



*An article by:*

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## Cuban Visual Poetry

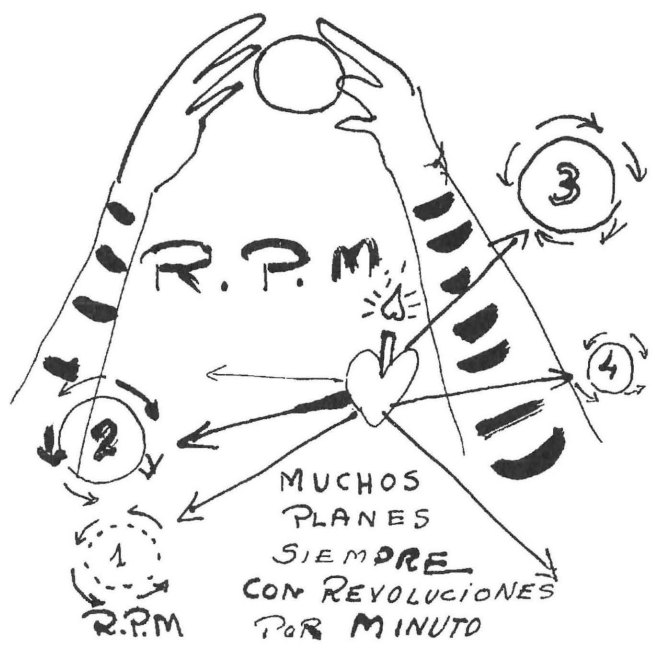
In his book titled *Avant-Garde Poetry in Cuba*, Roberto Fernández Retamar discusses Cuban visual poetry.<sup>1</sup> Retamar points to Manuel Navarro Luna's *Surco* (1928) as the most typical of Cuban avant-garde poetry. After citing numerous Cuban poets who were inspired by vanguardism in the 20s and 30s, Retamar notes as essential characteristics of avant-garde poetry the

*abandonment of stanzas, of rhyme, of measure, with the purpose of offering maximum liberty to the poet; the frequent abandonment of capital letters and punctuation signs; altered typographic disposition, sometimes — as in the best poems in Surco — in the manner of the Spanish poet Antonio Espina, who in turn took it from the French "paroxyst" poet Nicolás Beaudouin. Nevertheless, Cuban vanguardism never produced bold examples of this "typographic writing on three planes." At most, it has left us examples such as:*

**In them go  
the rich  
the able  
the privileged**



412



**Sandú Darié**  
Sin título  
Untitled

*More frequently it was the disposition of words on the page attending to their meaning. The word "fall," for example, was laid out with the letters giving the impression of descent from one extreme of the page to the other; the opposite happened with the word "ascend," etc. Or it was the entire sentence that responded — in the design — to the meaning : as in "Azotea," by Navarro Luna:*

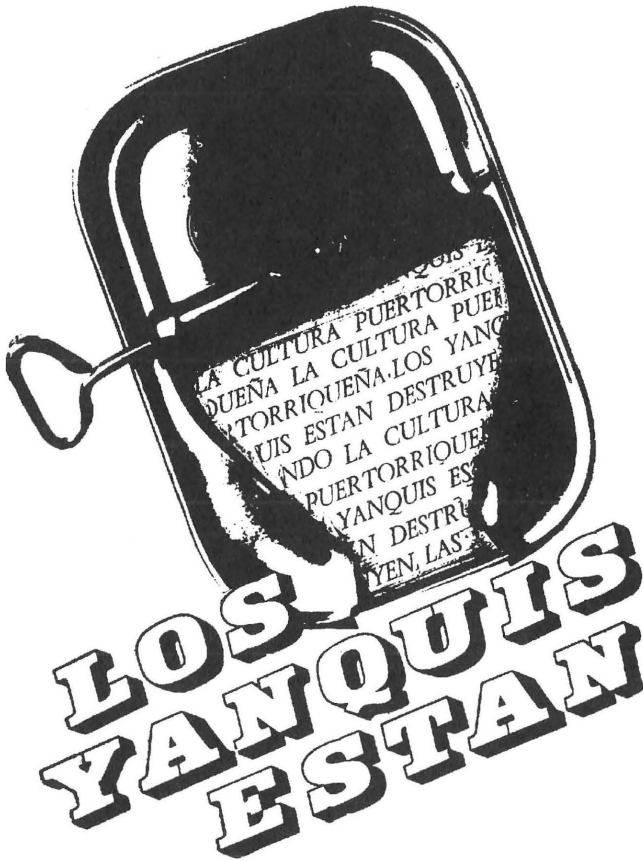
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**A cold sweat  
runs over me**

**and**

*Frequently the words seem to be arranged by chance. But always they manage to avoid giving the impression of having been serenely arranged. A legacy of Apollinaire's calligrams, they appeared to want to substitute modernist "musicality" with a visual sense in the poem.*

414



**García Chaple**

*Página de "Revolución y Cultura," Enero de 1976*

Page from "Revolution and Culture," January, 1976

In his conclusion Retamar asserts:

*The avant-garde, understood as the summary of the European isms, had an ephemeral life in our poetry, a conscious sense of movement towards new forms. As Esténger said, parodying a phrase of Enrique Díaz Canedo, "In Cuba 'avant-garde literature' has hardly existed."<sup>2</sup> This provoked a violent response throughout Cuban poetry, but it had neither the persistence nor the intensity to leave us works of much importance. As a result of the breath of fresh air which it brought with it, Cuban poetry took two basic paths: pure poetry and social poetry, which had a vigorous national representative in black poetry.*

415

After these changes in the 20s and 30s, poetic experimentation entered a long period of dormancy. Almost no one was interested in trying new ways. One must remember that the arts were well sealed up; in the visual arts a drawing was a drawing and an oil an oil. It didn't occur to anyone to mix anything even in the most minimal fashion. Never in the world could a charcoal drawing be contaminated with a little collage and a few touches of crayon.

Nevertheless, visual poetry survived. In his book *New Signs*, the Italian Lamberto Pignotti asserts that generally speaking art today is enjoyed with little attention. He adds:

*It is possible that this distancing makes possible a curious enough effect: for example, one sees visual (or almost visual) poems on looking at a publicity poster, an illustrated magazine cover, or a page of*

416



**Samuel Feijóo**  
*La Muerte alegre*  
Happy Death

*comics. You will say, then, that visual poetry existed already before visual poetry. Very true, but you didn't notice it. And in the end, therein resides the secret of artistic discovery . . . . Also the contrasts between light and shade existed before Caravaggio, and seascapes before Salvador Rosa, just as the forest existed before Ruysdael. . . .*<sup>3</sup>

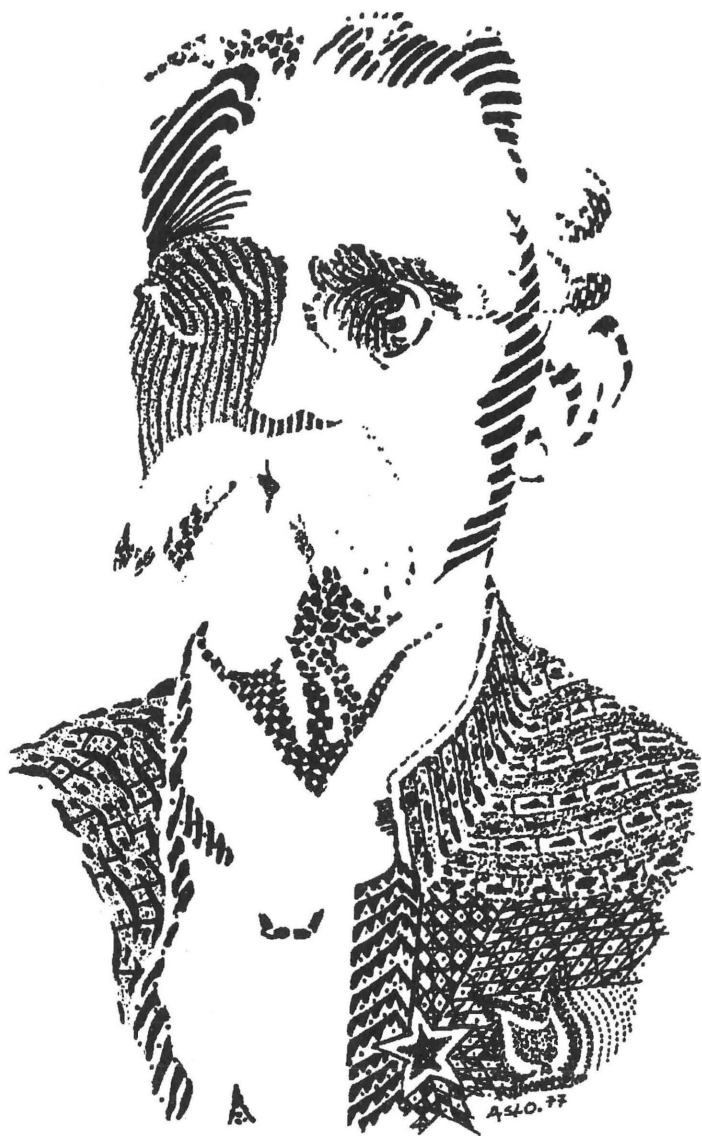
Thus Cuban experimental and visual poetry slept peacefully, without disturbance until the 1960s, or so it seemed to the Cuban critic and researcher José Pratts Sariol, as well as to the poets Fayad Jamís and Cintio Vitier, with whom I consulted. On January 1, 1959, the Cuban Revolution was victorious. The social upheaval of course affected culture. It was a true eruption in all senses. At that moment many things began in Cuba: mass literacy campaigns, huge print runs for books, the beginnings of the film industry, substantial impetus to literature and the visual arts, material support for works, students who were lovers of the arts and so on.

In all this commotion it's worth emphasizing that since the 1960s there began to crystallize what later would become the Cuban school of the poster, nothing less than the sum of the expressive synthesis of image and word. The Cuban poster incorporated the best of world graphics; it assimilated this dialectically, and I am convinced that hundreds of these posters are visual poetry of the highest degree.

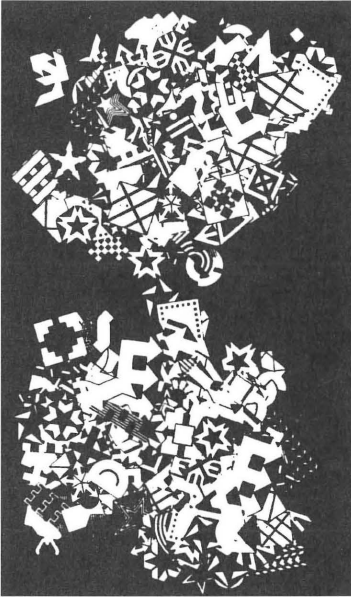
Two of our best poets are also painters and draughtsmen who increasingly create their experiments with mixtures of texts and drawings. They are Samuel Feijóo and Fayad Jamís. Feijóo — folklorist, researcher, writer and poet — has published much since the 1960s in his magazine



Duarte  
Sin título  
Untitled



Adalberto Suárez  
*Maximo Gómez*



**Felix Beltrán**  
*Composición, III*  
Composition, 3

420

**Aldo Menéndez González** |  
*Peinando el mes*  
Combing the Month



*Signs*, put out by the Central University of Villa Clara. It is characterized by its creole humor and its philosophical playfulness. Feijóo works in black and white, collage, bad-painting. *Signs* is an amazing compendium of Cuban visual poetry. Fayad Jamís also dedicated years to cultivating this kind of poetry with a highly developed visual sensibility in which the writing is incorporated as a visual value and loses almost all its semantic significance.

The designer Félix Beltrán also has achieved recognition by purifying and synthesizing signs in a highly personal vein. Another interesting example is the poet, actor and dramatist Francisco Garzón Céspedes with his book of poetry *Desde los órganos de puntería*, in which he offers a typographic elaboration of works.<sup>4</sup>

Since 1987 two well-known visual artists have experimented in this line: Zayda del Río has illustrated his own poems with sufficient persistence and grace to receive the attention which others in Cuba had previously achieved only sporadically. The other is Luis Miguel Valdés, who in 1987 began to draw using a computer and video equipment, incorporating color, movement, music, texts, voices and effects. Sound texts have been attempted in the excellent electronic music studio of ICAP, but until now without success.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Retamar, Roberto Fernández. 1970. *Avant-Garde Poetry in Cuba*. Havana: Casa de las Américas.

<sup>2</sup> Esténger, Rafael. 1950. *Cien de las mejores poesías cubanas*. Havana: Mirador.

<sup>3</sup> Pignotti, Lamberto. 1974. *New Signs*. Valencia, Spain: Fernando Torres.

<sup>4</sup> Céspedes, Francisco Garzón. 1971. *Desde los órganos de puntería*. Havana: Editorial UNEAC.