

Poetry as a Means for the Structuring of a Social Environment

Eugen Gomringer (translated by Mark E. Cory)

From the outset, the movement of concrete poetry has regarded the poet as a conscious participant in a team of designers dedicated to the aesthetic restructuring of society. To participate, the poet had to study fields not normally associated with poetry, e.g., architecture, advertising graphics, and typography. His contribution in turn has been to provide craftsmen in other fields with models for the solution of their own verbal problems. The goal of such a poetry involves entertainment, but goes beyond the immediacy of this game-activity to include an awakening of aesthetic sensibility, especially to the worlds of type, print, and sound. A review of the interrelationships between concrete poetry, industrial design, and the plastic arts over the past fifteen years illustrates the sort of team work necessary if poets are to have an active voice in our contemporary society.

To see poetry proper as a means for the structuring of our social environment, or to even want to conceive of it as such, places great demands on those few who are termed poets and who are typically thought of as shy, complicated people, wrapped up in their own worlds and not particularly gifted at expressing themselves. Poets go their own way as a rule, prefer the arduous company of other poets, have their own source of criticism, namely literary criticism (which I regard as a mistake), and are in general not really on top of issues concerning the structuring forces of society such as industry, product management, retail stock level control, consumption of goods, advertising, industrial design, architecture, city planning, transportation, etc. Since emotions are more their forte than planning and organization, poets are frequently drawn to politics, an area in which—in my opinion—their competence is not very great.

Despite occasional appearances to the contrary, the poet is a solitary figure in a society that can very well do without him; a figure with flaws, yet too, a figure with positive qualities. Having

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said a word about his flaws, it would be appropriate to elaborate on the good qualities which, under certain conditions, he can develop, both realistically and hypothetically. At the outset, however, the question must be raised whether we are justified in investigating the role of the poet in such a broad context—are we not guilty of manipulation in even posing the problem? What follows shall be devoted to rendering this question more and more superfluous.

I must proceed in these reflections from the thoughts and goals which existed at the inception of concrete poetry and which were instrumental in its development; such a glance back upon the early Fifties will serve as a review and perhaps even as a platform for a glimpse of the future. I will have to refer to some of my own early statements in the course of the formulations I offer here, as my thoughts have in fact always been concerned with the topic “poetry as a means for the structuring of a social environment.”

Concrete poetry distinguishes itself decisively from many other attempts to group poets and poetry in that it saw poetry as a great intellectual playing field and the poet as rule maker and umpire. From its very beginnings, concrete poetry saw the poet as a conscious participant in the team of creative builders (“Gestalter” tr.), who, drawn from the most diverse fields and working within and across their own disciplines, work together on the structuring of society. Although schooled in literary history, I myself had to shed that sort of preparation and go to school again, this time in the fields of architecture and business, graphics and typography, advertising and ergonometics. Even while I would try to apply traditional literary concepts—hesitatingly, for I could sense that they were no longer really valid—it became clear from my own work that these new forces could not be considered merely the latest developments of an exclusively literary tradition.

Neither could the poet, I realized, continue in his traditional role as Poet, for as such he remains—despite all the favorable reviews in the world—a lonely, perhaps courageous, asocial figure. The question arises as to whether such a figure can even relate to the language of the other creative builders. Since it has become the fashion to relate and evaluate everything to its social function, it is necessary to review the nature of the team work we were after in those days.

I think the young creative builders of the early Fifties were characterized primarily by their desire to create beautiful and yet functional objects. It was the great period of good form. Form was at that time still the ideal. Good form was recognized quite early in England and Germany (e.g., through the establishment of the *Rat für Formgebung*, Darmstadt, 1951) as being of use in the politics of foreign trade, and was supported as an ethical means for the development of foreign markets.

In general terms, our discussions centered around the CIAM (Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne), for instance the congress held in Hoddesdon, England, in 1951, in which the concept of the city as a community was the center of discussion. At that time reference was made to the Charter of Athens (1933), in which sentences of the following sort are found: "In any case the core (that is, the heart of every community) should attract visitors, and be filled with people and activity, and have an atmosphere of general spontaneity and relaxation." Three years later, at the CIAM congress in Aix-en-Provence in 1954, the English architects Alison and Peter Smithson saw the goal of city planning as lying in a simple, comprehensible orderliness; i.e., in the clarity of organization. They spoke of the "creation of points of juncture in the structure of human society." Accordingly, my own conception of the ideal meeting place of our polyglot society was the airport. Airports I saw as those places in which only a limited number of necessary and unambiguous instructions, signals, and signs were tolerated, so that they could be understood by everyone, regardless of his mother tongue. The airport played the role of an ideal model.

Another stimulus for us at that time was the concept of "Functionalism," by which we understood something quite different from the modern corruption of the term which often means precisely the opposite of the original. Unfortunately, the over-dependence on entirely smooth façades has strongly discredited Functionalism, at least in architecture. We understood it as an inner necessity which expressed itself in a true and natural beauty. For this reason one of the most important books for us was the book *Form* by Max Bill, published in 1952 and studied by only a small circle at the time. Nevertheless, it was precisely this circle

that later gathered from many countries in the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm and then spread year by year with ever-increasing impact throughout the world to provide a not insignificant core of activists for the restructuring of our social environment. Max Bill took stock of the development of form at the midway point of the twentieth century in his book. In this survey he collected and juxtaposed works of art, optical instruments, everyday appliances, furniture, toys, technical structures, houses, schools, and gardens. All these objects, large and small, were visible proof of the possibilities which exist for the structuring of the human environment with the means, and in the spirit, of the times.

Only one voice was missing from this positive statement on the restructuring of society—the voice of literary man, of the poet. Curiously, the poets, because of a preoccupation with novels, short stories, and the integration of the experiences of recent history, failed to recognize that developments had been underway since the Twenties which could have permitted the craftsman of language to join the international team of creative builders. I'm thinking here about linguistics, neopositivistic and behavioristic philosophy, and the new disciplines of semantics and semiotics—both well suppressed in the depths of philosophy in this country and hardly accepted as competent subjects for study in the universities. Ezra Pound—the only modern poet *digne de ce nom*—was without disciples and generally unknown in German-speaking countries.

Searching for the place of the poet—who was, to be sure, a student of the Glass Bead Game, but someone who had to create his means anew in order to be understood by the team of creative builders and to participate in the structuring of the modern world—we seized upon the technique of visualizing language. Advertising graphics and typography began to control the everyday surroundings of people as individuals and as a society. Where this occurred with artistic responsibility and understanding of the universal principles for the structuring of society, this visualization was a wonderful (and unobtrusive) exercise in the democratic building of good taste. Posters, brochures, advertisements—

weapons in the struggle of free enterprise—all yielded a measure of aesthetic sense gratis.

Again in conversation and discussion with graphic designers, the poet could learn something: about paper quality, format, proportion, and technique. From typographic experts he could learn about the forms of individual letters, the qualities of various type sets and presses. Questions such as whether all written or printed material has the same weight and value and should therefore be represented in only one type face, or whether certain material requires special emphasis were encountered daily and called for important decisions.

Of course some poets in every century—most recently in Symbolism, Jugendstil, Expressionism, and Dada—have been interested in the pictorial aspects of language. But it was our task to expand this narrow development (which incidentally had never been taken really seriously by literary criticism) and to join or influence the world-wide tendency towards visualization. I believe that this has been accomplished, by and large. The poet, and I speak now of the so-called concrete poet, not only sat at the feet of the graphic designer and typographer, but has influenced them, too. If the text is good, if the poet can really participate in the visual realization, then the graphic designer must take this into consideration in his design. The shape of letters is for typographer and poet alike an exciting material with which to work, and the expression which can be conveyed by the tiniest curve deserves much more respect and attention in the evaluation of poetic texts.

In the field of painting, the rise of concrete poetry coincided with a revitalization of constructivist art, which then soon slid over into op art. This school works with a relatively small supply of raw materials and is characterized rather by a highly inventive production of new and varied forms, compositional techniques, schemata, combinations, modules. At the same time new ways of looking at things were developed, which led to a school of visual formalism whose societal importance lay in the creation of a broad basis for communication. Concrete poetry developed at this time the multidimensional poem—a poem which like an ideogram could be read simultaneously on semantic and semiotic levels. As

a shape visualized on a plane, the concrete poem is no longer necessarily read in the traditional left-to-right manner. It becomes more like a picture, one formed by unconventional means, a surveyable macroform with a visual statement. Even more profusely than constructivist art, concrete poetry introduces new forms and methods.

In the area of industrial design there were lively discussions among workers and designers during the post-war years. The subject of these discussions concerned the precise definition of what constitutes good form, and further, the definition of the role of the industrial designer in the international challenge of structuring our world. The various methods and themes worked out in these congresses and discussions are perhaps less important than the efforts expended on clarifying terms and concepts, on articulating those problem areas involved in the future development of design. The many-sided aspects—technical, productional, business, aesthetic, psychological, and general human aspects—which converge in industrial design demand in their verbal articulation a clarity, an objectivity and an ease of understanding found only in a simple but precise language.

I saw the equivalent to these requirements in the realm of poetry as the ability to formulate processes capable of handling all subjects with a combination of vivid precision and meditative concentration. For instance this simple description of a simple process:

from the rim	von rand
inward	nach innen
inside	im innern
to the middle	zur mitte
through the center of the middle	durchs zentrum der mitte
outward	nach aussen
to the rim	zum rand

For many designers concrete poetry has become an analogy for the solution of their own verbal problems. There are designers who we could say express themselves in concrete poetry when faced with a problem requiring verbalization. And in addition to this metalinguistical analogy, there is an analogy in the preparation and use of raw materials, just as existed between concrete poetry and constructivist art. The adaptation of design to industrial processes of production corresponds to the attention paid by the concrete poet to the requirements of typeface and printing processes. Furthermore, there is a similarity in the gradual winning over of the poet and the designer—traditionally both artists and individualists—to the rational work processes and teamwork found in industry.

Above and beyond this participation, the poet had, perhaps for the first time, the opportunity to be an important, if not in fact a leading, member of this new team—a team whose creative efforts were all in some respect or other concerned with verbal communication. Concrete poetry saw itself for this reason as the aesthetic chapter in the development of a universal language. Concrete poetry afforded a comprehensive intellectual playing field in which, as was indicated earlier, the poet functioned as rule maker and umpire. By the concept of a universal language we did not mean a new version of Volapük or Esperanto, nor merely the selection of some existing language (despite how well English serves this purpose practically speaking anyway); rather we meant a conscious approach to the visual and acoustical potential for communication in language—an approach which would draw from all existing languages and yield a new language easily comprehensible in its signs and syntax. The resultant new language would be nourished from the most diverse sides, not the least of which could be that of dialects—an early source to which concrete poets turned both instinctively and consciously. Concrete poetry saw itself as the core of such a universally understood language in that it sought to construct its models from the objectified elements of many different languages.

But in order to assume his place in the teamwork described here, the poet had not only to risk changing his traditional attitudes, but to shed his entire former role as aesthete on the edge of society

and become a direct participant in that society. He must neither be a tragic figure who cannot understand the world—indeed, our challenge to him is that he try to understand the world with all his might—nor can he assume the role of the jealous, compulsive, destructive genius. And there are many other roles he must abandon, roles which no longer have any part in the enlightened, elemental, constructive world of the rational creative builders. He who ought to participate in the very core of the restructuring, ought also to be able to hold his own when measured against the leading creative geniuses like Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Gropius, Max Bill, and others.

How do things stand then today with concrete poetry? What has become of the idealistic beginnings? What is the current image of the concrete poet? Has concrete poetry actually become a means for structuring our social environment? Such a series of speculative questions has a natural place in this report.

During the period in which concrete poetry was conceived and began to develop, a counter-movement in poetry was formed. This was an emotional and realistic poetry. It is not yet clear however to what extent this reaction against concrete poetry might have been influenced by the very thing it was seeking to discredit. It sought to set itself off so frantically from the functionalistic concrete poetry, that it failed to sufficiently define itself in a positive sense. It was not really a return to reality, nor is it realistic, unless one seeks realism in one's daily bread, in the world of the worker, in the trivia of everyday life. You may make poems out of such material, but you would hardly escape the scepticism of concrete poets towards traditional language materials and their value as signs in the communicative process. It is, in fact, significant to note how often these so-called realistic poems have as their foundation a model derived from concrete poetry.

Of course within concrete poetry itself an unexpectedly large number of variations has emerged. The anthologies of concrete poetry have become veritable picture books. Concrete poetry—or, more precisely, the methods of concrete poetry—have extended themselves to social-critical arenas, to discussions of Vietnam and Biafra, to hippie phenomena, to graphical analogies with computer

design, to the design of letters, to the naked, unartistic presentation of typography, and finally to pure graphic materials themselves. Concrete poetry is the joy and delight of fans who see in Barbarella the epitome of poetry.

This variety, reflected especially in the field of visual poetry, has its justification. Through concrete poetry the worlds of type and print and letters were implanted into the consciousness of broad masses of people. It also succeeded in many cases in undermining the division between the esoteric literature of the feuilleton and that of the real world of signs and meaningful communication. It has even been picked up in schoolbooks, and the great increase of correspondence between concrete poets and teachers and students is further proof that the reality of concrete poetry is of contemporary significance.

What strikes me as a great failure, however, is the almost total absence of careful criticism of both concrete poetry, and of those who exploit it. Almost anything consisting of letters and print is accepted as unique and creative and then published or included in an exhibition. Simple typographical mistakes are uncritically accepted and evaluated as concrete poetry. After all, not everyone who responded to concrete poetry was a genius. But I want to concentrate on two points. I believe there are poets who are poor graphic designers and typographers, and typographers and graphic designers who are poor poets in the sense that they cannot order material in the spirit of a synthesizing experience. Sometimes the requisite teamwork is absent or the mutual ability to understand two or more languages is not present. I am sure that the modish fascination with letters and typography will subside and the thread of development in concrete poetry will emerge once again. But it would be a great shame if the hypertrophy of the movement—which has produced outgrowths that can no longer be really considered concrete poetry—should result in a reaction of repugnance. Now as before, however, I remain convinced that the future of visual communication belongs to the press, to signs in movement, to the meditation object, mystery novels, scientific professional literature, to game-forms of concrete poetry—and all this on a worldwide, polyglot basis.

If on the one side concrete poetry can be seen as a function—albeit not always a very successful one—of the plastic arts, on the other side it can be readily seen that not a few artists have availed themselves of concrete poetry. The task of articulating the extent of this reciprocal influence must be left for the art historians of the future.

In the fields of industrial design and architecture, the last fifteen years have seen a clear transformation. Interest in the perfection of single entities (i.e., interest in good form) has weakened in favor of posing questions for their own sake. Thought and discussion about problems of creating individual objects have yielded to discussion of broader questions and problems of the structure of our social environment—truly threatening problems whose solution may not lie merely with the perfection of good form. In industrial design there is a crisis for many designers of the old school, in that while the creation of individual objects still poses challenging problems, these problems have become much less important in view of our changing attitudes towards such individual objects. It is significant that recently there was an exhibition in Germany with the title “Tried and True.” This exhibition—competently enough executed—was meant as an admonition; and yet the signs of the times point not backwards in this direction, but in quite another. Our relationship to objects has lost some of the idealization of the post-war years, yet gained a certain intensity because of their limited life-expectancy. Things are there to be used, and once their usefulness has passed they are thrown away without a second thought. The one-way bottle is an effective symbol for this change in attitudes. At the same time, the visual aspect of design, which dominated the early Fifties, has given way more and more to the haptic. A corresponding shift has occurred in art, where tactile forms were almost unknown in the Fifties, yet now constitute the most sought-after class on the market. To think ahead for a moment, it seems only logical that the functional-visual forms will cease to be produced when the attitudes sustaining them cease to exist. In their place is emerging a new metaphysical understanding for things in their entirety, for the way in which things function together in our world, for the way in which we must deal with them. The accent today in industrial design is on

systems analysis; i.e., there is less interest in the plate from which we eat and more in the process of eating, of food acquisition and preparation. The plate is merely the optimal solution to a chain of interwoven problems. It is a point of juncture in a whole field of inquiry.

In architecture it has been realized that while the single-family house serves as an exercise in the study of the deportment of a small group of people, it cannot be the ultimate task of architecture in a century of exploding population. As with industrial design, the large-scale problems of structuring our environment have become very complicated. Symptomatic of this change could be the contrast between two huge housing projects—one quite modern and one from the Fifties. The Hansa Quarter in Berlin, a perfect example from the Fifties of a joint effort of many prominent architects and a combination of various realizations, is a collection of structures without any city-planning mission or reference. It is an open-air architectural exhibition. The housing developments underway everywhere now, on the other hand, are agglomerations of visionary scope. An example might be the Märkische Quarter of Berlin. The question of which type of housing better serves the well-being of its inhabitants must remain suspended for the moment (although a considerable difficulty has been experienced in the Märkische undertaking). We must only realize that this new type of housing on this new scale calls for architectural systems analysis and a programming of the efforts of many talents—all of which is in sharp contrast to the uniquely individual achievement of Le Corbusier's *unité d'habitation*.

So once again the question is raised as to the place of the poet in this metaphysical, technical-visionary world born of computers and characterized by bigness and masses. If we glance again at the multilateral development of concrete poetry or examine the products and books of concrete poets over the past fifteen years, we see that it, too, has changed along the lines of industrial design and architecture. Concrete poetry began with singular, self-contained forms, which by my own definition were to be so short and simple as to be memorizable. These were in a way comparable to single-family dwellings; I have always perceived the essential value of a poem and that of a sketch for a single-family house to be

equal. Yet I think the best work of the latest concrete poets consists of poem cycles, systems of poems, text groups, and collections. Personally I, too, felt the urge to depart from the individual poem and form "text books," which however were not to be anthologies or collections of single texts, but rather text syntheses of pages, paper, and verbal material. This is not to say that the concrete text should be burdened with superfluous material. A great economy of information was one of the achievements of concrete poetry. So while these superstructures might initially seem too complicated in construction, each must remain simple and concentrated. That which can seem monotonous yet intellectually agreeable—like a several-hour-long Andy Warhol film—can be a text in which the smallest detail conveys information. But in language and poetry, as in design and in the plastic arts, it is chiefly the programming of the structure which has come to fascinate us.

With such statements as this, one of course again runs the risk of seeming to seek a discourse only with other artists and to abandon problems of communication in everyday life. And I believe, in fact, that anyone who looks at language only as metalanguage, programmed language, and target language is working unconsciously to broaden the gulf which threatens to separate programmed results from the intuitive clarity of our natural tongues. I believe, therefore, that we must recognize and esteem words with multiple semantic levels—words like "love"—as values in themselves. By the way, it takes presently about ten years for programmed forms in our environment to be accepted and for the adaptations to become functional; soon it will probably take less time.

I have tried so far to sketch the connection between certain current or expected movements towards a structuring of society and movements in concrete poetry. I would like to summarize by outlining what I imagine the form and purpose of future poetry to be. Poetry is rooted in acoustical and written language. The phenomena of the times however are sound, color, and texture. Without question concrete poetry has experimented creatively in the phenomenon of sound—I think that some of these experiments

must be considered to rank among the best work of the most recent years. I simply cannot conceive how poetry can survive in the future if it ignores acoustical texts. That is, it will survive, but only in a museum. As we can see from many examples, concrete poets have written not only rationalistic texts of interest from the standpoint of semiotic and information theory, but have also captured noises, sounds, patterns of sound in verbal signs—that is to say, they have captured existential signs in objectively communicable written forms. In so learning to transmit concrete sound events through equally concrete verbal signs, the concrete poet opens to the people of a polyglot world an enormous, inexhaustible treasury of previously unavailable communicative elements. Initially he sets to work like a linguist, but in the second phase he engages in a sort of game-activity whereby new combinations of the concrete acoustical and written verbal signs he derives constantly allow new associations and meaningful relationships to arise. Whether he works according to a program or by allowing the “rules of chance” to function is unimportant. His results would be not so much conceptual abstractions, which at the most could function as the mere map to a concrete verbal world, but a new version of the concrete world itself. Interpretation would be superfluous, for the sound structures created would be in every aspect tokens of events extant in the concrete world.

Naturally an examination of the characters and signs used so far (e.g., our current alphabets and their associated sounds) would indicate that yet other signs must be created, but the fact is that sound exists in concrete poetry, and the possibilities for the poet excited by acoustical phenomena are boundless. Surely this is the beginning of a development whose goal, in my opinion, is not that of entertainment (which can at best be a side goal), but that of an awakening of sensibility. A sensitizing of our perception and imagination could be achieved through an acoustically ordered poetry in a manner similar to that now effected through some jazz and electronic music (e.g., Zaffiri, Nanucci). Of course, one could object that better poetry has always involved a certain acoustical sensibility and sensitivity—which explains why these terms have often been applied in speaking of traditional poetry. The difference is that we must create a sound poetry on a methodi-

cal and universal basis for our times, our society, our "world." The signs and symbols for the sounds of our age concern all peoples and must be either initiated, influenced or created by poets. Acoustical signs constitute a large measure of our environment. It is the task of the poet to use them to structure our world today and the world of tomorrow.

There are, on the other hand, poets who can participate in the communication processes via visual signs. The extent to which this is already the case today has been mentioned. A limited number of picture books and exhibitions and, of course, also the influence on graphics and the plastic arts are worthy of mention, but here, too, the concrete poet stands merely at the beginning of his development. The city of tomorrow, regardless whether under water or high above the earth, will be a challenge for visual communication and consequently for the poet stimulated by concrete poetry.

But will our familiar way of writing, our various alphabets or even an ideogram system as in Chinese suffice in the future? I have suggested here that this is very much to be doubted in the case where letter and sound should conform. As we can observe in our own language today, writing changes readily and without conscious direction. The reading speed required by electronic devices is so high that our traditional alphabets (which are after all descendants of our handwriting) are definite obstacles to communication. The question arises whether traditional alphabets are still usable as media of communication. Points and lines are easier for machines to read and still faster when arranged at right angles. Curves and slanting lines and similar details will disappear. Graphologists will die out. The conception, the rational component of information is becoming ever more important.

If the poet does not want to be put back into a museum, he will have at the very least to address himself to the question of the sufficiency of the written language and of possible replacement systems. In the structuring of the world of tomorrow, visually transmitted verbal communication will have to find its place next to problems of climate control, housing and transportation, colors and sounds. I believe that the poet has a great opportunity in the

sort of world sketched here to fulfill himself as a human being, and as a full human being to fulfill himself as a poet. It has been some time since the single-minded technocrat enjoyed a position as the most important member of society. Now a sense of play, an appreciation of game activity ("Spieltrieb" tr.) is being required of managers, indeed of all the leading organizers and shapers of the world. Formerly this was only attributed to artists. Now the poet who has the courage to take risks, who needs this element of risk and who therefore does not want to retreat to the literary museum can take his place next to the manager.

Let us therefore no longer consider merely the listener, the reader, the observer in a person, but concern ourselves as poets with the total existence of man, perhaps even with the vital force he represents. It is not enough that we may contend with this force—contend with it we must.

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