

# Visual Poetry

An International Anthology

Visual poetry is usually approached from a “formalist” critical viewpoint which attempts to classify works based on the ways that they work with the “negative” page space, how they graphically alter the conventional signifying functions of poetic language. Such approaches all too commonly lack a sufficient appreciation of the cultural, social and political dimensions of visual poetry. Furthermore, since visual poetry uses elements from the visual arts and from poetic language, theories based primarily in one or the other of these media can not do justice to the visual poem. The present anthology, therefore, is international in scope, forcing a comparatist critical methodology and thereby laying the basis for a fuller theory of visual poetry, one which takes into account questions of place, history and specific cultural formation. Seven countries are represented (Brazil, Cuba, Italy, Mexico, Portugal, Uruguay, United States). Short introductions and selected references, prepared by the country curators, are included.

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*Visible Language*, 27.4  
Harry Polkinhorn, pp. 390-393  
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## An Introduction

In the summer of 1990, the Núcleo Post-Arte group in Mexico City sponsored the Third International Biennial of Visual Poetry (the first two had been in 1986 and 1988). Mail artists and experimental poets from over forty countries sent in work for these exhibitions, which were put up at sites around Mexico City. In addition, colloquia, performances and debates complemented the formal exhibitions. Out of the intensive collaborations made possible by these events, artists from Brazil, Cuba, Italy, Mexico, Portugal, Uruguay and the United States decided to work together to assemble an anthology of visual poetry from their respective countries. The idea was to present a representative sampling of works which each of the country “curators” considered important in the world of experimental visual poetry and related practices.

Visual poetry occupies a genuine “inter-media” space between linear poetry (that which relies upon syntax, style and traditional versification for its effects) and the visual arts. Visual poetry comes in a variety of forms each of which features a treatment or treatments of language emphasizing so-called negative space, frequently activating as well the substrate upon which the work is printed, drawn or painted.

In a purely formal sense, visual poetry manifests the full range of signifying potentialities of any developed art form. From the minimalist works of a Sol Lewitt to the neo-baroque extravaganzas of an Ana Hatherly, this art form has taken advantage of the full repertory of expressive and compositional strategies which artists of our era have developed and used. What all share, however, can be characterized as the return of the repressed body of art through visual poetry's highlighting of substrates and activation of the perceptual ground as in the figure/ground relationship.

At the same time, visual poetry not only shares in but exacerbates the cultural and semiotic negotiations which characterize its cousins among the arts (linear poetry, prints, easel painting and so on). Because it is considered a kind of mixed form combining graphic elements and language, the visual poem calls into question the underlying epistemological assumptions of both linear writing and non-language visual imagery. This is another way of saying that the visual poem formally generates meaning in a significantly different way, and an important part of this meaning has to do with the ways visual poems highlight the usually unexamined dimensions of art's distribution and theorization in a given society. The following pair of questions polarizes and concretizes these abstractions: is the work to be printed, bound and distributed in book form (emphasis on undoing seriality and syntactic conceptualization; dismantle metaphor)? is it to be mounted and displayed in a gallery or museum (emphasis on undoing spatality and visual perception; dismantle metonymy)? In either case different social and economic considerations come into play.

Consequently, theoretical approaches growing from and based on either linear writing or the traditional visual arts will inadequately serve in the case of visual poetry.

First and foremost, issues of place, history and specific social formation must be addressed prior to or at the minimum as a central part of any critique of visual poetry. The creative circumstances of artists, their concrete practices of creation and distribution and other relevant country- or class-specific conditions must be adduced, such as the relative presence in a particular society of alternative cultural spaces.

Only then will a theorization of the subtle or aggressive questioning of formal boundaries which visual poetry manifests have its necessary grounding. Genre theory as such stresses the formative role of these suppressed boundaries. Visual poetry renders them much more consciously political than is the case with other related art forms. The inclusion/exclusion balance, powerfully and covertly policed by genre, is upset by the visual poem, which “bares the device” in a strictly material fashion. This it achieves through a negativization of art’s impulse towards idealization. The goal: to increase individual consciousness in order to improve social conditions.

Visual poetry, perhaps more than the other art forms to which it is most closely related, interrogates the political and psychoanalytic dimensions of the “image.” This understandably leads visual poetry to a preoccupation with the visual media of a given society (print advertising, television, video, film, photography), a questioning of the role of the visual image in that society, and, at a more general level, concerns with visibility as such, the complex processes of seeing by means of which we are constituted as social and private subjectivities and can thereby extend our creative and productive reach through time and space. The works presented here offer many fascinating and challenging examples; the international scope of this collection makes possible a cross-culturally based set of comparisons by means of which the above claims can be tested.