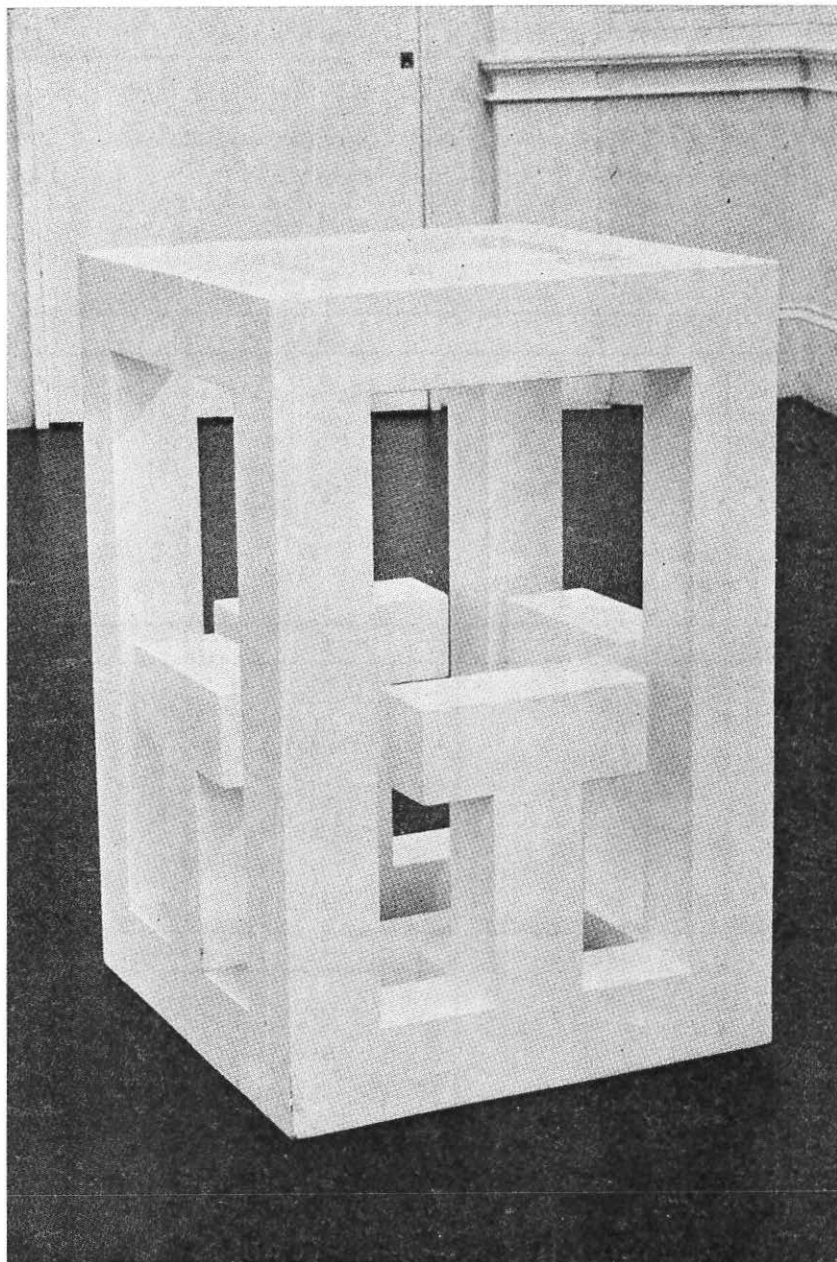
**4. a second step: the creation of an alphabet of letter-objects where front- and side-view have the same effect.**

**4.1. the upper side and to a less extent the bottom side allow and need a panoramic view from different positions.**

**4.2. transparent colored or not colored material helps to discover the traditional letterform when looking at the letter-structure from above or from below (although the length and width of this form will not always be the same), without an otherwise necessary multiplication of symbol and its reverse.**

**5. attempt to a three-dimensional alphabet:**

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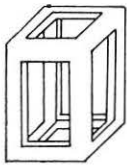
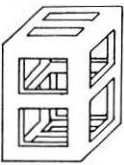
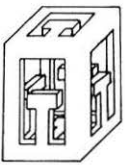

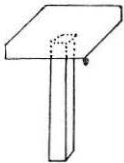
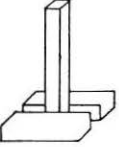
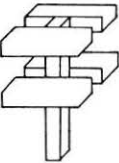
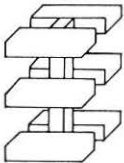
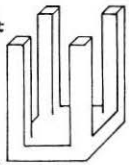
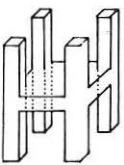

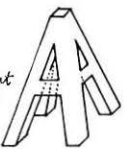



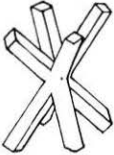

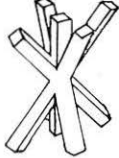

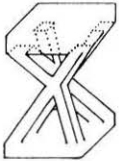

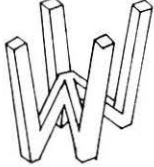
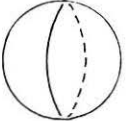
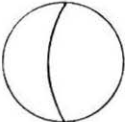
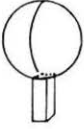
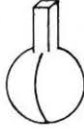

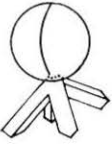
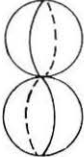
realized letter G. 70 × 70 × 100 cm.; wood; 1969–70.

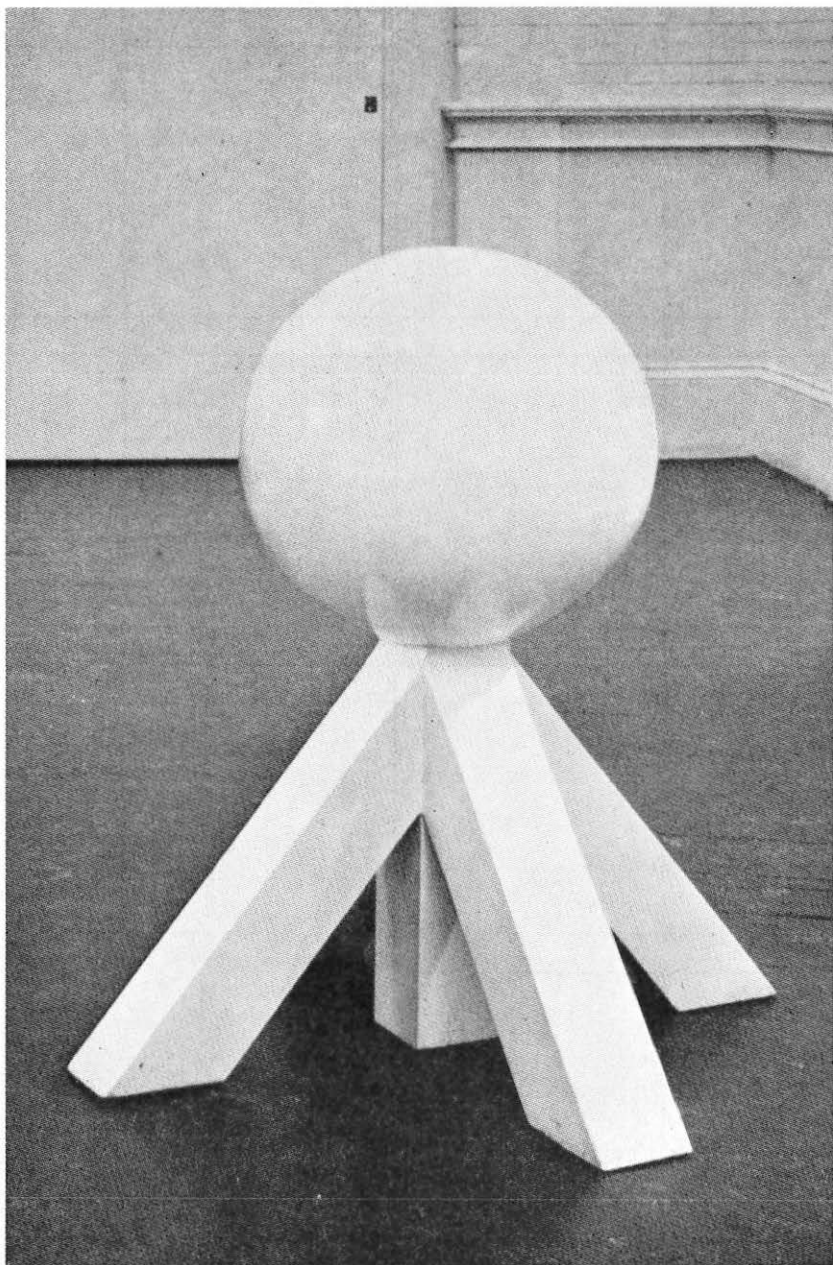
365 *damen: towards a three-dimensional poetry*

# ATTEMPT TO A '3-DIMENSIONAL' ALPHABET

STARTING POINT: alteration of the roman capital-letters to stereometrical letter-figures (rectangular block, flat, beam, cylinder, truncated pyramide or tetrahedron, ball) in such a way that from as many points of view and touch as possible the letter-body is recognizable (i.e. by an overlapping or an overlapping connection of symbol and its reverse and by means of non-transparent and coloured or not coloured transparent polyhedrons).

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>D</b></p>  <p>alternative: a closed block (of U)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>B</b></p>  <p>alternatives: - a flat instead of the 4 horizontal beams; - a overlapping connection instead of an overlapping</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>G</b></p> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>I</b></p>  <p>alternative for the beam: cylinder (similar with other letters)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>T</b></p>  <p>transparent flat</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>L</b></p> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>F</b></p> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>E</b></p> 
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>U</b></p>  <p>bottom: transparent flat</p> <p>alternatives: - open bottom - closed block:</p> <p>→ giving more prominency to the white in between the lines; → reducing the vertical beams to edges (cf O, J, V, S; a further step: letter-structure with the help of the white only)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>H</b></p>  <p>transparent flat</p> <p>alternative:</p>  <p>(view above)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>A</b></p>  <p>transparent flat</p> <p>alternative: - truncated tetrahedron</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>V</b></p>  <p>alternatives: - filled up truncated pyramide (see notes on U); - trunc. tetrahedron (open or filled up)</p>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>X</b></p>  <p><i>alternative: twice a tripod</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Y</b></p> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>K</b></p> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>N</b></p> 
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Z</b></p>  <p><i>instead of transparency: open upper and bottom side</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>M</b></p> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>W</b></p>  <p><i>up side down version of the M</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>O</b></p> 
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>C</b></p>  <p><i>to distinguish it from the O: transparent (coloured or not)</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>P</b></p>  <p><i>transparent ball (similar to J, Q, R)</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>J</b></p> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Q</b></p>  <p><i>alternative: tripod</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>R</b></p> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>S</b></p> 	<p>* of course it is also possible to start from a phonetic spelling as the result of which the C, Q, X, Y disappear, but other "letters" take their place, resp. extend the alphabet: exact notations of the different vowels, consonants (and diphthongs).</p> <p>* from the drawings it becomes clear that (perhaps only for the time being) i leave the undercast-letters out.</p> <p><u>NOTE</u>: the bodies of the letters have been made concrete here with more or less the same length, width and altitude; more variation in measure is also possible.</p>	



realized letter R. 70 × 70 × 100 cm.; wood, polyester; 1969–70.

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