

1. Maurice Lemaître, *Le Film est déjà commencé?* Paris: Editions André Bonne, 1952, p. 129.
2. Isidore Isou, *Les Journaux des Dieux*. Paris: Les Escaliers de Lausanne, 1950, p. 143.
3. *Why Isou Is More Important than Picasso* (Pourquoi Isou est plus important que Picasso), followed by *What Everyone Should Know about Letterist and Infinitesimal Painting* (Ce qui il faut savoir de la peinture lettriste et infinitésimale), 1962, reprinted in Isidore Isou, *From Impressionism to Letterism* (De l'impressionisme au Lettrisme). Filipacchi, 1974, p. 84.
4. Maurice Lemaître, *Super-Experimental Cinema* (Le Cinéma super-expérimental). Centre de Créativité, 1980, p. 23.

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Since this short essay could not take into account all the creative nuances of Letterist cinema, a short bibliography follows. It is not an exhaustive list but it should provide an initiation to this creative cinema for any curious or interested persons.

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## The Limitations of Lettrisme An Interview with Henri Chopin

Introduced and Annotated by Nicholas Zurbrugg

The following interview with the French sound poet, Henri Chopin, was recorded in English, in Brisbane, at the end of Chopin's visit to Australia as the special guest of the Sound Art Festival held as part of the ANZART exhibition in Hobart, Tasmania, in May 1983.<sup>1</sup> Chopin is best known as a pioneer of European sound poetry (or poetry composed for and by the tape-recorder); as the creator of "typewriter poems"; as the editor and publisher of the review *OU*, which first systematically published LP records by European and American sound poets; and as the author of the first comprehensive history of sound poetry, *Poésie sonore internationale*, published in Paris in 1979.<sup>2</sup>

Chopin's reflections upon Lettrisme are particularly interesting precisely because Chopin was never a member of the Lettriste movement. Indeed, as Chopin has insisted upon many occasions,<sup>3</sup> his allegiances are not so much to any one particular artistic movement, as to creativity — or movement — itself. As the Swedish composer and sound poet Sten Hanson has remarked, "Chopin is . . . a man who makes no compromise; he always speaks his opinion without any trace of diplomatic consideration,"<sup>4</sup> and although such statements wielding "always" should always be taken with a pinch of salt, Hanson judiciously points to the ironic wit informing most of Chopin's judgments. In other words, Chopin's meditations provide a useful antidote to the more partisan effusions of such Lettristes as Roland Sabatier, whose enthusiasms for Isidore Isou's achievements recently culminated in his avowal that Isou is not only "le plus grand artiste surgi dans l'art moderne" ("the greatest artist to emerge in modern art"), but also "le créateur le plus important de toute l'histoire de la plastique" ("the most important creator in the entire history of the plastic arts").<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Chopin's comments in the following interview provide an equally potent antidote to some of the excesses in Isou's own writings and observations. In the same issue of the Italian review *Berenice* in which Sabatier's eulogy of Isou appeared, Isou is quoted in an interview with Carmela Muscolo as avowing that "Le Futurisme n'a aucune importance historique" ("Futurism has no historical importance"), and that "ma création est une création internationaliste" ("my creativity is an internationalist creativity").<sup>6</sup>

As Chopin's remarks intimate, Lettrisme is perhaps itself at best a movement with a momentary historical significance, and is thus analogous in kind — if not in quality — to Futurism. And as Chopin also hints, Lettrisme never really

became the international movement that Isou wished it to be, and apparently believes it to be. Rather, it is perhaps most "important" as a peculiarly local, Parisian avant-garde movement, which in some respects prepared the way for subsequent international avant-garde trends, but which now appears to have been confined by both its *ideological* and its *technological* parameters.

From an ideological point of view, Lettrisme seems to have been unduly restricted by the consequences of the Lettriste protocol that Jean-Paul Curtay generously defines as the "propositions historiques" ("historical proposals") representing "le premier essai de réaliser un règlement éthique spécifique à un groupe d'avant-garde" ("the first attempt to formulate ethical regulations peculiar to an avant-garde movement").<sup>7</sup> These proposals listed a number of Lettriste commandments; specified appropriate fines for bad behavior; and finally appear to have precipitated the kind of parochial in-fighting and purges that Vasco Noverraz conscientiously recorded in his report entitled "L'Année Lettriste 1956" ("The Lettrist Year 1956"). Here, Novarrez proffers such gems as his reference to a Lettriste exhibition in which only Lemaître sold a painting: an event which led to a quarrel between Isou and the rest of the group, which was only resolved when "Lemaître, agacé par l'attitude brouillon d'Isou et sa puérole vanité, trouva facilement un prétexte pour isoler un instant ce dernier" ("Lemaître, annoyed by Isou's argumentative attitude and by his puerile vanity, deftly found an opportunity to take Isou aside for a moment").<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere, Novarrez lists those new members admitted to the group from Switzerland and from Paris, and similarly records that the group expelled Pierre-Henri Liardon (for "surrealist tendencies"); René Berger, Bernard Noël and Gabriel Pomerand (for "indolence and creative impotence").<sup>9</sup> This is, admittedly, just one Lettriste report, and moreover, from the mid-fifties, when — according to Chopin's testimony — Lettrisme was past its prime. Nevertheless, such petty quarrels and prescriptions seem the very antithesis of the dynamic creativity that one would associate with the ideology of a more open-ended, *international* movement.

The technological parameters of Lettrisme are nicely foregrounded by Chopin's references to the ways in which the Lettristes appeared indifferent to the creative potential of either the tape-recorder or the typewriter. While Isou's ideological statements use such scientific and technological terminology as his reference to "une éthique atomique et électronique" ("an atomic and electronic ethic");<sup>10</sup> and whilst Isou's "Open Letter to Frédéric Lefèvre" specified that Lettrisme would employ "La Radio — pour répandre la nouvelle musique lettriste" (Radio — to broadcast new Lettriste music), and "Les disques pour enregistrer notre musique et nos poèmes" ("Records to record our music and our poems"),<sup>11</sup> Lettrisme seems to have used the new, electronic technology of the Post-Modern era somewhat conservatively, as a means of mechanical reproduction, rather than audaciously exploring its potential as a means of mechanical production. Significantly, those Lettriste poets who used recording technology most creatively, as a means for both recording and orchestrating live improvisations — such as François Dufrêne and Gil Wolman — finally left the Lettriste movement in order to found Ultra-Lettrisme, and in Dufrêne's

case, in order to work among the more loosely grouped poets associated with sound poetry. As Chopin remarks, the Lettristes' apparent indifference to recording technology, and their emphasis upon *choral* performance, places their work in a strange watershed, just the wrong side of the technological revolution of sound poetry with its liberation of both abstract and semantic language within the recording studio.

It may seem churlish and ungenerous to quarrel with Isou's attempt to fragment language and liberate language by inventing new alphabetical signs, but in a sense these signs simultaneously demarcate both the triumph and the defeat of Lettrisme. On the one hand they triumphantly record Isou's effort to transcend conventional, alphabetical language, and constitute the most important verbal experiments since the phonetic poems of the Dadaists and the semantic juggling of Joyce. But, on the other hand, they restrict poetic innovation to an uncomfortably narrow semiotic system, which might at first appear advantageous when compared to purely alphabetical, phonetic poetry, but which seems singularly disadvantageous when compared with the rich sonic and semantic montages made possible by tape-recorded creativity.

In retrospect, then, it is scarcely surprising that poets like Dufrêne rejected the confines of Isou's Lettriste signs, in order to create more ambitious compositions with utterly abstract sounds orchestrated upon recording-tape. Similarly, it comes as no surprise to discover that Dufrêne also abandoned Lettriste materials in order to interweave the complicated puns and compressed semantic reverberations of his *Tombeau de Pierre Larousse*, a poem which at its best conflates Joycean wordplay with the joyous abstract declamatory style that Dufrêne had perfected during his work with the Lettristes. Subsequent refinements of abstract collages such as Henri Chopin's *audiopoèmes*, and subsequent elaborations of semantic collages, such as Bernard Heidsieck's *poèmes-partitions*, revealed the rich potential of Dufrêne's abstract and semantic explorations,<sup>12</sup> and anticipated Jacques Derrida's recent — and perhaps, belated — suggestion that such "writing machines" as the tape-recorder permit the most significant *extensions* of contemporary discourse.<sup>13</sup>

If Isou's new alphabetical signs both liberated the *sonic* potential of language and simultaneously restrained the sonic potential of language, by restricting its materials to a finite number of old and new signs, it might also be argued that these signs similarly limited the potential of *visual* language. Having rejected conventional alphabetical signs (or rather, having complemented conventional alphabetical signs with his own innovations), Isou appears to have neglected the creative potential of the typewriter, a machine whose fearful symmetry was particularly favored by the spatialist, concrete and visual poets in the late fifties and sixties, when it became the standard creative tool for a new, world-wide school of predominantly constructivist poets, who carefully juxtaposed geometrical clusters of abstract letters and words. In the hands of abstract poets like Dom Sylvester Houédard, the typewriter permitted a new, highly organized form of pattern-poetry (Figure 30); in the hands of a more semantic poet like Ian Hamilton Finlay, the typewriter's uniform typefaces allowed semantic repetition, spatial punctuation, and typographic pattern, to



5. Roland Sabatier, "L'Oeuvre plastique et romanesque d'Isidore Isou," *Berenice*, 4 (November 1981-March 1982), pp. 30-49, p. 49. My translation.
6. Isidore Isou, quoted by Carmela Muscolo in "Interview d'Isidore Isou," *Berenice*, 4 (November 1981-March 1982), pp. 111-113, p. 112. My translation.
7. Jean-Paul Curtay, *La Poésie Lettriste* (Paris: Seghers, 1974), pp. 151-52. My translation.
8. Vasco Novveraz, "L'Année Lettriste 1956," *Poésie Nouvelle*, No. 1 (1957), pp. 19-21, p. 19. My translation.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 20. My translation.
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11. Isidore Isou, "Lettre ouverte à Frédéric Lefèvre," collected in Curtay, pp. 57-8, p. 58. My translation.
12. Examples of Chopin's *audiopoèmes* appear on his LP recording *Audiopoems* (London: Tangent Records TGS 106, 1971), and on his LP *Henri Chopin* (Bruxelles: IGLoo Records IGL 012, 1983). Bernard Heidsieck's *poèmes-partitions* appear on his LP recording "*Trois Biopsies*" + "*Un Passe-Partout*" (Paris: Multi-Techniques, 1971). Chopin's and Heidsieck's work also appears on many other LP anthologies, including those of Chopin's review *OU*; those published by Flykingen Radio, Stockholm; and those included in Arrigo Lora-Totino's anthology *Futura Poesia Sonora* (Milano: Cramps Records 5204 001, 1978).
13. Jacques Derrida, quoted in an interview (of 1982) with Paul Brennan in "Excuse me, but I never said exactly so: yet another Derridean interview," *On the Beach* (Sydney), No. 1 (Autumn 1983), p. 43. Derrida comments: "I think that . . . we are living in the extension — the overwhelming extension of writing. At least in the new sense . . . I don't mean the alphabetic writing down, but in the sense of those writing machines we're using now (e.g. the tape-recorder)."
14. Dom Sylvester Houéard, *linga chakra*, collected in *Hispanic Arts*, I, No. 3 and 4 (Winter/Spring 1968), p. 211; Ian Hamilton Finlay, *ajar*, collected by Stephen Bann, ed., in *Concrete Poetry: An International Anthology* (London: London Magazine Editions: 1967), p. 142.
15. Micheline Hachette, "Poème cubiste," collected in Jean-Paul Curtay, *La Poésie Lettriste*, p. 226.
16. Vasco Novveraz, "L'Année Lettriste," p. 20.
17. Gomringer's and Bense's theoretical texts are collected by Mary Ellen Solt in *Hispanic Arts*, I, No. 3 and 4 (Winter/Spring 1968), pp. 67-70 and pp. 73-74. Examples of their poetry appear on pages 90-94 and 121-22.
18. Roberto Altmann's recent, relatively abstract calligraphy appears in *Apeiros*, No. 1 (1971), pp. 119-31; a sequence entitled *fragments d'Ø*, from which the following example of his work is taken.
19. For a discussion of this peculiarly constructivist aesthetic, see my article "Dada and the Poetry of the Contemporary Avant-Garde," in Richard Sheppard, ed., *Dada: Studies of a Movement* (Chalfont St. Giles: Alpha Academic, 1980), pp. 121-43.
20. Discussing Isidore Isou's *Introduction à une Nouvelle Poésie et à une Nouvelle Musique*, and perspicaciously evaluating Isou's ideas within the context of Futurism, Dadaism and Modernist literature as a whole, Eugene Jolas's excellent article, "From Jabberwocky to 'Lettrism,'" in *Transition Forty Eight*, No. 1 (January 1948), pp. 104-20, memorably deflated Isou's more megalomaniac pretensions, with the digression: "Isou is too young to have heard the great Polish pianist de Pachman who, when he had played a particularly brilliant passage before an adoring public, would turn and say for all to hear: 'Bravo, Pachman,'" (p. 118).
21. Isidore Isou, quoted by Carmela Muscolo in "Interview d'Isidore Isou," p. 113. My translation.
22. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins: 1970), pp. 219-53, p. 239. Translated by Harry Zohn.

**N.Z.** What were your impressions of Isidore Isou and the Lettriste movement?

**H.C.** Well, it's very complicated. Isou was very important in 1946 when he arrived in Paris and founded the Lettriste movement, alone. Isou's writings, such as his *Introduction à une Nouvelle Poésie et à une Nouvelle Musique*,<sup>1</sup> were very lucid. But when he produced poetry with letters (and these were part of a long tradition starting with Aristophanes, and continuing with writers of the sixteenth century and with the Dadaist movement), these poems were superficial. Because when Dadaist poets like Raoul Hausmann, Tristan Tzara and Kurt Schwitters created poetry without words, just with letters, it was like music. And for me, Isou's big mistake was his system of codification for Lettriste poetry — his alphabetical codification. He invented a new alphabet,<sup>2</sup> and Dufrêne was against it; he said: "We don't need a new alphabet, and we don't need the first alphabet." Gil Wolman said this too, and there was a war between Isou and Wolman and Dufrêne.

**N.Z.** In other words, Dufrêne and Wolman worked more "musically," and on tape, rather than simply writing poems with Lettriste words?

**H.C.** Wolman later, but Dufrêne, yes. But to return to Isou and to his movement: the first aspect of it was very very positive; the second one was absolutely negative, when he called André Gide "la vieille chienne" ("the old bitch").<sup>3</sup> But it was very important just after the Second World War, Gide was very important at this period. And when Isou said in *La Dictature Lettriste* that we don't need versification, like Victor Hugo and Baudelaire and so on, it wasn't a big problem — the problem was to find a new word, a new civilization. And unfortunately, it seemed to me that Isidore Isou wasn't lucid about the new media. He couldn't understand anything about stereo, about tape-recorders and radio. It was a paradox. Isou was a very intellectual man: he said "I am against a poetry with words," but he used twenty or thirty volumes of words to express the Isou system! For me, the best Lettriste artist at this period was Maurice Lemaître. Lemaître was a painter, a sculptor and a very good editor and publisher. Isou produced just one Lettriste review, just one issue. Lemaître edited *Poésie Nouvelle* and *UR* — *UR* was a marvellous review! — with graphics by Man Ray, with Sabatier, with Spacagna, and so on — with François Dufrêne too! He was a great enemy of Dufrêne; there was always the same terrorism against the non-Lettristes!<sup>4</sup> It was a pity! But he produced very very good reviews and portfolios. *UR* was published in the early fifties — and this review seemed absolutely perfect, and now it forms a monument to Lettriste graphics.

**N.Z.** Why did Lemaître stop publishing *UR*?

**H.C.** Well, for one thing he is now deaf, absolutely totally deaf, and Isou is very ill too.

**N.Z.** Was it just ill health that stopped them? Because in the mid-fifties there were a lot of new ideas; it seems curious that Lettrisme appears to stop in this period.<sup>5</sup> Does its decline coincide with the emergence of "Ultra-Lettrisme"?

**H.C.** Well, when Dufrêne and Robert Estivals founded Ultra-Lettrisme it was against Isou, and it was very important in Paris. They founded *Grâmmes* review in 1958. Dufrêne left the Lettristes in 1953, Wolman in 1951. It is very strange, for me; Isou is egocentric, for him Isou is the world and the rest doesn't exist. Isou's idea was to produce poetry with calligraphics, after the *calligrammes* of Apollinaire, but he was without talent. Lemaître was much better, and young people, like Jacques Spacagna and Roberto Altmann, were very important for Lettrisme. But whereas, for example, sound poetry accepted the new media, and poets like Dom Sylvester Houédard, myself, and the Australian poet Alan Riddell accepted the typewriter — the machine — Isou and the Lettristes paradoxically stayed with the hand. . . .<sup>6</sup>

**N.Z.** With the hand-written and hand-drawn graphic?

**H.C.** Yes — always, always, without evolution, always, always, following Apollinaire.<sup>7</sup> And Isou produced one system, identifying genius with Futurism, Dadaism, Apollinaire, Surrealism and Isou.

**N.Z.** How international was Lettrisme?

**H.C.** It was not international, absolutely not.<sup>8</sup> The fantastic thing about Isou was that when he came to France in 1946 he couldn't speak French. Isou had a genius for learning French, but he had only one area in literature and poetry: French literature. You know his sub-heading in *Introduction à une Nouvelle Poésie et à une Nouvelle Musique* — "De Charles Baudelaire à Isidore Isou" — it's absolutely typical. He had no idea about Swift, about Lewis Carroll, about Joyce. He had the genius to produce a text about everybody, but it's always superficial.

**N.Z.** He seemed to be opposed to Hausmann.

**H.C.** He hated Hausmann. Isou never met Hausmann, but every week in the last period of Hausmann's life, he sent a letter to Hausmann saying "ordure, ordure, ordure" ("filth, filth, filth").

**N.Z.** And in his pamphlet entitled "Le Lettrisme devant dada," Lemaître similarly calls Hausmann "la plus grande lèpre de dada" ("the greatest leper of Dada"), and also attacks what he calls: "les escrocs de dada" ("the crooks of Dada"), specifically: "Huelsenbick, Heusmann, Gornier, Bem, Label, Chapin" — that is Huelsenbeck, Hausmann, Pierre Garnier, Ben Vautier, Jean-Jacques Lebel, and yourself, Chopin.<sup>9</sup> Why did Lemaître and Isou attack you?

**H.C.** I don't know . . . because he hasn't any idea about sound poetry and the electric way. I've never seen Isou in a concert or a performance. He just decided that Chopin is nothing! And it was exactly the same for Dufrêne, when he said that Dufrêne was "une petite tête d'oiseau" ("little birdbrain"), because Dufrêne refused to follow Isou. It is very simple: I've never seen him in concert, never on the radio; he has no records, he ignores the *OU* records.

**N.Z.** He doesn't have your *OU* records?

**H.C.** No.

**N.Z.** Were the Lettriste group interested in other movements in Paris? Were they interested in the kinetic art of the South American artists there such as Soto or Le Parc? These artists seem to have influenced various concrete poets; indeed certain critics, like Weaver and Bann, went on to discuss "kinetic" poetry.<sup>10</sup> Were the Lettristes similarly responsive?

**H.C.** No. It's just a group from Paris. Isou was just interested in himself. Isou was a great danger to the Lettriste movement. If the Lettriste movement is dead then the great mistake is Isou. But I'm very sorry — he was very lucid about the new poetry of the twentieth century. And Isou has had a long career: his first movement was in Rumania in the Fascist period, and after that the Communist party. He seems to be using the same "verbe" — the same language — as the Communist party.

**N.Z.** Could you explain that a bit more? Perhaps we could compare your early poetry, such as *Présence*, published in Lemaître's review *Poésie Nouvelle*, in 1957,<sup>11</sup> with some of the poems collected in Isou's *Introduction à une Nouvelle Poésie et à une Nouvelle Musique*, which came out in 1947. What do you think were the main differences?

**H.C.** Well, here in Isou's "Swing," it's a question of repetition with:<sup>12</sup>

Bambagoula,	Bambagoula
bambagoula	Bambagoula
bambagoula	Bambagoula

Or here, in "La Guerre," with:<sup>13</sup>

BIERLINE	staline
BIERLINE	staline
BIERLINE	staline
BIERLINE	staline
BIERLINE	staline
BIERLINE	staline
BIERLINE	staline
BIERLINE	staline

It's repetitive, and look here, earlier in this poem, for example:<sup>14</sup>

Deutschland  
Deutschland  
Deutschland

It's always an apology for the Nazi period. It's very strange. He is a very strange man. Don't forget, in 1947, after the war, he introduced *La Dictature Lettriste* (The Lettriste Dictatorship) — it was horrible.<sup>15</sup> And here, look at that title, "Hâtez-vous de nous exauser pour" ("Make Haste To Exorcise Us") — his words follow the language of the Church,<sup>16</sup> while my poetry is absolutely paganistic and is a precursor for my work after that. For example, these lines from "Regard Total" in *Présence*:<sup>17</sup>

avale  
exprime  
éponge  
avale

exprime  
éponge  
avale  
exprime  
éponge

refer to my body, and to my research with the tape-recorder today.<sup>18</sup>

**N.Z.** I suppose one might say that your poem also uses semantic repetition.<sup>19</sup> But as you've remarked, your words seem to anticipate the way in which your present work superimposes semantic and abstract, body sounds upon tape, rather than simply reiterating place names like "Berlin" and "Deutschland," and political names like "Lenin" and "Stalin."

**H.C.** One thing that always struck me is that Isou had no humor.

**N.Z.** He was too serious?

**H.C.** Oh, very serious. Look here, for example, at the end of "1917":<sup>20</sup>

LENINE!  
STALINE!  
LENINE!  
STALINE!  
LENINE!

or here, at the beginning of "Calvaire":<sup>21</sup>

jésuschrist  
JESUS CHRIST!  
CHRIST!

It is very strange, he is not a consistent man. In 1952 he had a very big opportunity to present the Lettriste movement in public. It was at the Odéon Theatre, Paris; it was a very important meeting for him, and he was two hours on the platform, and he said, "You are plagiarists, rubbish, ersatz," to everybody, and, "I am the first one in the world!" — like that! For two hours! He never never read one Lettriste poem, absolutely nothing, because Isou had large ideas, and just ideas. He's not a poet, except for a short period, when he began the Lettriste movement.

**N.Z.** Well, his chapter headings in *Introduction à une Nouvelle Poésie* are certainly "large," referring to a "new poetry," a "new music," and a "new art."

**H.C.** It was his first research, and his only complete research. And after that, Lemaître said to me, "Would you like to join the Lettriste group?" and I said, "No, I'm not Lettriste." It was in this period that I started my work with the tape recorder.

**N.Z.** And did any of the Lettristes use the tape recorder?

**H.C.** Lemaître made a record, entitled *Maurice Lemaître présente le Lettrisme*, but with a choir, in 1958.<sup>22</sup>

**N.Z.** Did you find it very interesting or very successful?

**H.C.** I thought one poem was very nice, it was Lemaître's "Letter Rock."<sup>23</sup>

**N.Z.** It sounds a bit like jazz.

**H.C.** Yes, but with just the voice, just the voice.

**N.Z.** Well, there's something rather funny about the way in which Lemaître criticized Raoul Hausmann, saying that Hausmann couldn't be important because he never published a substantial collection of sound poems.<sup>24</sup> Because in much the same way, Isou's problem seems to be that he wrote pages and pages about Lettriste poetry, but he himself also never published a substantial record or tape cassette of this work.<sup>25</sup>

**H.C.** Absolutely! Isou wrote a few poems between 1945 and 1955, perhaps, and the rest is absolutely nothing.

**N.Z.** What do you think about the Lettriste poems collected in Jean-Paul Curtay's anthology, *La Poésie Lettriste*?<sup>26</sup>

**H.C.** Ah, I believe that slowly, after 1958, about the time when sound poetry appeared, when I was producing a few radio broadcasts in Paris, the Lettriste movement disappeared, particularly by about 1962, and young people like Jean-Paul Curtay produced big books, big anthologies, like *La Poésie Lettriste*. But curiously, Isou's movement stayed just in France, with a few people in Italy. It's strange, because Jean-Paul Curtay produced this large defense of Isidore Isou and Maurice Lemaître and company, but this book remained just a French affair. Because Isou's first idea, before 1950, was to produce an international Lettrisme — like the international of the French Communist Party — and Isou's dream was to produce an international poetry movement. But Isou was not capable of doing that — Isou is not a creator. But, I repeat, he was very lucid. When the Surrealist movement, the Futurist movement and the Dadaist movement disappeared, Isou was the first to read everything, and the first to say, "Futurism is over, Dadaism is over, we don't need that." And yet, it is very funny — when Tristan Tzara died, he said Tzara was the best poet of the first part of the Twentieth Century!<sup>27</sup> But anyway, it is certain that Isou has a place in the history of French literature: of that I'm absolutely certain, particularly for the period after the war.

**N.Z.** To turn back to the decline of Lettrisme, can you tell me a little more about François Dufrêne's reasons for leaving Lettrisme for Ultra-Lettrisme?

**H.C.** Ultra-Lettrisme was begun by Wolman, Dufrêne and Villeglé, who began the review *Grâmmes*. When it appeared in Paris, it was a very important review, and in 1958 its second issue published the *Tombeau de Pierre Larousse* by François Dufrêne in which Dufrêne attempted to find a new semantics, in opposition to Isou.

**N.Z.** So Dufrêne's movement into semantics was what made him different from Lettrisme? I'm thinking of such multiple puns as those integrated into such apparently abstract lines of the *Tombeau*, as:<sup>28</sup>

palmBITCHolida palmOLiVOUD litvakayDA valadoLID aydaliDAY

**H.C.** Well, before that Dufrêne also worked with *crirythmes*,<sup>29</sup> probably influenced by Antonin Artaud, when he composed *crirythmes* without letters, with nothing, with just the voice.

**N.Z.** So in fact Dufrêne abandoned Lettrisme in two ways: firstly, by going abstract, into noises, and not letters; and secondly, by going into semantics with the *Tombeau de Pierre Larousse*. . . .

**H.C.** And with the *Cantate des Mots Camés*.<sup>30</sup> Dufrêne was a great poet, he produced very very good sound poems, he was a marvellous man. Dufrêne was a very important poet and, I suppose, Isou was jealous. Isou says always: "I am Isou, I am the best in the world." It is curious, because without Isou, the Lettriste movement would not exist, and with Isou, the Lettriste movement was destroyed.

**N.Z.** And what about Bernard Heidsieck? Did Isou have any influence on Heidsieck?

**H.C.** Heidsieck said, like me, that "Isou was important," but that he is no longer important. Heidsieck always defended Isou for the period between 1946 and 1952. Lettrisme was important in France then, but that's all. No, it's a pity that Isou founded a movement and then destroyed that movement.

1. Isidore Isou, *Introduction à une Nouvelle Poésie et à une Nouvelle Musique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

2. Isou invented — or defined — nineteen new sounds. These are listed, along with their characters, by Curtay in *La Poésie Lettriste* (Paris: Seghers, 1974), pp. 42-3; and are exemplified in a number of Isou's poems collected in *Introduction à une Nouvelle Poésie*, pp. 317-410.

3. Curtay discusses Isou's attacks on Gide in *La Poésie Lettriste*, pp. 31-4.

4. The "terrorism" of Lettrisme seems to have been directed against other, established writers, such as Gide (see footnote 3.); against erring Lettristes (see Vasco Novveraz's account of the expulsion of undesirables in "L'Année Lettriste 1956" in *Poésie Nouvelle*, No. 1 (1957), pp. 19-21); and against rival groups of poets. The Paris-based American poet Brion Gysin interestingly comments: "Yeah, well, in the Beat Hotel there were no more Surrealists, there were Lettrists beating at the door. . . . Lettrists were trying to be the successors to the Surrealists, learning their techniques of party organization — which they did very well — as a terrorist organization," and subsequently alludes to an occasion when the Lettristes interrupted a performance by Henri Chopin in Montparnasse (Brion Gysin, interviewed by Terry Wilson, in Gysin and Wilson, *Here to Go: Planet R-101* [San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1982], p. 55).

5. Arguably, the late fifties witnessed the birth of innumerable Post-Modern trends: Beat Poetry, Concrete Poetry, Sound Poetry, Kinetic Art, Pop Art, Computer Art, The New Novel, Magic Realism, and so on; most of which are usefully discussed in the "Changing Guard" issues of the *London Times Literary Supplement* of August 6, 1964, and September 3, 1964.

6. Examples of the "typewriter poems" of Houéard, Chopin and Riddell are collected in Alan Riddell, ed., *Typewriter Art* (London: London Magazine Editions, 1975). Other examples are collected in *Hispanic Arts*, I, No. 3 and 4 (Winter/Spring 1964).

7. Examples of Lettriste graphics appear in Curtay's *La Poésie Lettriste* and in Gérard-Philippe Broutin et al., *Lettrisme et Hypergraphie* (Paris: Georges Fall, 1972).

8. By contrast, Chopin insists that sound poetry — or *poésie sonore* — is international. Hence his first, dedicatory, paragraphs in *Poésie sonore internationale* conclude with the affirmation: "La poésie sonore est un voyage" (7) ("Sound poetry is a voyage").

9. Maurice Lemaître, *Le Lettrisme devant dada et les nécrophages de dada!* (Paris: Centre de Créativité, 1967), pp. 53; 27-28. Lemaître reviles Hausmann in similar terms, in his response to a questionnaire published in the "Raoul Hausmann et Dada" issue of the review *F*, No. 4 (1974), p. 30.

10. See Mike Weaver, "Concrete and Kinetic; the Poem as Functional Object," *Image*, No. 13 (November 1964), pp. 14-15; Mike Weaver, "Poésie Cinétique," *Les Lettres*, No. 34 (1965), pp. 12-17; and Stephen Bann, "Poésie Cinétique," also published in *Les Lettres*, No. 34 (1965), pp. 19-21.

11. Henri Chopin, *Présence, Poésie Nouvelle*, No. 1 (1957), paginated independently, pp. 1-32.

12. Isidore Isou, "Swing," *Introduction à une Nouvelle Poésie*, pp. 352-53; 353.

13. Isidore Isou, "La Guerre: première symphonie lettrique," pp. 361-410; 405.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 403.

15. See footnote 4, for reference to the terrorist tactics of this "Dictature."

16. Isidore Isou, "La Guerre," p. 392.

17. Henri Chopin, *Présence*, p. 23.

18. Chopin's work now quite literally records the sounds of his body, sometimes by the process of swallowing a small microphone. In this respect, the imperative "avale" ("swallow") is indeed prophetic of his later work with the tape recorder.

19. The function of semantic repetition in sound poetry (particularly North American sound poetry), is very interestingly discussed by Joseph F. Keppler in his article "Repetition in Aural Literature" in Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *Aural Literature Criticism* (New York: RK Editions, 1981), pp. 81-6.

20. Isidore Isou, "1917," *Introduction à une Nouvelle Poésie*, pp. 331-32; 332.

21. Isidore Isou, "Calvaire," *ibid.*, p. 333.

22. Maurice Lemaître, *Maurice Lemaître présente le Lettrisme* (Paris: Columbia E.S.R.F. 1171, 1958).

23. Maurice Lemaître, "Letter Rock," *ibid.*, and collected on Franz Mon's recorded anthology *Phonetische Poesie* (F 60 379, Luchterhand, Germany).

24. See Maurice Lemaître, *Le Lettrisme devant dada*, p. 53, where Lemaître comments that Hausmann "n'a pas trouvé le temps ni le désir de dédier un ouvrage distinct à sa découverte" ("neither found the time nor the desire to consecrate a complete work to his 'discovery'"). Lemaître reiterates this accusation word for word in his letter to the review *F*, No. 4 (1974), p. 30. My translation.

25. Isou's work appears on record in Arrigo Lora-Totino's anthology *Futura Poesia Sonora* (Milano: Cramps Records 5204 001, 1978); on the French EP anthology, *L'Autonomatopiek 1* (Paris: Georges Fall/Opus Disques, 1973), but otherwise, Isou has no substantial recordings.

26. Jean-Paul Curtay, *La Poésie Lettriste*, pp. 189-292.

27. Isou's comments on the death of Tzara are documented by Curtay, *La Poésie Lettriste*, pp. 327-36.

28. François Dufrêne, *Tombeau de Pierre Larousse*, first published in *Soulèvement de la Jeunesse* (March 1953), and republished in *Grâmmes*, No. 2 (1958), pp. 22-68. François Dufrêne discusses his own work, and that of other sound poets, in his article "Le Lettrisme est toujours pendant," *Opus International*, No. 40/41 (January 1973), pp. 43-63. An extract from *Tombeau de Pierre Larousse* appears on Lora-Totino's *Futura Poesia Sonora*.

29. François Dufrêne discusses his *crirythmes* in his manifesto "Pragmatique du crirythme," *Revue-Disque OU*, No. 28/29 (1966), unpaginated. Dufrêne's "Tripty-crirythme" appears on record in the same issue of *OU*.

30. François Dufrêne's *Cantate des Mots Camés* is published on an undated and uncoded tape cassette, published by the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.