

## Letterism — A Stream That Runs Its Own Course

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The great difficulty in situating Letterism in the context of modern art (poetry, music, cinema, etc.) is that it stands in such arrogant isolation. While avant-garde movements by their nature and definition reject the conventions of established forms, Letterism carries on a continual battle against society and other artists. The fact that there is some justification for the Letterists' claims to superiority does not help in this case because these artists are not widely known. It is impossible to determine the Letterist influence on artists who have never heard of them directly and perhaps only know the diluted adaptations of their principles and inventions.

Letterism leapt onto the stage in the 1940s — sometimes quite literally, as when Isidore Isou interrupted a Dada performance to read his own poems — and immediately claimed a place in the succession of artistic movements in the West. In the initial theoretical manifesto of Letterism, Isou traces the lineage from Baudelaire to himself, accepting a place of equal importance with Rimband, Mallarmé, Valéry, Jarry, Apollinaire, Tzara. These poets represent for Isou the watersheds of four different creative currents that lead fairly directly to him.

To understand the rationale that leads to this assertion, it is useful to review the evolution of art forms as outlined by Isou. Like a giant sigh, arts experience a period of expansion, taking in oxygen, sunshine and other nutrients which are transformed into rich lifeblood. Isou calls this phase *amplic*. (The problems of translating these terms will be discussed further on.)

For the art of poetry the *amplic* phase covers all its history up through Victor Hugo, or roughly until 1857, the moment when Baudelaire brought his "new shudder" to initiate the other phase of art.

The second phase is like a huge exhalation, the part of the sigh which signifies the consumption of all usable oxygen, expelling the carbon dioxide, muscles full of lactic acids and the brain fatigued. Isou calls this period in art the *chiseling* phase. Chiseling is the activity of artists who cut away at the accomplishments of the *amplic* phase.

As a first step Baudelaire replaces the poetry of narrative anecdotes with a plastic image; next Verlaine and Rimband reduce the poem to lines and words; Mallarmé and Valéry then chisel words into space and sound; finally Breton and Tzara complete the annihilation of words.

At this point Isou discloses the use of letters as meaningful particles smaller than words, and Letterism undertakes the culmination of the chiseling phase.

Two of the most interesting concepts in Letterist theory are those just presented: the idea of the *amplic* and *chiseling* phases, and the notion of the power of letters. The first of these has the strength of sweeping generalizations that allow people to organize their knowledge and feelings. Like the concepts of classicism/romanticism, apollonianism/dionysianism, male/female principles, and Eastern philosophy/Western philosophy, the *amplic*/*chiseling* dichotomy suggests all sorts of new critiques of art. As seen in Frédérique Devaux's essay on cinema, it can be applied to all fields of artistic endeavor, and it provides a basis for devastating attacks on those unlucky enough to be in the wrong phase. Of course even Letterism itself will experience both phases.

The reduction of language to its smallest particles — written signs, spoken syllables — is not a nihilistic gesture, for Isou has illustrated that these units, atoms of the language, retain an expressive force far greater than their size suggests. By comparing a series of visual compositions it is possible to recognize a hierarchy of signs that illustrates this principle: If an abstract work contains one natural, representational element, our attention is drawn to that object; in a representational painting such as a landscape, even the smallest intrusion of a human being becomes the focal point; and in a portrait any letters — for instance, on a tattooed arm — dominate the visual field. Letters are thus proposed as the most powerful elements to be used in any composition, whether poetic, pictorial, musical, or cinematic.

In post-war France it was not surprising that Letterism appeared as a form of nuclear fission, sometimes considered the atomisation of literature. The analogy held regarding Letterist tactics as well as its theory. The preferred manner of spreading the movement during the late 1940s and early 1950s was to pass out tracts, hold public meetings, and give readings at cafés. While the gloomy existentialists frequented the café Deux Magots in the Latin Quarter, Letterists wandered down to the Tabou to hear recitations by Gabriel Pomerand, one of Isou's earliest partisans.

Already the name Letterism had been pronounced in the right places. The Surrealists Aragon and Breton were initially friendly to the young poets of Letterism, offering assistance that was later repaid with violent rejection. The newspaper *Figaro*, which traditionally records the arrival of new artistic movements, had carried a favorable report on Letterism, and in 1947 the important publishing house of Gallimard brought out Isou's manifesto, "Introduction to a New Poetry and a New Music."

By 1950 it was possible to identify Letterism as a vigorous and obnoxious new artistic movement, striving through tactics that applied to the masses — radio programs, demonstrations, speeches — to take over the place held by Surrealism. There was a vital group of Letterist artists who had started a journal and set up their own press, and they had recognition value in the intellectual and artistic milieu of France.

Maurice Lemaître joined forces with the Letterists in 1950, and from that time on he and Isou became and have remained the principal figures in the movement. During the 1950s the possibilities of Letterist theory were explored

and exploited to their fullest. The original emphasis on sound poetry was extended to encompass visual poetry as well, and this domain has been especially well illustrated by Lemaître.

Isou and Lemaître developed an excellent collaboration, where the Roumanian initiated dozens of ideas that the Parisian elaborated and organized in presentable forms. After sound and visual poetry, it was cinema. Isou's *Treatise on Slobber and Eternity* won the prize for avant-garde cinema in Cannes, and Lemaître also turned his attention to politics and economics, becoming a model of the complete artist and creator which Isou had envisioned.

Aided by the new *Journal Ur*, founded by Lemaître, there were regular outlets for the voluminous production of Letterist texts, analyses, and critiques that came out during this period, mostly from the two ringleaders (Figure 6). Letterist notoriety was maintained through public recognition and the support of faithful defenders such as Jean Cocteau.

Cocteau had been instrumental in Isou's success at the Cannes film festival, and he was on the jury of a poetry prize that was considering Isou in 1956. The

Letterists supported Isou with a tract passed out at the restaurant where the jury was meeting. Cocteau did his best, but the vote went another way, and the Letterists responded the same evening, with yet another tract attacking the jury.

One of the opposing jury members was Louis Aragon, the surrealist poet who along with André Breton began receiving a barrage of criticism from the Letterists. There were two principal sources for the Letterists' antagonism. On theoretical grounds the Letterists felt that Surrealism had taken the material of the avant-garde (as illustrated in Dada, for instance) and carried it backwards toward Romanticism. The later accommodation of Aragon and Breton to modern conventional trends in France, particularly in Aragon's wartime lyrics, incited Lemaître to call them chameleons.

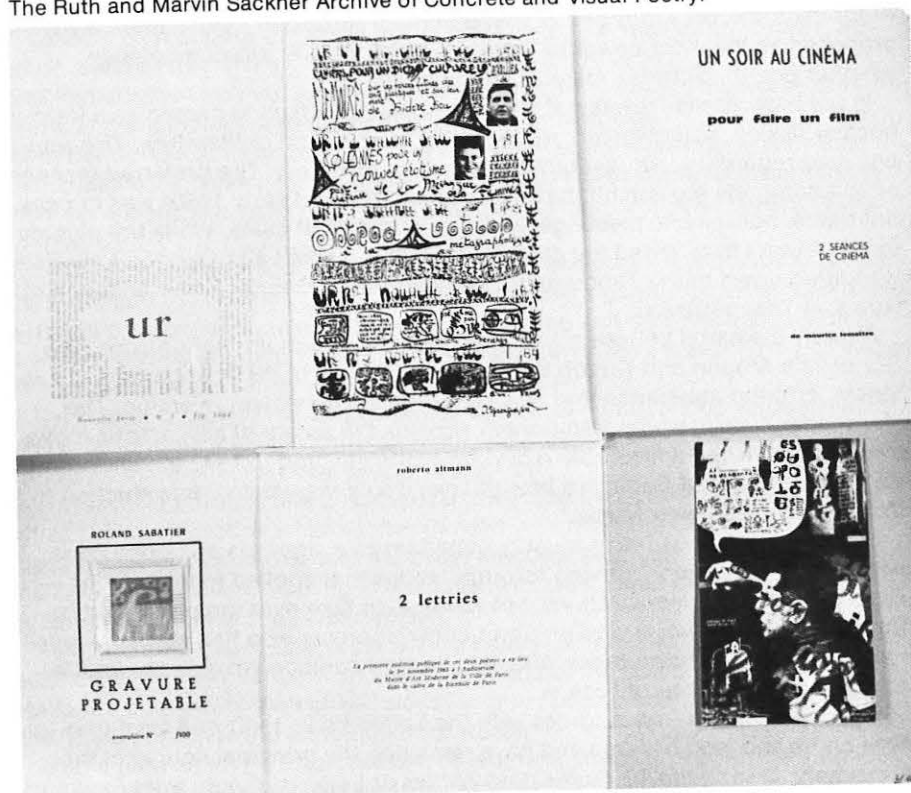
On the personal level, Aragon was seen as figurehead of the band of surrealists who failed to rally around the cause of the Letterists, abandoning them to the critics and, worse yet, to silence. Lemaître later recalled bitterly that Aragon was one of those most guilty of causing problems for the Letterist movement.

In replying to questions posed by Pietro Ferrua (in an unpublished manuscript, "Entretiens sur le Lettrisme," (1975-1982), Lemaître acknowledges a whole series of adversaries whom they attacked in articles, brochures, and tracts: Albert Camus, Jean Paulhan, Marcel Arland, Cioran, Aragon and Elsa Triolet, Paul Eluard, the painter Mathieu, actor and director Jean-Louis Barrault, Béjart and the Marseille Avant-Garde Festival, Charlie Chaplin, Alain Resnais, Jean-Luc Godard, and so forth. Sometimes the reason for the conflict is forgotten, and all that remains is a memory of acid words or an image of fleeing from the police after a demonstration.

The reason for these perpetual debates and confrontations, which includes a long-standing friendly quarrel between Isou and Lemaître themselves, is partly a firm belief in their own originality, and partly an investment in continuous revolution. Lemaître is very reluctant to admit comparisons with his predecessors, even when the influence seems warranted. For instance, his response to Ferrua's question about a Futurist technique that reappeared in Letterism was to question the motives of his interviewer. On the other hand, he continually accuses others such as Godard of plagiarizing Letterist ideas.

The Letterist idea of a continuous revolution is more defensible, if not entirely successful. It is related to a faith in youth, as evidenced by the formation of a Front de la Jeunesse, which followed Isou's treatise "The Revolt of the Young" (Figure 7). This is where the Letterists had already parted company with the aging Surrealists, and it led them to vigorous involvement with students in the uprisings of May 1968 (which the Letterists claim to have initiated through their theoretical writings of the 1950s). The Letterist commitment in this area has never flagged, and continues to be evidenced by their support of youthful collaborators and innovators, whom they publish in a series of ephemeral journals and exhibit in annual salons. While the goal of these efforts is to promote creativity, it is not always easy to detect any evolution from the original efforts of Isou and Lemaître.

Figure 6 [89]. *Ur*, new series, no. 3, 1964, The Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry.





dissect and deride the exhibitions at hand. For both experts and the general public, this French critical dialogue with art is part of the enjoyment and the deep value of it.

In Jean-Paul Curtay's historical summary *La Poésie Lettriste* (Paris: Seghers, 1974), nineteen young artists merit being named in chapter headings for the decade of 1963-1973. The period was inspired by Lemaître's gathering and encouragement of disciples, bringing them into art shows and publications alongside himself and Isou. The new poets begin a more systematic development of the ideas the Letterist founders had inspired. Curtay himself, for instance, pursued the matter of giving a notation for all the sounds that a person can make, including finger-snapping, and other non-oral noises. This led eventually to his practice of "body sound art," which he has been performing independently of the Letterists since 1980.

When Stephen Bann's *Concrete Poetry, an International Anthology* appeared in 1967, it included no Letterist poetry or mention of it. Although in defining concrete poetry he places heavy emphasis on the visual text, he does allow for some performance-oriented poets such as Ernst Jandl. This makes the absence of the term Letterism even from his introductory essay a bit troubling. Soon afterward other anthologies presented visual poetry to the American reader: Emmett Williams published an *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* which expanded on the list of poets in Bann's volume, but still ignored Letterism. This was also the case with Eugene Wildman's *Anthology of Concretism* and Mary Ellen Solt's *Concrete Poetry: A World View*.

Concretism is a term elusive in its definition but generally applies to works of poetry in which the physical presentation of the material — phonetics, typography, etc. — contribute significantly to the meaning. This obviously should include Letterism, and its absence was probably due to a couple of outside factors. The first was simply that the mainstream of concretism had developed around some German, Brazilian, British, and American poets who became a standard for the concept. Gomringer, de Campos, and Finlay set the tone with their clear and elegant presentations. In France the closest example was Pierre Garnier, whose "spatialist" movement rivalled the Letterists. Garnier acknowledges a debt to the Letterists but is much more congenial about their interrelations, while the Letterists remain quite bitter and have attacked him in a pamphlet.

Another factor making the Letterists inconvenient is the quality of their texts. Isou himself had a tendency to scribble drawings that often drew the charge of infantilism, while Lemaître's canvasses could only be reproduced in photographs. The other French visual poets were producing handsomely printed paperbacks, such as Jean-François Bory's *Once Again*, or even expensive cut-out pages as with Julien Blaine's *La Sculpturale*. By contrast, the Letterists publish as quickly as possible and by the most economical means, so there is a predominance of cheap-looking, hand-drawn volumes on any Letterist bookshelf. Since the physical text claims such importance in these avant-garde movements, this careless presentation can only be detrimental.

Another problem for Letterism is that few of the theoretical texts have been translated. The First International Symposium on Letterism, organized by Pietro Ferrua and graced by the presence of Lemaître himself, did not result in widespread recognition for the movement. The proceedings of the symposium are available in photocopied form, but have not been published. Lemaître has recognized this problem himself, and circulates another publication called *What is Letterism?*, which includes translations from his own work and various articles in English gleaned from here and there. These translations highlight the difficulty in Letterist vocabulary: they have invented numerous neologisms that have no ready English equivalent, and sometimes appear to be wrong, mysterious, or silly in translated form. The major Letterist thesis about the *amplique* and *ciselant* phases of art is reduced to the clumsy rendering "amplific" and "chiseling." Elsewhere this is translated as "amplique" and "engraving." The *cinéma disrépant*, an important concept in Letterist cinema, is called "discrepant," which has no meaning to English-speakers, while "disjunctive," a more meaningful term, does not lead back easily to the original word. And Greek-based neologisms like "psychokladology" and "es-thapeirism" have alchemist overtones that do not enhance the status of Letterism. The originality of invention thus confronts the conventional mind.

Letterism today still has life in France, where the salons and publications continue, and a small but dedicated faction of artists pursues the principles of Isou and Lemaître. Its founders have made every effort to transmit their ideas and enthusiasm, with only mixed success. What comes next?

There are several avenues of hope for the fortunes of Letterism. Lemaître made a point in recent conversations that the death of Aragon closes the era of Surrealism, leaving only one viable avant-garde movement intact. "Now people will have to recognize Letterism," he told this writer in January of 1983.

Another, more important reason for Letterist optimism is that their fundamental theories and inspirations have indeed contributed to the development of contemporary art forms. From the perspective of our slightly later historical moment, we can see the sequence of events that justifies Letterist claims. The direct contacts may be difficult to establish, but since the Letterists were so prodigious at publishing and dating their new ideas, it will be easy to give them credit for innovation and creation throughout the post-war period. The passage of time also softens the disappointment over some of the low production standards in their publications; as years go by, the germ of inspiration seems more important than the elegance of presentation.

Lastly, this present volume and the exhibition it accompanies provide the attention and exposure abroad that may be necessary to give Letterism its due in France. Lemaître despairs of recognition by the French public, and sees in the American academic world a more sensitive and serious audience. What remains to be seen is whether the young Letterists will pass out tracts decrying this effort as ossified institutional effrontery to their evolving avant-gardism. Long live the Letterist chisel!