

# A Course in Poetry and Printing

Aaron Marcus and Joe Rothrock

An experimental course was devised in which students with backgrounds in poetry and in the graphic arts worked to discover essential relationships between verbal and visual poetic statement. The course organization utilized a university environment to the fullest and is offered as a prototypical case study. Students participated in a series of multi-disciplinary guest lectures and in studio-based development of creative projects. Their work eventually moved beyond the more traditional views of the poetry-printing dialectic conceived for the course and resembled more the creative speculation of avant-garde art.

Modern art's once polemical claim that language and visual form are creatively related has today become the subject of less argumentative and more positive investigation—historical as well as theoretical—as is evident on many campuses and in art schools. Academic lectures examine its many facets, from the impact of Gutenberg's invention to the constellations of concretism, while studio courses and student publications experiment with closer integrations of writing, design, graphics, photography, and the processing of the object itself. The following is a report on one such course, called Poetry and Printing, which took place at Princeton University.

Poetry and Printing came about through the persistence of four undergraduates who wished to propose it as a student-initiated seminar under a Princeton program especially instituted to provide curricular response to campus interests. To formulate the course they enlisted the help of Joe Rothrock, curator of graphic arts in the university's library. A number of faculty members were asked to contribute ideas, two of whom later joined Rothrock as course supervisors. They were Aaron Marcus, graphic designer and assistant professor in the visual arts program, and John Peck, poet and lecturer in the program in creative writing.

173 *Marcus & Rothrock : Course in Poetry and Printing*

such as figured poems, when “speaking pictures and mute poetry” actually were combined, and with the obvious modern poet-artists, from Blake to Gomringer. In addition, one lecture (the first) compared English medieval poetry in manuscripts to early print. Another discussed the visually less obvious but hardly less crucial work of Ezra Pound. Finally, two lectures were devoted to Chinese lyric poetry, to Islamic calligraphy, and to tantric art.

Readings in poetry, literary criticism, and art history were assigned by the individual lecturers as preparation for the lectures and following discussions. The lectures were held in the library so that, besides slides, temporary displays of the original examples from the graphic arts collection and from rare books and special collections could be shown. Toward the end of the term the graphic arts collection mounted an exhibition of sixty West Coast poetry broadsides from the late fifties and sixties, and Marcus arranged for a viewing of international selections of surrealist, dada, and concrete poetry from the extensive private archive of Jean Brown of Tyringham, Massachusetts.

### *Projects*

The students completed three poetry and printing projects of their own conception. They were asked but not required to use their own poetry. Collaboration between poets and artists was permitted, though not encouraged, because it was felt that collaboration should and would be spontaneous.

For pedagogical and practical reasons, there were several requirements. The projects had to be capable of exact manifolding, the first two in editions of five, the last in an edition of twenty. They also had to be complete in themselves, which, to the disappointment of some, excluded audio-visual projection. Finally, everyone was required to become familiar with all the technical choices available before starting the first project. Thus, five weeks of rather intensive instruction in letterpress and photo-reproductive techniques had to be arranged outside regular class hours at the beginning of the term. Faculty designers Marcus and Carol Bankerd, printer and printmaker Carol Stoddard, and photographer Sol Libsohn were more than cooperative. They also acted as consultants throughout the term.

After considering alternatives that would require a single instructor, including a seminar in concrete poetry or a workshop conducted by a guest poet-printer, it was decided to make Poetry and Printing a semester-long, interdisciplinary university effort. The course eventually involved instructors from eight academic departments, drew upon special collections in the library, and utilized letterpress, etching, and photographic equipment in the visual arts program and cold-type, copy camera, and photo-silkscreen facilities in the visual studies laboratory of the School of Architecture and Urban Planning. Further, it mixed literary with visual talents. Sixteen students were enrolled from more than twice their number of applicants according to demonstrated achievement as either poets or artists. Most were upperclassmen who had had previous university experience in creative writing or in Marcus's graphic design and typography courses.

The aim of the Poetry and Printing course was to gain as broad and as fundamental an experience as possible of the relationships between poetry and its visual presentation. This ambitious goal was to be met by tandem programs: a lecture survey by different scholars based on historical examples and a studio-workshop sequence of creative projects. Historical materials ranged from medieval illuminated manuscripts to recent concrete poetry and were drawn from Oriental as well as Western cultures. In the studio the students were more directly challenged to question typographical habits and other conventional visual and, in a sense, social elements in the process not only of printing poetry but also of writing poetry. From the very beginning they were asked to confront the realities of printing technology and its power to elaborate and transform verbal ideas.

### *Lectures*

The twelve lectures (see Appendix) assumed a general knowledge of literary and art history. In particular they assumed an acquaintance with the classical humanistic theory that poetry and painting, though separately practiced, nonetheless share the same principles of aesthetic and moral edification, and with the subsequent collapse of that theory under romantic and modern pressures. The lectures therefore dealt with atypical examples,

The completed projects were criticized at class meetings interspersed in the lecture schedule. The students, course supervisors, and faculty artists attended. The four hours allotted each review proved barely sufficient.

### *Critique*

The aim of "Poetry and Printing" seemed to dictate its organization: contact and dialogue between poets and artists, a freely experimental studio, and lecture topics that did not try to prescribe rigidly from either the distant or recent past what the students might find enlightening or creatively useful. On the whole, these components interacted successfully. Some doubts do remain, as mentioned below, about the specific lecture topics, but none about their spirit of wide-ranging and fundamental inquiry. For whatever reasons of background and timeliness, the students came prepared to seek broadly informed, basic confrontations with their creative dependencies on words and vision.

To say the least, the mixture of poets with artists also succeeded, not only in assuring a variety of approaches but also in enlivening the basic issues. Verbally and visually talented students soon had their passionate extremes. Lively, sometimes harsh debate erupted during the critiques, as the poets defended their oral and ultimately individuating definition of poetry against some of the more verbally reductive visual and social statements of the artists. Three of the poets, though well aware of visual elements in modern poetry and of the importance, for instance, of the typewriter in their own work, found how thoroughly verbal their poetics remained. Against such projects as one, for example, that consisted of a few conceptually associated sentence fragments typed on bits of paper and floated inside a solid globe or "organon" of amber acrylic, one poet steadfastly countered throughout the term with traditional stanzic poems symmetrically presented on broadside in handsome but economical letterpress.

In retrospect, it seems that the rift between extremes ought to have been predicted, just as the absence of collaboration ought to have been predicted (with a single exception, there was none). The students quite rightly responded to the exploratory and fundamentalist spirit of the course with intense personality. The old

division of creative labor between poet and printer simply did not apply.

It was not easy to foresee how most of the students, poets as well as artists, would get beyond even the contemporary modes that combine poetry with visual form but nevertheless leave something of our semantic-pictorial habits intact. The first round of projects did conform to what was expected. They tended to rely on the more or less established modes of open-field word spacing, the typographic-pictorial broadside, and concretism. Thus they tended to retain the appearance of verbal entities, while being ingeniously juxtaposed to, laid beneath, superimposed, or otherwise interwoven with woodcuts, etchings, silkscreens, embossed shapes, colored transparencies, photographs, and found imagery. However, the subsequent projects took a radical turn towards the interventional effects of printing technology, to which the use of photography and found imagery more properly belong, and above all toward non-objective plastic qualities.

Everyone agreed that the concentration on non-objective technical and perceptual energies inexorably established his modern identity and corresponded generally to sensibilities behind open-field word spacing and concretism. The thrust, however, was towards far denser integrations of verbal and visual experience, with no particular allegiances to either expressionist or constructivist modes. Rather, the point of departure was spatial, that is, an attempt by sculptural imagination, including size, texture, overlap, seriality, process statement, and implied communal value, to break away from the finished two-dimensional, and in a sense too purely intellectual habituations of visual word-signs in perspective organized space. In comparison, the impact of many of the projects overcame any lingering resemblances to poetry's heritage of the archetypal format of graphic art: the written, typographic, or pictorialized page.

The emphasis of the projects thus appeared to be radically visual, with inevitable consequences to poetry or, more accurately, to the word itself. Removed from their familiar format and syntax as passive signs for reading, words were recreated in the unfamiliar context of visual-plastic invention. The course title assumed newly conjunctive meaning as typographic words and letters were viewed



Gordon Curtis, 24 x 18 inches, black and white. The letterpress typography appears within a blind embossed panel set off-center within the field of the off-white slightly textured paper. In this unconventional visual entry the viewer is made to take in the whole object before reading the text. The poem concerns multiple planes of time. From left to right the poem literally reads: "fall . . . seconds . . . count them . . . Do not hurry . . . Lakes slap blue and wonder on, tired of your surprise." but visually it combines semantic meaning with kinaesthetics. The use of vertical and horizontal vectors, of repetitions and echoes, of mirror images and reflections, of roman and italic, of large and small type sizes, and of opening and contracting word spacing (which are confined in turn within the liquid-smooth recessed panel but are yet part of the white expanse of the textured sheet), combine with the semantic meanings to render this multiple sensation of limit and limitlessness.

as shapes creating a new reality, or were handled as points, lines, planes, and vectors contributing to a whole sensorial construction, or were ontologically examined through the artist's openly stated procedural sequences. Consequences to traditional poetic syntax and its discursive capacity were also obvious. They were replaced by a keen interest in cyclical, incantatory, ideogrammatic, kinetic and other non-linear verbal schemes.

Still, within their own terms the emphasis was more apparent than real, since the inspiration of the projects was semantic as well as visual. It is rather that words and vision were used together, dialectically, in a search for experiential and psychological totality. Put another way, both were treated as incomplete in themselves and equally illusory, so that the projects often provoked a conceptual dimension which was less an extension of projective verse or concrete poetry of the fifties and sixties than of questions raised and directions adumbrated by diverse aspects of art and poetry in the sixties, such as pop art, optical art, photographic fantasy, happenings, art as protest, the new social and creative intimacy implied by the proliferation of poetry readings and small presses, the interest in Oriental and native American religions, to name a few. If the first step in approaching the projects required the full sensory measure one normally reserves for objects, their ultimate comprehension required semantic understanding. Integrally combined in the space-time of visual art, poetic statement was conceived as a palpably dramatic reenactment of the discovery and communal celebration of language itself.

Later projects included a poem as a witty, syncopated pun of monosyllabic words, phonics, and flat geometric shapes presented as interchangeable cards for assembling in two or three dimensions and packaged for mass distribution from an instant food rack; a poem as the visually contiguous, variously distorted repetition of one vowel, so that the vowel, the optical illusion of plastic shape built up by its repetition and distortion, and its phonic evocation become strangely indistinguishable; a poem as a forty-page book, bound in plates of bronze which, though based on Gomringer's *Silencio*, is a far more extended visual-plastic exploration of the semantic theme; poems that, as graffiti, as the pictographic libretti of primitive chants, as calling cards, or as the legend on a brightly colored commercial map, are freed from the page to circulate like tribal or social messages; a poem about the experience of taking a photograph presented as incomplete process of manuscripts, typescripts, copycamera negatives, and so on; and poems presented on photographs, embossed on a mobile, or printed on a thermographic copy of a birth certificate as immediate reflections on experience and perception, again without the intermediary of the traditional page. Indeed, it made little difference whether the verbal element was in traditional poetic form or not, so long as the expectations of the page format were studiously avoided. Thus, even the broadside may be included here, insofar as it was not treated merely as an expanded page but instead used for its subtle potential to monumentally heighten the mysterious anatomy of poetic inspiration, structural formality, and verbal precision.

Response to the lectures was consistent with the spatially integrative thrust of the projects. To Mallarmé, to concrete poetry and particularly its forerunner in cubism, and above all to Miró and surrealism and to the Oriental examples, response was enthusiastic. In the remaining examples, however, even in the most exotic departures from conventional typographic presentations such as illuminated manuscripts and figured poems, an unconscious faith in the primacy of words was detected. It became clear that certain of the artists shared even less than artists of the past that faith in the efficacy of language.

## Lightfast, Starred Lady

Space, she sang  
black space with  
of light but with  
a tear of black

Black depths  
back space and  
lightfast  
attendant hos

Coarse white  
and sight he  
Touch the other  
avoided cry, the tear she sang  
and all mine light made hole

Bruce Hahn, 18 x 24 inches, black and white. Photographically enlarged letterpress typography is reproduced through photo-silkscreening, overprinting a previous cloudy rectangle. Thus the text, full of puns, appears and disappears within the dense black space. The text is always legible, even though it sometimes appears as black on black. The poem itself, written by Hahn, evokes a mystery of light and dark, of joy and sorrow, and implies a magic discovery of visible writing. As in the previous example, Hahn demonstrates that he is primarily concerned with the process of defining language within his visual world.

In conclusion, the course led both poets and artists to discover something about themselves. It was not so much a matter of learning about possible relationships between verbal poetry and visual form as of uncovering their primal interdependencies. To this end the lectures were not always relevant, for the thrust of the studio projects revealed that the topics had been selected, in spite of a professed intention of universality, with a certain bias toward the age of print. The lectures left off, perhaps, where they ought to have begun. It was agreed that the theoretical touchstones for the creative combination of verbal poetry and visual art might lie even beyond a program concentrating on modern and Oriental examples, and that the theory behind a course such as the one described here might be more readily accessible and more readily acceptable to poets as well as artists in lectures on the origins of language, on archaeological inscriptions, on primitive ceremony, and on religious language.

Given the exploratory nature of the undertaking, this experimental, interdisciplinary course was viewed by the participants as a very worthwhile educational project. We hope that this report will encourage an exchange of information about others in the areas of "visual poetry," concrete poetry, and other combinations of verbal and visual art.

*Appendix: Lecturers and Their Topics*

Joe Rothrock: Poetry Broad­sides.

Richard Schrader, Department of English: English Medieval Poetry and the Transition to Printing.

Yu-Kung Kao, East Asian Studies Program: Chinese Visual Lyric: A Momentary Enlightenment.

Rosalind Krauss, Visual Arts Program: Surrealism and the Problem of Peinture-Poésie.

Roger Lipsey, Department of Art and Archaeology: The "Word" Organized in Space: Medieval Acrostics and Eastern Mantras.

Thomas Roche, Department of English: English Figured Poetry and Emblem Books; and William Blake.

Albert Sonnenfeld, Department of Romance Languages: Mallarmé and Symbolist Poetry.

Susan Marcus, guest lecturer: Apollinaire and the Cubists.

John Peck: The Canto as Song: The Design of Pound's Printed Texts.

Carol Bankerd and Aaron Marcus: Concrete Poetry in the 1950's and 1960's.

Tom Ockerse, guest lecturer, Rhode Island School of Design: Verbi-Visual Poetry: A Discussion.