

Super-Writing 1983 — America 1683

Jean-Paul Curtay

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God is not an artist like the others. He invented the giraffe, the elephant, the cat. He does not have a style, in fact he keeps on experimenting.

—Picasso¹

While living with his parents in Romania during World War II, Isidore Isou was preparing himself — to invent neither the giraffe, the elephant, the cat nor different styles, but to invent new arts, new sciences, new philosophies. In 1942 at the age of seventeen he outlined the original basis for a new poetry, a new theater and a new aesthetics.² *Lettrism*, the new poetry, was launched in Paris at the end of the war; it consisted merely of letters gathered into verses without words.³

Although the verses bypassed dictionary entries, they "said" something, diffusely, through the sound of the phonemes and their rhythm in performance. Poetry took several strides away from books, literature, intellectualism, to become action — action for the performer and sensation for the listener. Following in the paths of the prophetic works of the Italian Futurists, the Russian Futurists, Hugo Ball, and Kurt Schwitters, Isou had founded an abstract poetry.

The young avant-gardist had reached his maturity through books. When the accelerated program of education provided for him by his father became insufficient, he had come to consider books as his foster parents. With Lettrism he was to betray them. As Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich had abandoned the figurative object in the visual arts thirty years earlier to enter a universe of "diffuse" communication through direct sensation, so Isou envisioned forcing "meaning" back into the visual arts by centering them on objects extracted from books: letters, words, sentences.

Thus, at the age of eighteen, he outlined the theoretical basis for another field, Lettrist painting, in which sensitive games of color and rhythm would be played around writing.⁴ But this time, instead of "liberating" a field such as poetry from constraints by offering it a light-weight particle, the phoneme, mere sound matter, Isou tried to restructure a visual art open to the freedom of abstraction, by introducing heavyweight particles — elements of writing — made of directive form and meaning like the figurative object.⁵

For some years, until 1953, Isou did not really care to go much further than the presentation of his theories: "I am not a painter because I do not have

enough time to be a painter. With this shortsighted view of mine I see in front of me other fields which — it feels to me — require renewal more urgently."⁶ Isou was aiming at shifting the basic ideas, what Thomas Kuhn calls the paradigms,⁷ of all the fields of art, science and philosophy that he could embrace. His purpose was to accelerate the evolution of a world he believed held for the first time a chance to step into a "terrestrial paradise." This made him more eager to change the school system, the banking system, or the status of creative people than to achieve works of art. Thus, all he did as a "painter" from 1943 through 1947 was to transcribe his Lettrist poems on to sheets of paper, first in one color, with a few doodles and spots overlapping the text/score, later in several layers of different colors and finally on canvases. These Lettrist poems were obviously not the most "meaningful" (in the sense of having "transcendental edge") that he could have used. But to him and to those who had begun to appreciate abstract poetry they were highly meaningful. In 1946-1947 these realisations, along with a few letters made of wire, were shown in Paris at the Porte Latine Bookstore, the Lettrist "headquarters" of those years.⁸

Gabriel Pomerand, Guy Vallot (a Romanian friend of Isou whose real name was Rodica Valeanu), and Roberdhay were the first three Lettrist painters. Both Guy Vallot and Roberdhay realized compositions close to lyrical abstractions, with letters running, flying or melting into a whirl of colors. Isou complained: "My friends looked like they did not trust mere letters; they blended them with spots and informal lines; they weakened them by reducing them to pretty compositions on overworked backgrounds. During our conversations I often shouted at them something like: 'Why don't you just write and give to the text a chance to appeal and move. Write "shit!" on the canvas! That's enough.'"⁹ But rather than actually painting, to fulfill his obsessive wish Isou tackled another field: the novel.

Once again he wound up with a liberating paradigm shift. In 1950 he proposed to invite handwriting, drawing, color, collage, photography and even objects to come and dance on the page, turning the novel into a visual feast.¹⁰ Apart from the revolutionary look given to the book, this proposition triggered unusual phenomena. To replace the word "moon" in a sentence with a drawing of the moon ("pictoprose") or a collage of a picture of the moon ("collaprose") or a photograph of the moon ("photoprose") allowed — potentially — direct depiction of "this" moon with attributes that depend in the traditional novel on adjectives and context. The context in the "metagraphic novel" could then play other games of color or form.

It seems to me that Isou, who loved books so much, showed more freedom in his creativity when he dreamt of a new novel than when he dreamt of a new poetry or painting. He who distrusted machines and would resist the use of the tape recorder in poetry a few years later proposed using record players to give sound to some novels, and bulbs and electricity to give them light. He even wanted them to release odors and perfumes. Houses, he wrote, could be transformed into mazes where strings of real objects would write the story. A whole city could also become a literary frame (*esthpolis*): the reader would have a

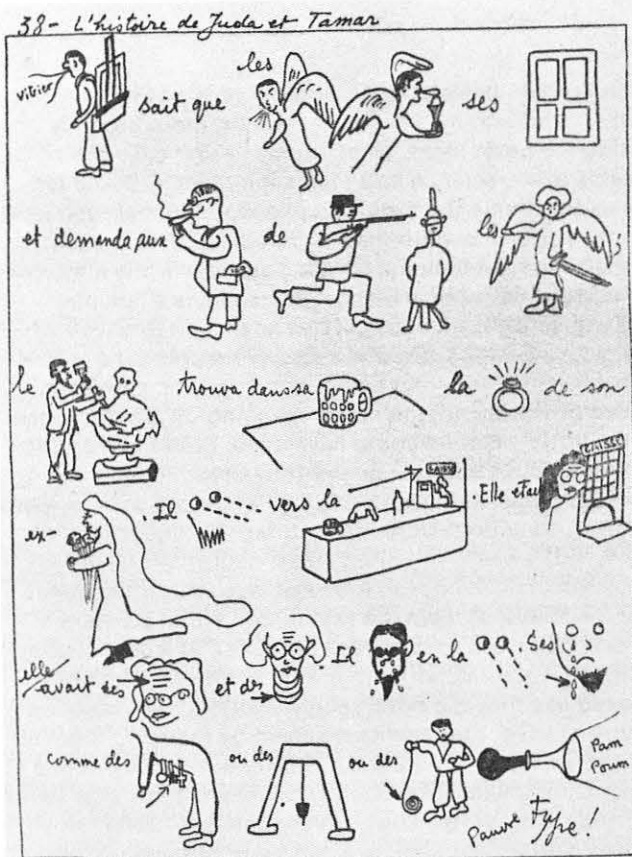
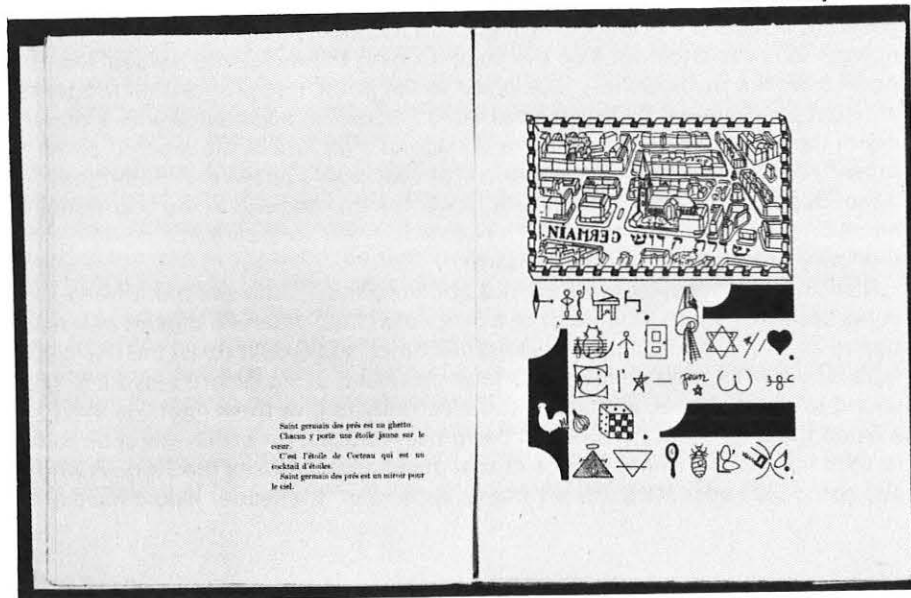


Figure 9 [30].
Isidore Isou,
from *Les Journaux
des Dieux*, 1950,
The Ruth and
Marvin Sackner
Archive of
Concrete and
Visual Poetry.

Figure 10 [56].
Gabriel Pomerand,
from *Saint
Ghetto-des-Prêts*,
1950, The Ruth and
Marvin Sackner
Archive of
Concrete and
Visual Poetry.



map to lead him/her to the successive locations where the "chapters" await. Plants and animals could participate in fiction too, in person. This luxuriant program would be the basis for the meca-art system, developed ten years later.

For the first time, the founder of Lettrism also took into account the possibility of different degrees of readability. The replacement of the alphabet by another system of signs, either alphabetic or syllabic or ideographic, either known (Braille, Morse, sign languages, flag codes, knots) or invented, would provide the reader with a ludic approach to the text to be deciphered. And the game could be made more sophisticated by mixing several systems, by using other known or specially devised techniques of mysterography (rebuses, enigmas, anagrams, cryptograms, cross-words) and by building palimpsests, several texts being printed on the same page.

Isou experimented with some of these possibilities in *The Gods' Diaries*, the first novel of its kind.¹¹ The style of both story and drawings is naive but the work on the whole is stunning and funny at the same time. The first forty pages display one text in blue. The following five pages, in which "God writes in Braille, because God is blind," are the result of an overlapping of two texts, one in blue, one in red. The last five pages display three texts in blue, red, and yellow, generating a merry jungle of signs (Figure 9). Unexpected encounters at the level of the small notations, and beautiful chance compositions of the whole page, remove the reader still further from conventional reading.

The rich and free merging of visual arts and literature envisioned by Isou in 1949-1950 under the name of "metagraphy" appeared fertile to many more people than the one proposed earlier with Lettrist painting, left almost unnoticed.

In 1949 Gabriel Pomerand composed and a year later published *Saint Ghetto des Prêts* (Saint Ghetto of the Loans), a novel in which the main character was the district of Saint Germain des Près. The right page displayed the magic of the mysterographic translation of the text, which was printed on the left page in regular words (Figure 10). Pomerand described his haunting vision of Saint Germain des Près by means of a strange hybrid wherein ideograms, rebuses, Hebrew alphabet, cuneiforms, and sign language intermingled. I found particularly appealing his "synthetic" rebus: *croirait* ("would believe") was represented by a cross (*croix*) drawn on the back of a ray (*raie*); *déniche* ("rummage") by faces of dice (*dé*) drawn on the roof and wall of a dog house (*niche*); *chaviré* ("overturn") by a cat (*chat*) whose tail had a form of phallus (*vit*) and whose behind bore a stave and the note D (*ré*). Pomerand also laid out the pages innovatively: in a maze, on a chess board, around or over a large figurative or abstract shape, and in white on a black background.

With *Canailles*,¹² a ten-page metagraphy, Maurice Lemaitre introduced various narrative devices around an autobiographical story on the period of the war (Figure 11). A sequence zooming from the solar system to a photographic portrait of the author, through a drawing of the earth, maps of Europe, France, Paris and of the inevitable Saint Germain de Près district set the action's frame. Comic strip material was — for the first time, to my knowledge — made part of a work of art; in any case *Canailles* preceded the work of Oyvind



Above left
Figure 11.
Maurice Lemaître,
from *Canailles*,
Ur, no. 1,
Paris, 1950.

Above
Figure 12.
Isidore Isou,
Les Nombres
(IX), 1952,
private collection,
Paris.

Left
Figure 13.
Isidore Isou
Métagraphie Amos,
1952.

Fahlström, whom Lemaître visited in Sweden and who wrote the first articles on Lettrism and Metagraphy in the Swedish papers while he was still a surrealist; Gianfranco Baruchello; and Roy Lichtenstein, all of whom did it later and in very different ways.

Isou's move into the novel had left the gate of the visual arts wide open to the introduction of any type of sign. It became clear in 1952 that one could paint not only with the Latin alphabet of Lettrist painting, but also with all the other current systems of writing (Cyrillic, Hebrew, Arabic, Chinese), with all the ancient systems (cuneiforms, hieroglyphs), with invented systems, with symbols coming from science (mathematics, chemistry), with maps and even with figurative objects and abstract particles, integrated into a narrative structure. This new visual world, which could be developed on canvases or in books (and their expansions) was renamed "hypergraphy" or "super-writing."¹³

Because the following years were dedicated for the most part to film¹⁴ and to theater,¹⁵ Isou and his friends did not return to the visual arts before 1953. In 1953 Isou decided to be, after all, a painter too. He became one with *Les Nombres* and *Amos*.

In some of *Les Nombres* (The Figures), 36 canvases, each representing two stanzas of four verses in the form of rebuses, the "idea" appeared still stronger than the plasticity, but the naïve quality of the monochlor part of *The Gods' Diaries* found itself transfigured by surprising oppositions of colors (such as yellow writing on a violet background)¹⁶ (Figure 12).

The narrative sequence of *Amos* was developed in nine photographs:¹⁷ 1) the author's room (unkempt bed, book open on the table close to the window), 2) Isou combing his hair in front of a mirror leaning on the wall close to stacks of books, 3) the room with the unkempt bed from another angle, oriented towards the open door, 4) Isou in the street, 5) a view of the street, 6) Isou smiling, 7) (meeting) a woman (Figure 13), 8) a man (Maurice Lemaître), and 9) (the three friends walking) towards Saint-Michel square. The black and white prints were covered with a dense net of mysterious colored writings. A closer examination makes us understand that these Greek letters, political and religious symbols (Jewish, Christian, royalist, Communist, Nazi), tiny figurative elements (flower, human shape, tree . . .), and punctuation signs form an alphabetical system. One could try to decipher the text. But without having to read it literally, the veil of substitutive letters transforms the "reading" of the pictures through the parts left untouched, through the blocks of colors, through the contrasts of light and the various thicknesses of the strokes.

Slogans du groupe isouien by Maurice Lemaître¹⁸ realized a much tighter integration of photography and writing than *Amos*. Instead of substituting a letter for a note, as Isou had done in *The Gods' Diaries*, Lemaître substituted a phonetic sound for a note, a characteristic of all his writing systems to come.

In 1954 the Galerie Palmes showed a set of works by Lemaître: two large panels,¹⁹ canvases, a ceramic pot, plates,²⁰ a bas-relief and other objects covered with hieroglyphic and stenographic signs and other mysterograms. These works look like artifacts inherited from some remote civilization. Their writings have the peaceful, hieratic qualities of Egyptian art; they contrast with the corrosive, nervous, modern text written on *Amos's* sequential photographs.

By conjugating different modes of visual communication (writing, drawing, photography), super-writing effected a "semiotisation" of art, making clear that painting had to be read one way or another.

The paradigm had been different for artists such as Picasso and Braque, Paul Klee and Mark Tobey who had used writing, letters, signs, and symbols before hypergraphy; their works were seen as figurative or non-figurative. Only after the appearance of super-writing did critics begin to see signs on their canvases and to read them as "visual texts." Isou had thus shifted the paradigm of art. To paint had become to organize signs. This is what so many movements (concrete and visual poetry, pop art, *geschriebene Malerei*, situationist "art," semiotic art) and so many artists (Cy Twombly, Capogrossi, Tom Phillips, Jiri Kolar, Gérard Fromanger or Ed Ruscha) have since approached from so many different directions. Abstract painters such as George Mathieu and Hans Hartung, surrealist painters such as Max Ernst and André Masson, and neo-expressionist artists such as Penck and even Francesco Clemente have revitalized their art thanks to writings or symbols. Certainly text-as-art was announced by certain artists — Magritte, for instance — but in a very particular orientation. Isou alone, however, made it unambiguous and open to any orientation.

I believe that most of hypergraphy is still to come. Isou, Lemaître, the later hypergraphists and other artists who had no link to the Lettrist group but who worked with the same material have provided the field with only its primitive milestones. Figurative art lasted centuries because its elements, the objects reflected from reality, were numerous, fairly complex and most of all capable of carrying expression and formal findings (perspective, aerial perspective, chiaroscuro, and so on). Abstract art appears to be out of breath after a few decades, not only because of accelerated creative evolution but also because its material, required not to represent anything even though it could be made infinitely complex, is much less likely to relate to our concerns. Hypergraphy, offered as a way to manipulate any sign, and including figurative and abstract particles, presents an unprecedented potential for formal and expressive expansions.

But Isou, feeling compelled or preferring to outline still new creative areas, chose again to give up the growth of hypergraphy to other artists — reasserting, however, as often as he could, that he should be remembered as its inventor. In 1956 Isou declared in his "Introduction à une esthétique imaginaire" (Introduction to Imaginary Art)²¹ that one did not need to manipulate any real element to create art. He proposed that inaudible phonemes could be composed in ways to realize imaginary sound works. The first silent poems were performed in 1959.²² Invisible signs (infinitely small or infinitely big), of course, could also be the material of imaginary visual works. Finally, Isou came to believe that anything which was not seen as a concrete sign but as a surrogate particle for imaginary or "impossible" matter was entitled to represent the works of a fourth structure (after figuration, abstraction and hypergraphy) in art: "infinitesimal" or *esthapeirist* art (from *esth*, "aesthetics," and *apeiros*, "infinite," in Greek).²³

As the actual works had to take place in the mind, one of the most efficient ways to create them was to invite the public to see them through the ears, the nose, the skin, the tongue. Sounds, perfumes, tactile and gustative stimuli became, not the matter, but the "triggers" for this outlandish art.²⁴

We mentioned that as early as 1950, in *The Gods' Diaries*, Isou had proposed that perfumes, animals, electricity, the city, be part of a new fiction. But these propositions were concrete, were to be part of super-writing. The work would actually be built from perfumes, animals, electricity or the city. Isou called this concrete way of enriching art with new instruments "meca-art" (*méca-esthétique*).

A work can be seen as the production by instruments (brushes, colors and canvas, traditionally) of elements (figurative, abstract, hypergraphic or imaginary), organized in certain forms or rhythms (the characteristics of which make a style recognizable) in the direction of certain subjects or themes (among them the absence of theme or a-theme). Isou proposed that creativity extend independently the array of possibilities in each of these dimensions of any work: mechanics, elementics, rhythmicity and thematics.

During the years 1960-1964, Paris was invited by the Lettrist group to celebrate art and creativity around a bewildering blossoming of meca-art.²⁵ In 1960 at the Museum of Modern Art Isou presented two works, one made of rice, cocoa, ropes, fur, and pieces of iron, and one canvas from which was hung a cage with a real bird in it.²⁶ (In the same show, Lemaître decided to hang a bird cage without a bird in it and to present it as an imaginary mobile).

Then Isou conceived of going even beyond imaginary art, to propose works which would never be achieved, works which would be worked on forever. The artist would offer open frames on which any person or group of persons (one particular family, for instance) or animals or natural phenomena would be invited to make contributions; these contributions could be required to employ certain types of particles, to be organized according to certain rhythms or to concern certain subjects. These works, named "supertemporal works" or "sup," in contrast with Allen Kaprow's Happenings, George Brecht's events or Hans Haacke's pieces, yet to come, had as their main characteristic not to be ever completable.²⁷ In fact, Isou permitted some works to be limited in time, but once this time limit was reached, the work lost its supertemporal status and re-entered the world of achieved, closed, frozen art.

But as we know now, Isou did not dwell long on the same idea. In the Hotel de Navarre, rue Gît-le-Coeur, he launched "anti-meca-art."²⁸ Absurd machines as anti-machines (this was certainly not Isou's most original idea), a gargoyle as anti-live mobile, colors as anti-colors ("violet? no! green! . . ."), emptiness as anti-instrument (without Yves Klein's philosophical/mystical overtones) — in brief, any negated instrument was proposed to generate art just as any acknowledged instrument had been proposed to do so.

The following year at the Museum of Modern Art, Isou returned to meca-art with a world wide connected sculpture — a telex machine churning out news from all over the planet.²⁹ Also in 1963, he established what he called the "integral equation" — the human, animal, vegetal, physico-chemical, cosmic and

mental resources from which meca-art could extract its instruments. By opening an envelope glued at the end of the booklet, one could get a handful of cigarette butts, matches, firecrackers, stamps, pages torn from school children's notebooks, clippings and other found objects spread on the table; this was *The Great Chaos*, Isou's last novel.³⁰ He called this new type of writing "polyautomatism." The purpose of polyautomatism was theoretically to offer a larger scope of randomisation than Dada chance methods, Surrealistic automatic writing and free association, and other types of spontaneous techniques, such as Jackson Pollock's dripping. One could improvise by choosing randomly the instruments and/or the elements and/or the rhythms and/or the subjects of the work, whereas a nonanalytical approach of spontaneous or random expression would lead to a smaller number of solutions. Even if one did not want to be "rational," polyautomatism could submit a richer array of alternatives to irrationality.

Pursuing his mapping of new creative skies in *The Diamond Law*,³¹ Isou devised yet another equation to attack and destroy art in an analytical method, similar to polyautomatism: polythanasy.³² This time he gave up demonstrating his theory and simply offered the extreme solution of his formula: a completely blank novel. At the end of the sixties, polythanasy became the favorite form of expression for the young painter Roland Sabatier.

Unexpectedly, Isou spent most of 1961 in painting Lettrist and hypergraphic works. Canvases like *Cheveaux* (a hybrid of *cheveux*, "hair," and *chevaux*, "horses") or *Tigre* (the word *tigre* stretched, elegantly slanted in yellow) represented a return to the primitive idea of Lettrist painting as Lemaître conceived of it in the mid-fifties with his mono-word works like *Joy* or *Atome*.

Figure 14. Maurice Lemaître, *Le Cabinet de l'amateur lettriste*, 1961.



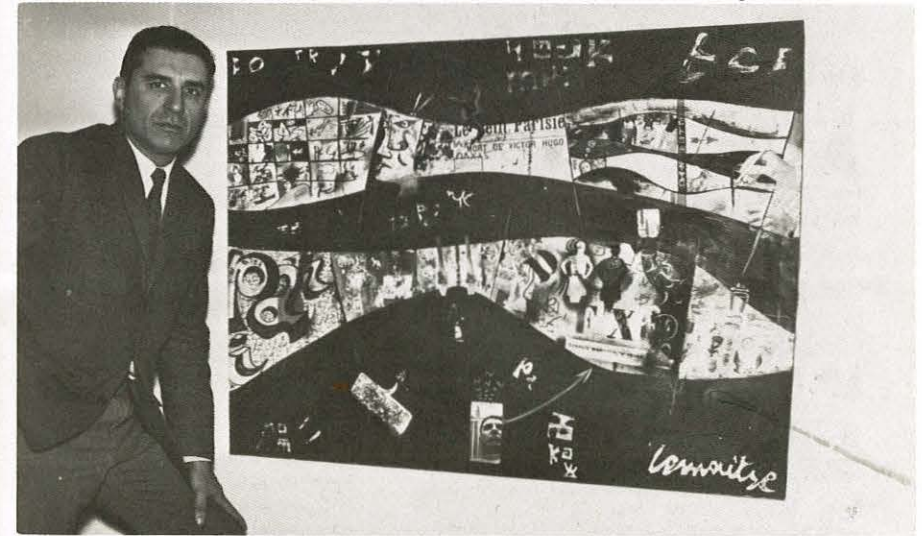
The same fever of painting seized Lemaître, who, in contrast to Isou, kept in touch with symbols (his invented phonetic alphabets) and used many different hues. Lemaître, who had in his poetry already tended toward a romanticist style, realized a less calculated, less systematic, more emotional ensemble of works. Through the selection of the material (words, sentences, pictograms, mysterograms, icons) and the intuitive mode of association, one can feel a quest for affective solutions where Isou was looking for rational solutions.

In the early sixties Lemaître began compounding the letters of his invented alphabets into figurative shapes in the manner of calligrams. He also compounded his different styles on one canvas as had Isou, but instead of having symmetry rule the synthesis, Lemaître let his intuition arrange the squares and the rectangles in a merry patchwork, as in *Le Cabinet de l'Amateur lettriste* (Figure 14).

Lemaître had to wait until the mid-sixties before he found a unifying and dynamic principle to shape the successively more heterogeneous but also more expressive and directly readable material of his works: a comic-strip syntax made of large wavy divided structures and of balloons. *The Self-Portrait of the Artist Speaking on the Art of Portrait* (1966) gathered an anthology of all the previous portraits realized by the painter into a huge balloon (Figure 15). Inside the balloon one finds a comic-strip sentence in the primitive form of the wavy structure which appeared in a mature version later in works such as *Story of Victor Hugo's Death* (1967).

Jacques Spacagna seems to have pushed some characteristics of Isou's styles of 1961 — a pseudo-stenographic cursive writing and organic patterns — to an intensity and a refinement never reached before in hypergraphic art.

Figure 15. Maurice Lemaître, pictured with *Récit de la Mort de Victor Hugo*, 1967.



After having limited his palette to black, white, silver and gold, and having nearly rejected straight lines, Spacagna played various deeply inspired games with his writings, sensuous and serene at times, incisive and violent at other times. The highly electric and magnetic qualities of the calligraphy oscillated — through speed and density games — in between the oriental and the occidental spirits³³ (Figure 16).

If Spacagna's walk was guided by the inner eye, Roberto Altmann's was a somnambulist drift (Figure 17). A hypnotic myriad of small appendices, holes and arrows formed swarming little sign-cells which influenced each other's shape. The intense social, intellectual and love life of these little sign-cells was described in a magnificent hypergraphic comic strip in 1967.³⁴

Spacagna and Altmann were the first two hypergraphists to find their way to a single intuitive style which slowly evolved over the years. Roland Sabatier shifted several times to explore various formal possibilities in a way even more rational and systematic than Isou's. *Full Pages* (Pleines pages) in white on black associates letters (Latin or from various alphabets like Braille), syllables, lexical and ideographic signs (corresponding to one word) and phraseographic signs (corresponding to one sentence) in a puzzle of pieces of messages and stranded components, like a large slice of memory, a hectic memory, containing more "bugs" than readable information (Figure 18).



Figure 16 [89].
Jacques Spacagna,
Untitled, 1964,
from *Ur*, new series,
no. 3, 1964,
The Ruth and Marvin
Sackner Archive
of Concrete
and Visual Poetry.



Figure 17.
Roberto Altmann,
Hypergraphic Epopea,
1967.

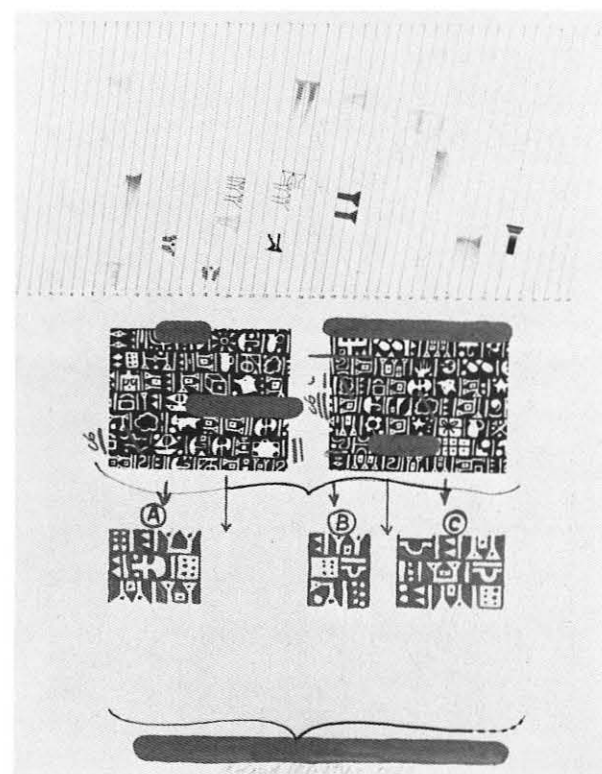


Figure 18 [81].
Roland Sabatier,
Hypergraphie corrigée,
1972, collection
of the artist.

ECCE HOMO

roman hypergraphique de alain satié



Figure 19 [60].
Alain Satié,
"Ecce Homo,
roman hypergraphique
de Alain Satié,"
from *Revue Litteraire
Lettriste*, no. 1,
1970, The Ruth and
Marvin Sackner
Archive of Concrete
and Visual Poetry.

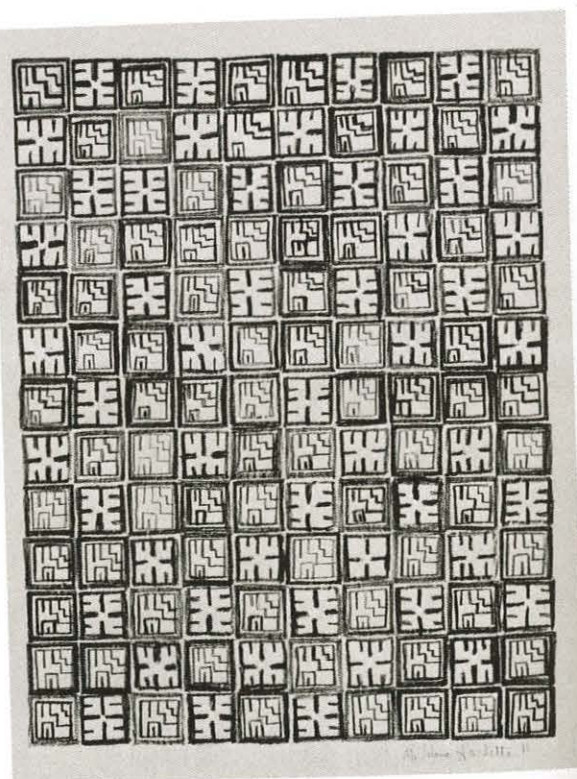


Figure 20 [16].
Micheline Hachette,
Van Gogh, 1976,
collection of
the artist.

Natural Sciences Reconsidered (Reconsidération des Sciences Naturelles) opposed with still more clarity a background of "noise" made of randomly spread objects and letters — over which Sabatier sprayed black paint — and cartouches of biological, medical or geographical schematic information. This rendering of the fragmented perception of knowledge was sometimes augmented by other, nonsensical, cartouches. In the booklet *For the Form*, a flot-sam and jetsam of words and images constitute a fake speech.³⁵

The most important among Sabatier's numerous styles, and one developed since 1969, was the "polythanasic style," a systematic analytical attack upon the hypergraphical work itself. This condemnation denied any relevance to the idea of painting, while the act of painting took the form of a sado-masochistic game wherein the painter physically tied, blindfolded, covered, scratched, tore or verbally distrusted, discarded, denied, laughed at or invited the public to distrust, discard, deny and laugh at his own work.

The graphic virtuosity of Alain Satié, who was educated as an industrial designer, helped him to construct a very personal vision of the Latin letters. He reshaped them into acrobatic forms, paroxysmally bent above each other. The movements of these boomerang letters was frozen into a jelly of "electronic" signs, securely fastened by delicate knots, only thin antennae succeeding in keeping their freedom.

Satié synthesized many human faces with his electronic-component-like signs, contrasting with particular care the highlights and the shadows. A fascination for the third dimension drove him finally to quit the canvas to cut his inscriptions and struggling letters into wood panels so that real shadows could project themselves onto the wall. He glued books and various objects onto canvases, where they formed colored suns, myriads of the tiny letter-pasta that one can use to make soup with (Figure 19). As did most of the previous hypergraphists, Satié anthologized his diverse styles in balanced compositions. He also approached imaginary art in an original way, offering various types of visual material for daydreaming by indicating on them precise spots as focus points for a sort of self-hypnosis.³⁶

Micheline Hachette modified her one style progressively, but always along the same line, a broken line with which she remodelled all the Latin letters first, then simplified and fragmented them and finally enclosed them in cubes (Figure 20). Her angular compositions were inspired more by Aztec than Cubist art. One of her first canvases was *Letter to Guatimozin* (1964); Guatimozin was the last Aztec emperor, whom Cortez tortured by fire to learn the secret location of his treasures.

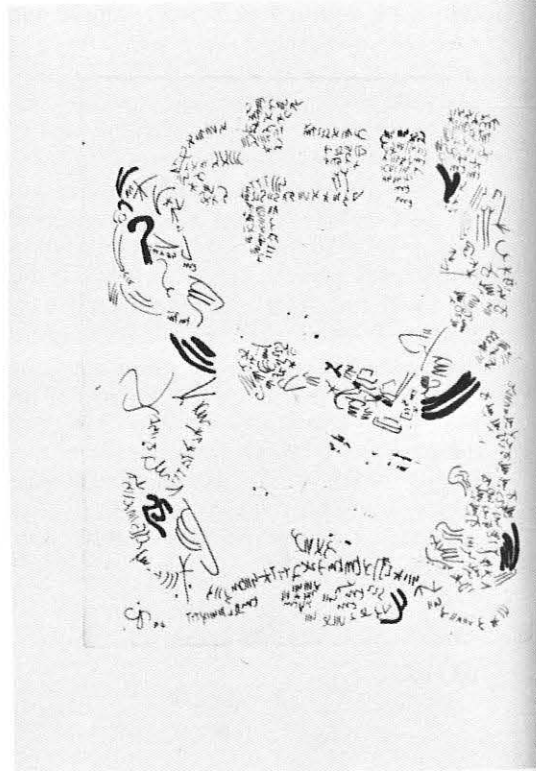
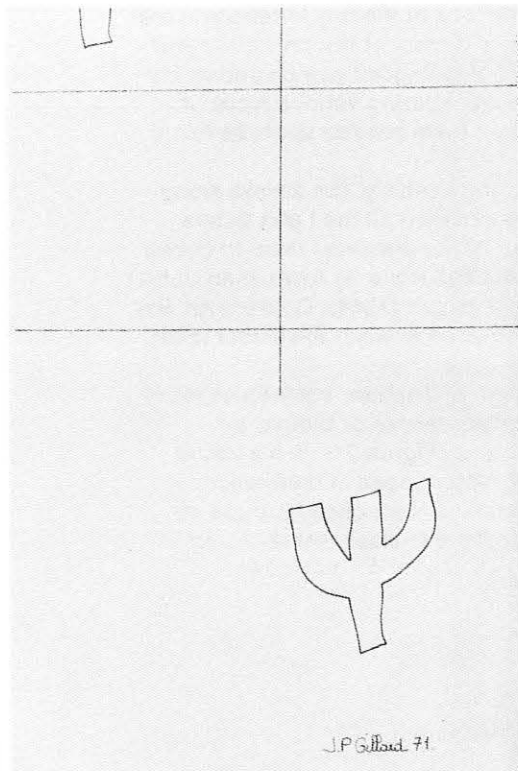
François Poyet's highly complex signs in folds and spikes, sometimes fern-like, sometimes exotic bird-like, formed curved sentences or blocks, in dialogue with diverse calligraphies or mere strains (Figure 21). In his visual novels the same signs stroke or hug nude women engaged in meditation. Poyet also appropriates the third dimension. He has composed baroque inscriptions with signs cut into thick styrofoam or into transparent sheets of plastic.

Right
Figure 21 [58].
François Poyet,
Untitled, 1981,
collection of
the artist.



Below
Figure 22 [3].
Jean-Pierre Gillard,
Untitled, from
Lettrisme et hypergraphie,
1972, The Ruth and
Marvin Sackner
Archive of
Concrete and
Visual Poetry.

Below left
Figure 23 [7].
Jean-Paul Curtay,
Homage to Bracelli II,
1974, collection
of the artist.



Jean-Pierre Gillard painted and printed and sculpted all his works with the same sign, the Greek letter *psi* (Figure 22). Beset with the question of the transition between the concrete universe and the imaginary universe, he made his sign travel from hypergraphy to infinitesimal art. One can see the *psi*, either two- or three-dimensional, disappearing partially by passing the border of the work, becoming mutilated or dissolving into liquids, finally disappearing completely.

After 1969 I based my work on four mysterographic alphabets which were meant to transmit, through the mere shapes of the signs, four different atmospheres: the first alphabet was made of cerebral Greek and geometric signs; the second was intended to suggest organization and life; the third evoked masks and strangeness; and the fourth, made of full pictographic icons, was meant to suggest materiality, pleasure, games, and freedom. In the first series I painted (*Logopées*), the thick signs were realized with the finger from the color squeezed directly out of the tube onto the canvas. The whole composition was arranged according to an iconic relation to the background. In 1971 I began a work of reflection on the relationships between two signs: proportions, orientations, distances from infinitely remote to contact, overlapping, coincidence, inclusion and composition (the two signs compose a third sign), which led me to express atmospheres through the rhythm as much as through the shape of the signs (Figure 23). To limit the interference of color I restricted my palette to blue, green, and white (sea/sky, country, foliage, mountain/snow) to which I added yellow when I introduced figurative components.

In 1973 I was looking for a unifying principle in super-writing equivalent to Italian perspective. "Perspective" means "to see through" — for figurative painting, to see a three-dimensional space through a two-dimensional surface (like a window pane). The illusion of a physical third dimension could not be as essential a principle for the art of signs as it had been for the art of naturalistic representation. The understanding that calligrams allow a figurative shape to be seen through a group of words provided me with a solution. Instead of composing only figurative shapes from words, one could compose any sign from any group of signs: figurative shapes could compose letters; abstract particles could compose letters; letters could compose letters; figurative shapes, figurative shapes, and this could be generalized, for compounded signs could again compose signs, and so on. In *Homage to Bracelli* small letters from the second alphabet were gathered in shapes of trees, the trees in shapes of fishes, and the fishes arranged in the form of a large B. In *Homage to Arcimboldo* small letters from the third alphabet were gathered — or distorted (letter fecundation) — into shapes of fishes, the fishes into shapes of trees and the trees into the form of a large A.³⁷

In 1978 I showed that the depths introduced by this "integrative perspective" in super-writing could relate not only to space and topography in a way different from classical perspective (for instance, to form the word "home" with doors, floor, ceiling, windows, fire places, arm chairs . . .) but also to time (for instance, to compose a portrait from portraits of the same person from birth to the present time, or to compose an adult frog from young frogs, themselves

composed of tadpoles) or to instruments (like Arcimboldo's portrait of a librarian with books).³⁸

In an early period Françoise Canal displayed strings of complex signs, each different from the other — garden signs or jewel signs inspired by Matisse. In a second period she restricted her material drastically to a single sign in two parts — playing fine games of proportion and situation, sometimes of composition (*Hypergraphic Nocturnes*) through its repetition. Over the years, as Canal took advantage of techniques of successive rubbings to produce transparencies, the associations became freer, the colors merrier and the subjects more closely related to life, as in *Hypergraphic Mornings* (Figure 24).

Gérard-Philippe Broutin was always fascinated with hieroglyphs and Russian formalism. When he started to paint, he naturally composed hieroglyphs in a formalist spirit. Eventually the genuine hieroglyphs were replaced with a hieroglyph-like mysterographic set of fruit and animal signs organized in sentences alternatively with plain words. In these hieratic compositions Broutin overlapped portraits and stone-like signs.³⁹ He also began playing with relationships of proportion, overlappings and inclusions of single signs until he made us share a new fascination for hyper-inclusions where, like Russian dolls, a sign contains a sign which contains a sign which contains a sign. Broutin ended up revealing an eerie universe of planes (pages of signs) rotating in space amidst large depositories of encapsulated and re-encapsulated hieroglyphs (Figure 25).

Like Lemaître but in contrast to Isou or Broutin, Antoine Grimaud entered painting with an affective quest in mind but tried first to conciliate rational leads and affective moves (Figure 26). His bird letters first appeared caged into squares, then liberated themselves to fly in flocks like flags. The birds were then invited to socialize with solemn split signs, chemistry symbols and later computer programs. At times rationality took over, boxing everything into cases in which humans and birds could only meditate; at other times they found a way out of their tight niches and ran and screamed and flew. In recent years they screamed heavy clouds of onomatopoeia and nightmare visions.

The art of Florence Villers evolved also through the years toward expressionistic super-writing. She began, however, with extremely formal compositions made of permutations of three signs, emphasizing positive-negative oppositions. Probably under the influence of a defective eye convergence which gave her a flatter view of the world than normal, and by which the space between the objects appeared to be as outlined as the objects themselves, she read the intervals between her signs as well as the signs themselves and developed a writing of "intersigns."⁴⁰ She expanded this intersign writing before discovering it was a classical Gestalt exercise. In recent years Florence Villers has swapped her geometric signs for human shapes and has them travel along accelerated trajectories, strongly suggesting emotional, often violent, releases (Figure 27).

In the last few years Albert Dupont has refined techniques and styles introduced by previous hypergraphists: he transformed sculptural signs (Lemaître), portraits composed with letters, words, sentences (Lemaître), superimposed

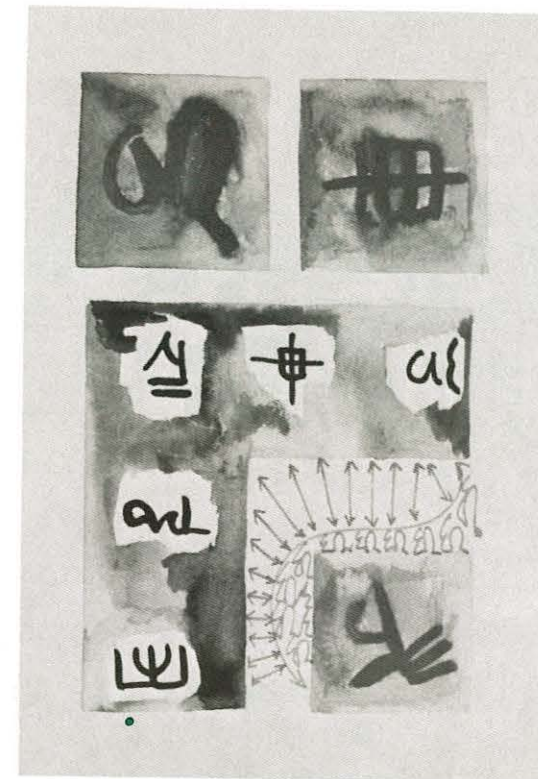


Figure 24 [33].
Françoise Canal,
Untitled, from
Trente Juin:
poème lettriste
polyautomatique,
1972, The Ruth and
Marvin Sackner
Archive of Concrete
and Visual Poetry.

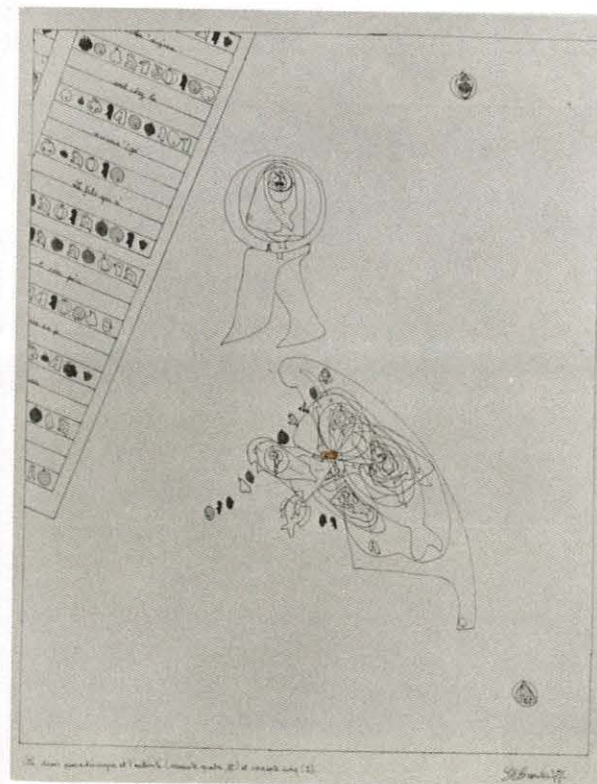


Figure 25 [6].
Gérard-Philippe
Broutin, *Le désir*
paradisique
et l'extrémité
(soixante quatre
et soixante
cinq I), 1977,
collection of
the artist.

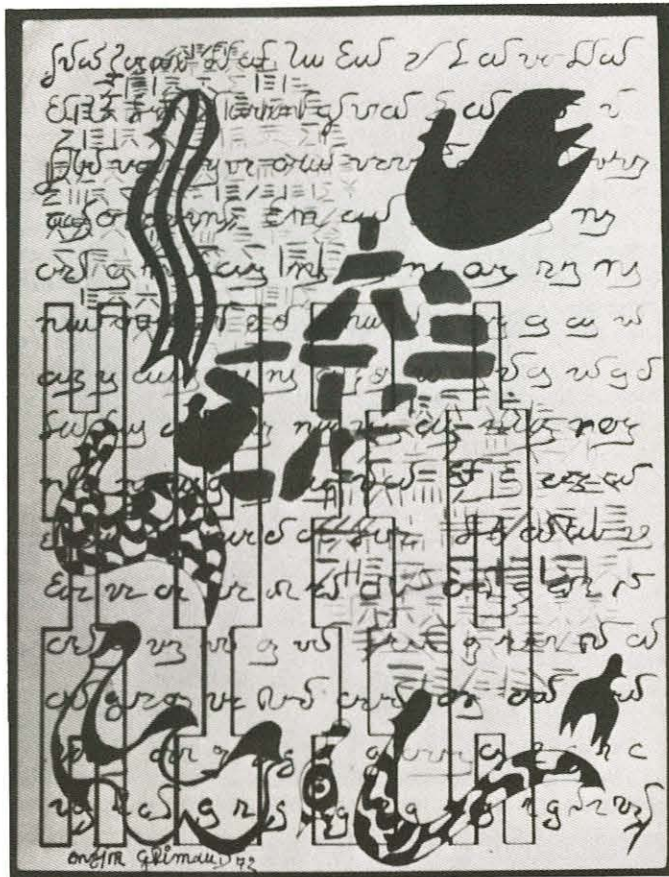


Figure 26.
Antoine Grimaud,
Untitled, 1972,
collection of
the artist.

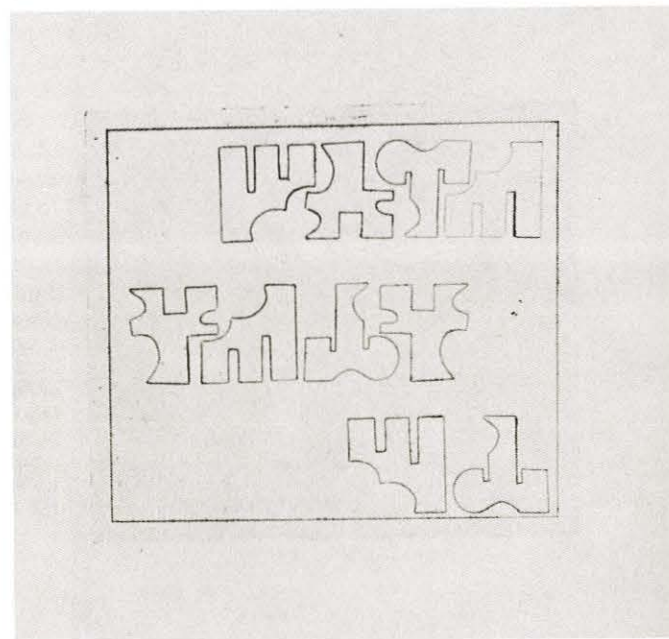


Figure 27 [94].
Florence Villers,
Ces quelques signes,
1974, collection
of the artist.

writings (Satié) into jungles over which only a few white readable words dominate, before inventing his own original and impressive style (Figure 28). Dupont traced his totemic signs into the thickness of the paper with a point, rubbing pastel colors over the relief so that they appear with a riveting intensity among the softest tints.

François Letaillieur's work revolved mainly around comic strips, in the original form of collages. The cut pieces form letters or large balloons. Even reduced to thin strips, the material maintains a surprising attractive power. One cannot escape trying to reconstitute the missing parts, so that Letaillieur's collages operate like venetian blinds on the windows of dreams.

What has been brought into cultivation by all these artists? Actually, only a very few patches of the continent "super-writing." The pioneers ran through;

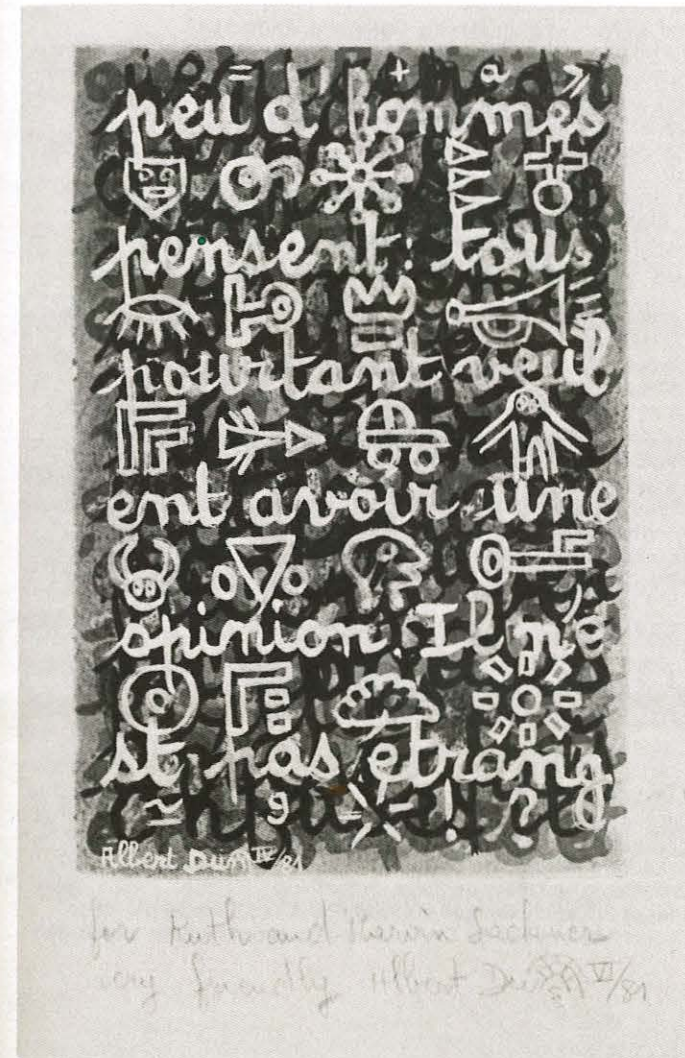


Figure 28 [13].
Albert Dupont,
Untitled, 1981,
The Ruth and
Marvin Sackner
Archive of
Concrete and
Visual Poetry.

here and there clumps were sown. Their efforts provide us with landmarks — "historical" canvases that often have the rawness of Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. The artists who came after Isou and Lemaître began to harvest some splendid crops too. But, even without talking of meca-art, imaginary or supertemporal arts, if we consider the potential of the art of visual signs today, the striking variety of the known works undoubtedly confirms the vastness of the land. We find ourselves walking in the America of 1983. And all the recent explorations implemented in the budding fields of semiotics, visual symbolism,⁴¹ advertising, and nonverbal communication indicate its "magic" fertility: an exceptional power over our minds and hearts.

1. Françoise Gilot, *Vivre avec Picasso*, p. 40.
2. Isou, *L'Agrégation d'un Nom et d'un Messie*, Gallimard, Paris, 1947.
3. Isou, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et une nouvelle musique*, Gallimard, Paris, 1947. Also Curtay, *La poésie lettriste*, Seghers, Paris, 1974; and Curtay, "Abstract Poetry, Lettrism, Mouth Symbols and More" in Mary Ann Caws, ed., *Concrete and Visual Poetry*, forthcoming issue of *Dada/Surrealism* at The University of Iowa Press.
4. Isou, "Esquisse d'un Manifeste" in *Mémoires sur les forces futures des arts plastiques et sur leur mort*, *Ur* No. 1, 1950.
5. He called the form "symmetric edge" (*tranchant symétrique*) and the meaning "transcendental edge" (*tranchant transcendantal*).
6. In *Mémoires sur les forces futures des arts plastiques*.
7. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, 1970.
8. Georges Mathieu, still an expressionist painter, visited the Porte Latine Bookstore in the forties, before using calligraphy and becoming a "signist."
9. Isou did not escape some Dada clichés. *Les Champs de Force de la peinture lettriste*, Avant-garde, R. Altmann, Paris, 1964, pp. 31-32.
10. Isou, "Essai sur la définition, l'évolution et le bouleversement de la prose et du roman" in *Les Journaux des Dieux*, Aux Escaliers de Lausanne, Paris, 1950.
11. With some foreshadowings in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Stendhal's *La Vie de Henry Brulard*, Balzac's *Ursule Mirouet* . . . but it was only ten years later that novelists, artists and visual poets started book art and new fiction in the same direction. See today the Franklin Furnace Archive in New York, the Visual Studies Workshop catalog (Rochester, NY), Maurice Roche, Raymond Federman, Joëlle de la Casinière, Sophie Podolski, Steve Non, Paul Zelevansky, David Cole, Janet Zweig, Tom Phillips, Dieter Rot, Bern Porter . . .
12. Maurice Lemaître, *Canailles*, *Ur* no. 1, Paris, 1950. Reprinted in *Canailles*, Centre de Créativité, Paris, 1964.
13. Isou, *Fondements pour la transformation intégrale du Théâtre*, vol. II, 1952. I published it in 1970 ((CICK, Paris).
14. Isou, *Traité de Bave et d'Eternité* ("Treatise of Drivel and Eternity" and not "Venom and Eternity" as it has been translated until now), 1951. Script published in Isou, *Oeuvres de Spectacle*, Gallimard, Paris, 1964. Lemaître, *Le Film est déjà commencé* (The Film Has Already Begun), 1951. Script published by André Bonne, Paris, 1952. The film is available through Northwestern Film Archive, Portland, Oregon. François Dufrêne, *Tambours du jugement premier* (Dawnsday Drums), 1952. Gil J. Wolman, *L'Anti Concept*, 1952. Jean-Louis Brau, *La Barque de la Vie Courante* (The Current Life's Boat), 1952. Guy Ernest Debord, *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (Screaming for Sade), 1952. Debord became later the founder of Situationism. See also *Ion*, Paris 1952, the single-issue periodical containing Isou's "Esthétique du Cinema" and texts on the films mentioned.

15. Isou wrote most of his *Fondements pour la transformation intégrale du Théâtre* after the notes gathered in Romania. First volume, Bordas, Paris, 1953; second volume, CICK, Paris, 1970.

16. *The Figures* were shown in 1953 at Galerie Point du Jour and Galerie Palmes. The text was published in *Ur* no. 2, new series, 1964.

17. *Amos* was reproduced in black and white in *Ur* no. 3, 1953, and *Arcanes*, Eric Losfeld, 1953. In their films Isou and Lemaître had already scratched, painted on, written on photographs (1951).

18. Lemaître, *Slogans du groupe isouien*, *Ur* no. 3, 1953.

19. Reproduced in *Canailles*, Centre de Créativité, 1964.

20. Reproduced in *Canailles II, III, IV . . .*, Centre de Créativité, 1968.

21. Isou, "Introduction à une esthétique imaginaire," *Front de la Jeunesse* no. 7, Paris, 1956.

22. Isou, *Oeuvres aphonistiques*, Avant-garde, R. Altmann, Paris, 1967.

23. I feel it is much simpler to keep calling it "imaginary art."

24. Conceptual art appeared nine years later with Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965), with a more intellectual orientation (art as idea) and very different "solutions."

25. Isou, at the same time, designed a new hypergraphic novel, *Initiation à la haute volupté* (Aux Escaliers de Lausanne, 1960), a thriller blended with erotica and creative propositions. The patchwork style juxtaposed regular typography, hand writing, mystrography, figurative drawing overlapped with hand writings, calligrams, cartoons, Pomerand-like rebuses, pictograms.

26. *Concentré méca-esthétique* and *Mobile vivant* (Integral Meca-art digest) and (Live mobile), Salon Comparaisons, 1960.

27. Isou, *L'Art supertemporel*, Aux Escaliers de Lausanne, Paris, 1960.

28. Isou, "Manifeste de l'anti-méca-esthétique généralisée" in *Pour une connaissance plus précise de la méca-esthétique et de l'esthapeirisme*, PSI, Paris, 1976.

29. Six years in advance of Hans Haacke's *Communication System UPI* (Howard Wise Gallery, NY, 1969). It is interesting to note that with the years the length of time needed by other artists to re-invent Isou's works diminished, because of the creative explosion of the sixties.

30. Each copy was different. Isou, *Le Grand Désordre*, 1963.

31. Isou, *La Loi des Purs*, 1963.

32. *Thanatos* means "death" in Greek.

33. See "Hypergraphie-voltographie" (1965), for instance, in *Lettrisme et Hypergraphie* (Fall, 1974, p. 43).

34. Roberto Altmann, *Geste Hypergraphique* (Hypergraphic Chronicle), Centre International de Création, Vaduz, Liechtenstein, 1968.

35. Roland Sabatier, *Pour la Forme*, Crean, Paris, 1969.

36. Figures also suggest an order among the spots. See Satié, "Manifeste du roman infinitésimal contrôlé et relance" in *Écrit en prose* (PSI, 1971) and Satié, *Exemple a conseiller* (*Revue Littéraire Lettriste*, 1971).

37. Jean-Paul Curtay, *Perspective Perspective*, Studio M, Bamberg, West Germany, 1976. See also *A New Perspective System: Integrative Perspective*, forthcoming in Invisible City, San Francisco (first published in French, ± 0 no. 20, Genval, Belgium, 1978).

38. Curtay, *Les profondeurs figurative et hypergraphiques*, ± 0 no. 21-22, Genval, Belgium, 1978.

39. Gérard-Philippe Broutin, "Mes Bandelettes d'Eternité," in *Irreductibilité Lettriste*, no. 1, CICK, 1974).

40. In a quite different orientation, Irma Blank (in Milan) recently began painting the spaces between the words in meditative minimal rhythms, after she had put word rhythms in the forefront for years by systematically cancelling all the words from various printed texts.

41. Here "symbolism" means "iconicity" in Peirce's terms.