

The Reinvention of Reading

Ana Hatherly

The concrete poetry movement started simultaneously in Europe and in Brazil. Although they agreed on fundamentals, the Brazilians/Portuguese—with a background in traditional poetry—were concerned with spatialization of the text and its relation to music, while the Europeans—with a background in graphics and architecture—were more influenced by the plastic arts. For both the concrete poem becomes a relational field of functions yielding tensions of word-things in space-time, and extending the boundaries of reading beyond the traditional literary limits. The author illustrates and discusses her own “image-texts”—studies in the illegibility or ambiguity of writing and the disintegration of language.

Plural Reading of the Image

Although the modern concrete poetry movement started simultaneously in Europe and Brazil, with Eugene Gomringer and the NOIGANDRES Group respectively, these two sources of the movement did not agree on all points. On fundamentals they did agree—acknowledging the stimulation of Stéphane Mallarmé’s “Un Coup de Dés” together with Ernest Fenellosa’s and Ezra Pound’s theories about the Chinese ideogram and also information theory, mass-communication techniques, and other mathematical and scientific theories—but elsewhere they differed, and these differences later became conspicuous in the work of their followers.

The Brazilian group, which in Portugal influenced especially the work of E. M. de Melo e Castro, tended to yield to the lyricism of the ideogram and to fidelity to Mallarmé’s principles, particularly to his notion of the spatialization of the text and its

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relation to music, with the consequence that the text almost becomes a musical score. The Europeans, in contrast, were more influenced by the plastic arts, mainly via the Bauhaus (though it should also be borne in mind that the impact of Cubist and Post-Cubist avant-garde art has been pervasive in all fields of creativity). Another telling difference is that while the Brazilian group, and later the Portuguese one, were made up of poets who had written poetry in the traditional way before taking up *poésie concrète*, the European followers of the movement—generally speaking the German and Anglo-Saxon world—were in most cases mainly graphic designers, architects, or painters.

This may explain why the Brazilian group, starting from a sort of scientific lyricism, headed towards social criticism and even satire of capitalist society; while for the European concrete poets the importance of the formally visual aspect gradually imposed itself to the point of almost completely eliminating the literary aspect, with important ramifications in the phonetic areas of language, thus renewing the avant-garde tradition (if “avant-garde” and “tradition” aren’t incompatible) where language, sound, and image are completely identified, consequently overthrowing all barriers between their arts.

It must be noted that the European concrete poets, by thus claiming that the concrete poem could and should be immediately grasped, were condemning their products to an immediate obsolescence, placing them unexpectedly at the level of sacrificial immolation: on the one hand by totally assuming the value of the instant (a Zen Buddhist influence) and on the other by the metaphorical assumption of the consumer’s society in which men and things indifferently consumed sink into a desperate inutility, an awareness of which makes one renounce beforehand all values proposed by it. This would then be one more way of rejecting the *status quo* and traditional values as competing for importance with the concept of immortality of (or through) art: a reflection of the basic *dur désir de durer* that has haunted all artists and all men.

Still, this radicalism has had a price, for despite the repeated wish for immediate communication, *poésie concrète* is often considered truly incomprehensible: that is, *illegible*.

Perhaps for this very reason, however, the concrete poetry

movements in Brazil and Portugal—fighting against traditions of laziness, lack of culture, underdevelopment, and everything that represented the state of decrepitude of those societies—claimed that *poésie concrète* was a sort of symbol of impeachment, a way of rebelling against traditional values and above all against an outdated unrealistic concept of culture. Questioning those values, threatening their meaning and all that was associated with them, they aimed at society and its institutions. In South America as in Portugal the questions the movement asked were to remain a long time unanswered. Within the “intellectual milieu” even the best members of the movement were often objects of bitter criticism or mockery and derision. However, this treatment seems only to have toughened them up, for both Portuguese and Brazilian concrete poets survived and in some cases became notable figures on the literary scene, including literary criticism and literary theory.

Meanwhile, the “concrete revolution” has taken place all over the world; to those who have experienced it, the event has been decisive. A definition from the English avant-garde magazine *Link* (1964):

If you see it for the first time do not try to read it as poetry;
better, do not even try to read it at all, just look at it.
Examine the spaces between the letters, the typographical
variations, the spaces around the words. Look at it as an image.
Then see what ideas come out of that image associated with
the letters and the words in it.

This position became quite easy to understand with familiarity, illustrating clearly the necessity of an initiation, an interpretive way of reading, both rigorous and specific (in other words, creative). Another definition from the NOIGANDRES Group’s *Teoria da Poesia Concreta* (São Paulo: Edições Invenção [1965]):

Concrete poetry assumes a total responsibility before language, accepting the presupposition of the historical idiom as an indispensable nucleus of communication, but refuses to absorb the words as mere indifferent vehicles without life, without personality, without history—forbidden tombs in which convention insists on burying the idea.

With the conversion of every aspect of poetry into poetic substance, including the space of the composition, through the simultaneous functioning of its visual, auditory, and linguistic structures, the concrete poem becomes *verbivocovisual* in its interaction. Refusing the older formal syllogistic-discursive foundation, the concrete poem becomes a relational field of functions, yielding *tension of word-things in space-time*.

The concrete poet sees the word in itself as a magnetic field of possibilities, and he rejects the perspectivist syntactic organization (of conventional poetry) in which the words “sit like corpses at a banquet.” For the concrete poem its visible form is also its structure, in Gomringer’s words (*Worte Sind Schatten*, Berlin: Rowohlt, 1969), and when he defines the poem as a constellation following Mallarmé’s “prismatic division of the Idea,” he is really proposing a new “plural reading of the image.” The greater or lesser degree of intelligibility—that is, its informative content—is what is going to define the poem’s degree of communication and the need for an “adequate” reading.

In its initial phase in the 1950’s the concrete poem was still exclusively made up of words, or rather “word-objects.” It was still literary. Only later did concrete poetry free itself from this constraint, attaining and assimilating wider and more ambiguous areas, starting from the elements it already used: the graphic image, the phonetic values of language. When it is possible to assume the sound of speech or the image of the composition of writing liberated from semantics, considered not just as purely aesthetic matter but also as autonomously informative, then wider perspectives open themselves up for *poésie concrète*, while at the same time the link with earlier cultural times is thus renewed without affecting the reality of the present.

One could say that concrete poetry in its original form was soon caught in a predictable cycle—that of its speedy and necessary exhaustion—but also that through the same process of annihilation it found itself able at the same time to give birth to new and different ways of investigation. And this is fundamental: *extending the boundaries of reading beyond the traditional literary limits*.

Legibility/Illegibility

For the further evolution of reading, the concrete poetry movement is fundamental inasmuch as it contributes to a new approach to the text, which ceases to be merely a lyrical-literary expression in order to become a new trajectory from the word to the sign. If the word becomes a sign again, a pure sign, then other signs can become newly legible—can become literal and even literary—thus justifying the connection between *ikon* and *logos*.

For myself, an important experience of illegibility was the study of archaic writing which I pursued during the 1960's when I was trying to discover experimentally the mechanisms of handwriting. The results of these attempts appeared in my *Mapas da Imaginação e da Memória* (Lisbon: Moraes Editores, 1973). At that time, when the study of modern linguistics and oriental philosophy dominated my work, I had the opportunity of thinking at length about the problems of the communicability of the text, its legibility and illegibility, for I was constantly confronting texts which in the literal sense were illegible to me—for instance, archaic Chinese—but which I was nevertheless able to *read*.

Starting from that experience of the fragility of content-communication and the possibility of there being various readings of forms, I developed (in my own way) the practice of the image-text, which simultaneously transcends and embodies the problem of the text's content at the level of meaning. I was trying to enlarge this to what could be designated a *field of integral meaning*, characterized by a deliberate non-specification of content, the only limitation being the graphic form itself. In this way I was trying to extend beyond mere literality the area of what can be "read"; at the same time I was also trying to broaden the domain of research on forms and to expand the creative area of writing itself, both metaphorically and in fact. While inviting attention to handwriting as drawing, as painting of signs (making it illegible in order to jolt people out of the habit of content-reading), I was trying to restore writing (and handwriting) to the semiotic, iconic, autonomously semantic power that it had at its origin.

Investigating the problem of the legibility/illegibility of the text is natural for the writer or poet who is constantly faced with the twin facts of writing as a codification and reading as a decipher-

ment. It is natural for him to ponder the degree of legibility or illegibility of a text and the influence of time over the text's legibility; natural to meditate upon the wear and tear of one's language (languages become "worn out"), a sort of exhaustion that is distinct from the debilitation of the successive ideologies that utilize (but also recreate) it. In short, to study legibility is to attempt to estimate to what extent it derives from the limitations imposed by a code which, in the course of establishing the relationship between transmitter and receiver, regulates its own legibility: i.e., the degree of possible communicability of messages and their decipherments, which is the real problem of reading.

E. H. Gombrich, for instance, has written that in art communication consists in "making concessions" to the receiver's knowledge. In fact, even within a specific language area it would still be necessary to decide what is and what is not literally legible, just as in art. And above all: legible to whom? when? how? why?

We know that whatever the "language"—of words, of gestures, of objects—it is not the case that everything in it is invariably legible, or sayable, or decipherable. And it is precisely in that area of obscurity determined by the limitations of expression and interpretation that the essential illegibility of the art object is inscribed—what part of it remains unsaid, silent, unsayable, which is to say what part of it will allow for innumerable creative readings. The word "unsayable," however, is not used here to refer to a mystical notion, "*l'innommable*." It refers on the contrary to a practical test, that of the impossibility of the "total saying," as put forward in Wittgenstein's famous Proposition 7 (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*).

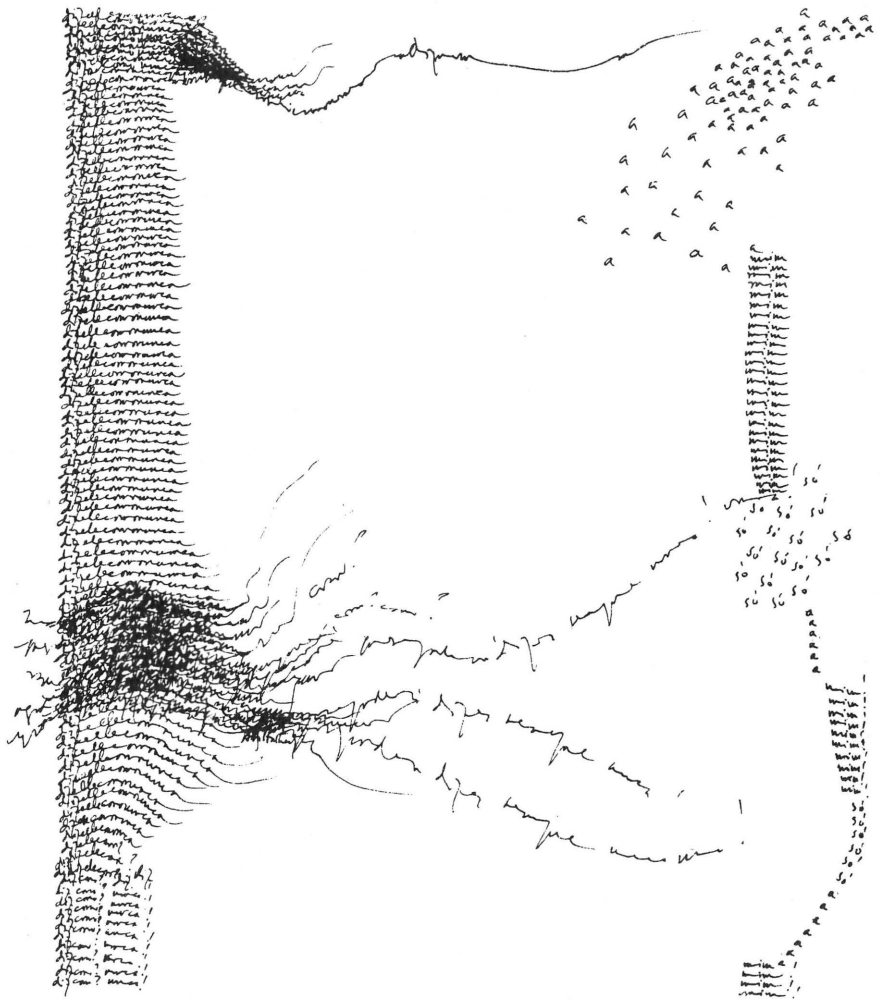
Writing is mute. The writer is obliged to dwell upon the silence of words. But the same problem of silence can also be found in other forms of artistic expression, as in all forms of expression *tout court*. "That which can be shown cannot be said," declares Wittgenstein in Proposition 4.1212. And in that assertion one could well see an eloquent justification of all forms of visual communication.

The visual poem—visual-text, image-text—is literally and literarily silent. The non-literal legibility it can attain was

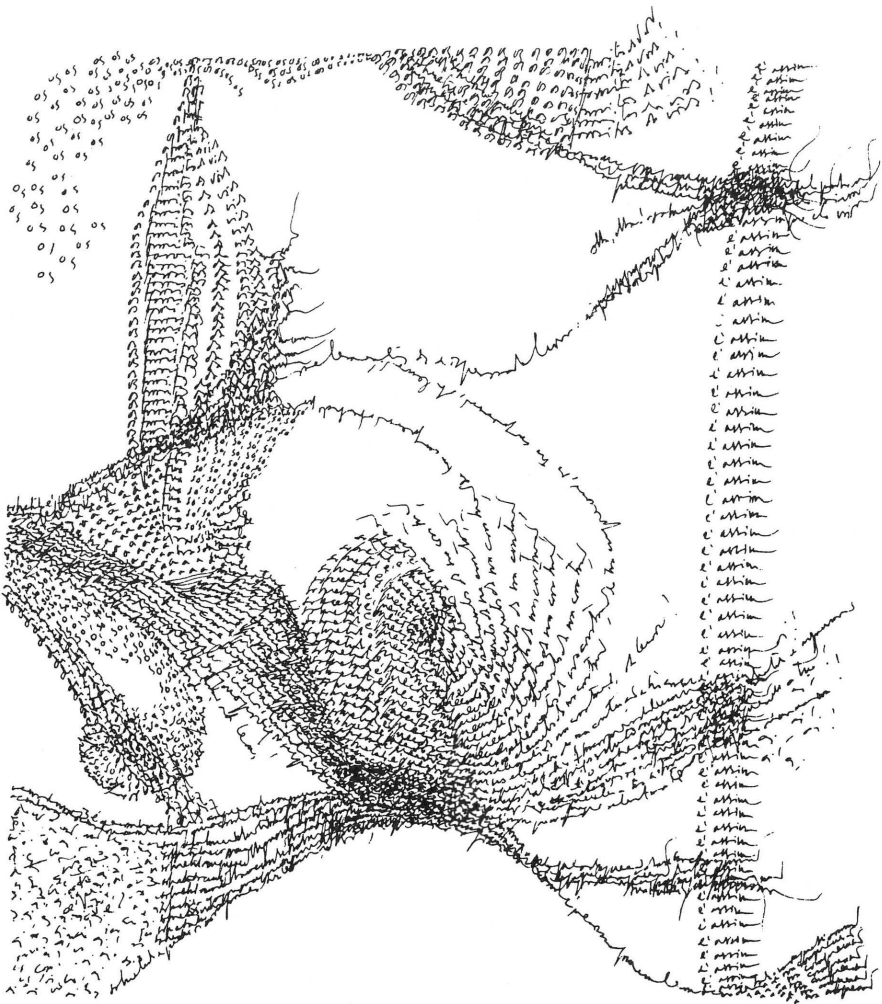
precisely what made it possible for the visual poem to be diffused all over the world; in the confusion and the incommunicability of languages and, concomitantly, that of civilizations and cultures (Joyce once said that the Tower of Babel is the Tower of Sleep), communication through the non-verbal image becomes a sort of *lingua franca*, a universal language. And renouncing the implications of literary tradition divests the society which gave rise to them of its robes—its ideologies and the techniques—making an *auto-da-fé* of preconceived ideas as to how writing, the writer, the text should be.

When widely adopted, a new technique defines its own viability and its own necessity. If it becomes universal in a given period this is because it corresponds to a contemporary truth, at the same time creating it. That is how, as soon as new techniques impose themselves on a society, a corresponding mutation in sensibility is brought about, deriving from their use. That mutation is epitomized in the texts of concrete poetry, which demand a true revolution in the reading, interpreting, and conceiving of poetic (more generally, artistic) expression.

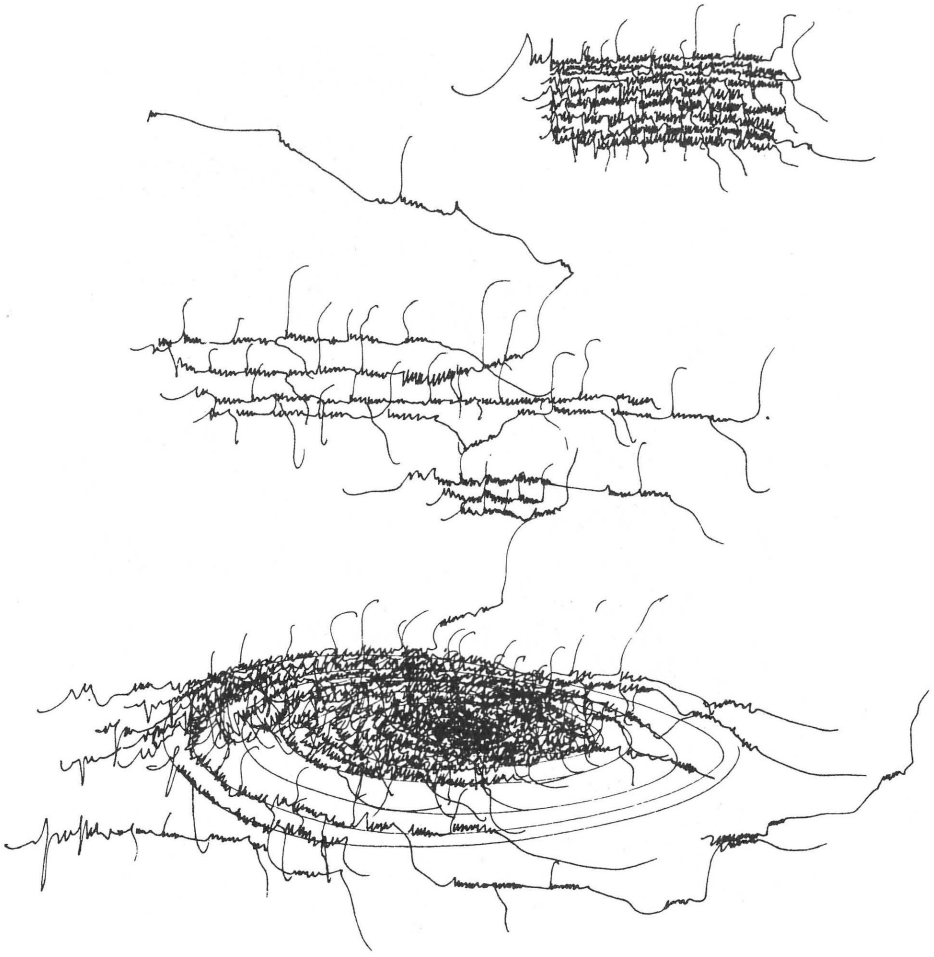
Inserted into the context of traditional logic, the word, like logic itself, has become an ambiguous reality. The ambiguity of writing and its contradiction in the plurality of meaning, combined with natural illegibility of writing taken in and of itself, now make of reading a form of reinvention, which reinvention becomes a civic obligation. And if the art of narrative, which has been that of poetry, leads to the exploration of space and visual effects, the disintegration of language defines a struggle for innovation which the text attests and which reading recreates through interpretation.



As never (to me alone)



One Must Understand



Beginning of Reason

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The Pleasure of the Text

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