

Throughout this issue,
several of Kostelanetz's
video poems are presented
as sequences. To activate
the poem, flip the images
by going to the first screen
and quickly fanning the
pages to the last screen.
Poems beginning on verso
pages 20, 36 fan from back
to front, while poems
beginning on recto pages
7, 29 fan from front to
back.

Abstract

An historical account of Richard Kostelanetz's significant contributions to visual literature and the development of intermedia/linguistic experimentation unfolds in this article in his own words. Reflections on the history of his intentions, their development, reception and critical thoughts frame this still largely unheralded aspect of expressive visible language. He continues exploring the materiality of language through collaborations that take him into technologies dealing with dimensions beyond the page and even the single screen. Thirty years of work and change are considered.

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Thirty Years of Visible Writing: A Memoir

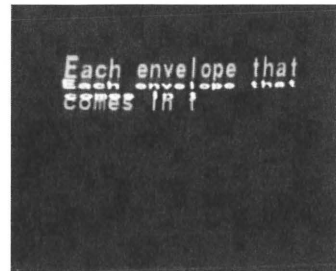
Richard Kostelanetz

The history of most arts is the history of their avant-gardes, of those works and groupings of works which the next generation seizes upon to follow, thus provoking the analogy to the avant-garde of an army (the small group of soldiers that precedes the main body of troops). Dick Higgins, *Horizons* (1984)

In memory of Dick Higgins
(1938-1998)

The thought of producing visible poetry initially came to me while bored watching Antonioni's *Blow-Up* early in July 1967. The next day, I wrote — rather drew — my first visible poem, "Tributes to Henry Ford," using rulers, French curves and stencils found at a neighborhood stationery store; the fact that this five-image (two-letter) poem remains among my most reprinted works both pleases and depresses me. I had already seen some visual poetry, initially during a lecture at London's Institute for Contemporary Art two years before, and again in the then current "concrete" issue of the *Chicago Review*. Even though most of the work collected under that "concrete" label did not appeal to me, because it favored fragmented language over recognizable words, the idea of alternative forms for language struck me then (and now) as poetically suggestive. As I had just completed a book on *The Theatre of Mixed Means* (Dial, 1968; Archae, 1980), a new art genre that fused live performance with arts other than language, the principle of intermedia — or the integration of nonadjacent arts, as distinct from mixed media, such as picture + poem — already appealed to me.

Much of the glorious summer of 1967, just after my twenty-seventh birthday, was spent working with my new art, producing many visible poems that have since appeared again and again — "Disintegration," "Echo," and the "Football Forms," among others. Some of these early poems are explicitly mimetic, my drawing enhancing the legible words in representational ways. My aim here was the creation of a visual form so appropriate to a certain word that the whole picture would have an indelible impact. What is called an *afterimage* would be left in the viewer's mind, primarily because the shape endowed the word with certain resonances that would otherwise be unavailable. Perhaps the richest poem in retrospect is the opening "Manifestoes," which contains four syntactically circular statements, one placed



each

inside the other, because syntactic circles is a form to which I would return (and which few others favor). Though I lacked formal training in visual art, I nonetheless felt obliged to do all the drawing myself. Since my works were poetry, rather than commercial design, nothing was lost in their visibly revealing the idiosyncracies, bad and good, of my amateur hand.

Toward the end of that summer, I discovered the technology of the photostat and began to submit clean, camera-ready copies of my work to periodical editors who had previously published critical essays of mine. Nearly all of them were unresponsive, some even suggesting that I was wasting my time with such poetry. The first editor to accept my visual poems was the late Paul Carroll, a Chicago poet-professor who was then putting together his pioneering anthology, *The Young American Poets* (Follett, 1968), and my appearance there served the crucial professional function of certifying, in my own mind at least, my status as “poet” as well as “critic.”

To celebrate the publication of his anthology, Carroll sponsored a series of “readings” featuring his contributors. Since such visual poems could not be declaimed (without compromising their silent integrity), his invitation prompted me to develop the presentational form I still use — “an illuminated demonstration,” in which a carousel slide projector throws my visual poems up on a screen, while I, as their author, standing behind the audience, declaim a nonsynchronous, voice-over narration that is filled, not with specific explanations but general concepts that the audience may or may not choose to relate to what they see. Thirty years ago, I had only enough slides to fill a single carousel tray; now I can fill several and often project two different sets of images simultaneously. One of my dreams is that someday I’ll be given a gallery installation with several projections, each representing a particular phase of my visual poetry.

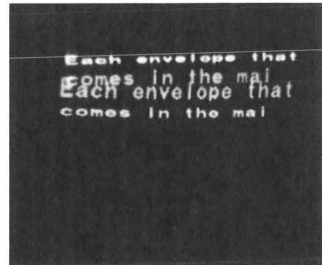
Since a book’s worth of visible poems existed almost from the beginning, I decided with instinctive confidence, early in 1968, to dedicate *Visual Language* to my forward-looking teacher at college, S. Foster Damon (who had four decades before written a pioneering critical book about William Blake), and even announced the dedication that February at Foster’s 75th birthday party. Copies of my collection were submitted to several publishers, some of whom had previously issued books of mine; none of them took it. By 1970 I

reluctantly recognized that commercial publishers in America were not yet hospitable to visual poetry. (This is still true today, alas, even though this sort of poetry by now has been published periodically and exhibited widely.) It was thus inevitable that *Visual Language* should be published under the imprint of Assembling Press, which I had co-founded that summer, with each of the fourteen letters of the title horizontally extended to resemble a line of poetry and thus the whole counting as a sonnet (how literary!). In printing my own book, I had two ulterior motives: to see this work reviewed (it wasn't) and to have enough copies to distribute to friends and anthologists. With people in both those last categories the work had more success — indeed, too much success with the latter, who for years made my work the token visual representative, to the unfortunate exclusion and at times resentment of colleagues doing good work.

II

In recent years, the issue of canon formation has attracted a great deal of attention, [reflecting] approaches [that] mandate modes of thinking which urge distance and skepticism, modes which actively call into question the implicit assumptions of any enterprise or institution, and which actively seek to determine the presence and nature of hierarchies. Alan Nadel, *Invisible Criticism* (1988)

The publication of *Visual Language* also forced me to consider alternative ways of producing visible poetry that would be similarly non-syntactic (in contrast to a rebus). I tried to make my own visual alphabet, which is to say a poem for each letter — a challenge that other visual poets have completed. Some of these were reprinted in my second collection, *I Articulations* (1974). I also compiled collections of synonyms that were then visually enhanced, such as the “Live-Kill” pair (1972). Another new development, begun in 1970, was the handwritten visual poem whose words flow at various irregular angles, such as “The East Village” (1970-71). Here I wanted to get away from the centered space and upright perceptual approach of my earlier work. Since my mind tends to be more inventive with materials than imaginative about events, I chose a familiar subject: the neighborhood in which I then lived. As my theme was the variousness of the individual side streets — each having its own characteristic spatial qualities, its own details and its own sounds — I devoted one page



of language and space to each block. I thought of hiring a professional calligrapher to redo my peculiar handwriting, but her single sample reminded me too much of the rigors of linotype, and that was precisely what I was trying to avoid. Once again, the best solution was letting the work reveal my own hand.

I originally wanted Assembling Press to publish "The East Village" as a single book, on large 11 by 17" pages. However, since twelve images seemed insufficient for a book, even in such a large format, I eventually incorporated the work into the 7 by 10" pages of *I Articulations*. A later, longer handwritten poem, "Portraits from Memory" appeared as an entire 35-page book (1975), in which each page contains a verbal-visual portrait of a woman I might have known. Here, as elsewhere in my work, the titles of individual pieces tend to be rather explicit. I had always thought that my best visual poems should appear in enlarged forms, not only to make them available for gallery exhibitions but also to enhance their retentive (afterimage) capabilities. Back in 1970, I made a large photostat of "Concentric" for a two-person exhibition. In the summer of 1974, I took a silkscreening course which resulted in a few enlarged prints, but since my technical competence remained limited, in the following year I commissioned a printmaker to produce *Word Prints*, a set of seven 26 by 40" prints including "Live-Kill," "Disintegration," "Echo [negative]," "Truth," "Black-White." By 1976, I had gotten into photolinen, with images even larger than the prints, and had them stretched, much like paintings, over wooden bars. First exhibited in New York in 1977, these last works were scheduled to be included in a Guggenheim Museum visual poetry exhibition that was announced for the late 1980s before being postponed into oblivion.

III

But those works which are truly avant-garde are by their very nature apt to be a little strange to most viewers at the time of their origin, even to seem unpopular or elitist because they simply do not fit the establishment's norms. Dick Higgins, *Horizons* (1984)

By the time my third collection of short poems, *Illuminations* (1977), appeared, I felt that my previous ways of making poetry were no longer fertile; the new variations were no better than my earlier work and did not advance beyond it in any discernible way. As my aesthetics incorporate an ethics of transcendence, not only of my

previous work but of myself, I needed to go on to something else. Two new solutions for poetry came to mind in the summer of 1979. The first I call "Strings," which are extended lines of letters composed of overlapping words. To be precise, each new word incorporates at least three or, in one earlier case, two letters of the preceding word without duplicating any word. Typed out, these strings are roughly 100 inches long and they have been published in literary journals with their extended lines broken by hyphens. Here is the beginning of "Stringthree":

Stringfiveteranciderideafencerebrumblendivestablismentertaintegerund. . .

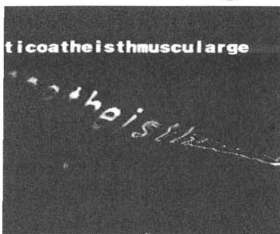
whose opening can be read as:

Stringfi(ve)tel(ran)(ci(d)er)(i(de)a)(fen)(cer)eb(rum)(bl(e)n(d)ive)st) . . .

However, remembering my interest in alternatives to the type-written or printed page, I began to think about how else these "Strings" might be published. Since the long word is really one unit that should not be broken apart, I hand-lettered them on continuous adding machine tape and exhibited them in that form.

Early in 1980 I received a modest Visual Arts Planning Grant for Art in Public Spaces from the National Endowment for the Arts. That got me thinking that the best place to "publish" these Strings — to make them available to the public — might be in an extended public space, such as a wide wall or a long hallway, like that at an airport or, better yet, the floor along the edge of a train platform. As I envision the latter, the letters should be brass and they should be embedded in the platform floors with their bottoms positioned away from the train, perhaps two feet in from the edge of the platform; and I calculate that if these letters were 4" high, in a lowercase condensed typeface, the piece would be 200 feet long, which is roughly the length of a New York City subway station. Because these Strings are linguistically difficult, they cannot be fully comprehended in a few minutes. In this respect they differ from most public sculptures or wall murals: they need an audience with time to spare — people waiting for a train. I imagine that travelers will observe the section in front of them, fully aware that, if disturbed by friends or by the oncoming train, the work — with all its variations on the overlapping principle — will be available to them again when they return to the station. I wrote a String in French and others in German and Swedish to see how the same techniques would work in another language, but also because I hoped that sponsors in Paris, Berlin, Montreal or Stockholm might be interested. To





several American cities that have recently held competitions for public art, I have made proposals; none has scored yet. My assumption is that just as it took me years to publish my poems in books, so it will take years for them to appear in public spaces.

IV

But one thing that is evident, that is inherent in the concept of a pattern poem, is its unsuitability for any sustained argument of emotional persuasion. Its appeal is immediate and involves the recognition of the image. Dick Higgins, George Herbert's Pattern Poems (1977)

Whereas the Strings are not visible poetry in any strict sense but verbal poems whose optimal form of publication is visually unusual, especially for poetry (and like other visual poems cannot be easily declaimed), the other new development in my poetry is somewhat closer to my earlier work. I began by putting individual words in each of the four corners of the rectangular page, attempting to discover how four spatially distant words can make more than the sum of their parts. As before, once I determined my constraint, I did numerous variations. Sometimes, the four words reinforce one another through complementary relationships; other times, one word stands out from the others precisely because it is not a complement — an antonym, say, or perhaps a word that comments critically upon the other three. Sometimes the words cohere in terms of sound, other times in terms of visual qualities, such as length or common neology. In any case, the reader is forced to tilt his or her head, or physically move the body in ways unusual for poetry appreciation; the reader is prompted to read where and how he or she has not read before. Ideally, in pages so dominated not by black but white, the *poetry* arises between the words. These new poems were dedicated to the composer Anton von Webern, because they descend from my love and experience of his style of an aural pointillism informed by linguistic rigor.

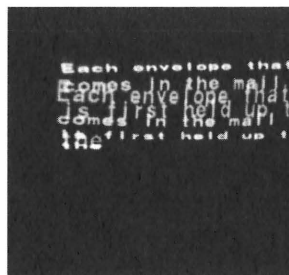
Later I made two more sets of poems in this vein — one set with eight words to each rectangle and then another with sixteen words within each frame; and in these as well, the words within each poem relate to one another in numerous ways. While I feel that four words to a page may be too sparse for poetry, I am not so sure that the more populous poems are necessarily more poetic. The first selection of these four-word poems, a diminutive chapbook entitled

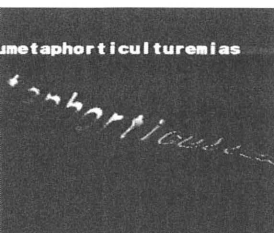
Turfs/Arenas/Fields/Pitches, appeared in 1980. The first selection from all three strains, *Arenas/Fields/Pitches/Turfs*, appeared in 1982; a second selection as *Fields/Pitches/Turfs/Arenas* in 1990. A final collection, eighty pages long, has recently been touring publishers.

V

I want to defend literature. It's a poor man's art. You can think, even when you can't feel comfortable among the cigarred princes and the knockkneed venerables in miniskirts who run our visual arts scene. You can write when you can't afford the fancy fancy materials to make art-canvas, silkscreens, and the right kind of paint. You reach people who can't afford to hang de Koonings, Oldenburgs or Sol LeWitts. Dick Higgins, "Seen, Heard, and Understood" (1972)

Later I put just two non-syntactically connected words adjacent to each other, so that they interact not only in terms of meaning but as simultaneous on the page, which is to say that they make a duet in which, as in music, adjacent notes may assume varying amplitudes. I then placed three discrete words horizontally (though vertical arrays are also feasible); to me these are trios. A further departure involved the forms of the circle (which I had previously used both for "Manifestoes" and for my initial hologram). In these new poems, I set words only around the circle's circumference, all of their bottoms facing the center; and in some of them also cast progressively smaller circles of words parallel to the outer circles. In all these circular poems, there is an abundance of individual words, all relating to one another in various poetic ways, more harmonious than dissonant — all, as in the earlier geometric poems, ideally making more than the sum of their parts. One quality that these last poems share with their rectangular predecessors is that no word is more important to the whole than any other. Later circular poems have continuous letters composed of overlapping words, such as "SEARCHO," which incorporates both "SEARCH" and "CHOSE." A more succinct example is "ITEM," which can also be read as "EMIT" and "MITE." To my mind, these works are *visual poetry*, to cite a category I still find useful (while the language-fragmentation of "concrete" has passed), in that the art very much depends upon how the words are displayed on the page and the poems must thus be read as paintings as are read, not as lines or other units





with beginnings and ends but as visible fields. *Which Witch* (1999) is a chapbook of words that sound alike though spelled differently, with one to three pairs in similar typefaces on the same page, with an afterword explaining why these visual poems represent an inversion of the Chinese process where the same sequence of letters can sound differently.

VI

By "poetry" we must therefore mean always the "art of the word"; so that, when we speak of "visual poetry" we mean to refer absolutely to that type of creation where the verbal element works together actively and indivisibly with the visual element. Gillo Dorfles, "Six Visual Poets" (1990)

Another phase began with a long poem, "Particulars," that was originally published under the pseudonym Jean-Jacques Cory, an elaboration of my grandfather's name. For more than a decade Jean-Jacques published poems only in the form of lists, which was the title of his first book (1974). For his second book, the long poem "Particulars," he found unfamiliar phonemes in familiar words, stretching the parts of each word from one edge of the page to the other, such as: CHO PHO USE

One variation of this strategy was "Partitions" (1981) that appeared on videotape under my own name before it appeared in print. Having already worked with video, I turned to a character-generator, or electronic letter-making machine, whose memory had only eight "pages," enabling me to create sequences that pass through eight separate steps. Thus, the title poem, for instance, becomes:

PARTITIONS/PA/PAR/PART/ART/TIT/IT/PARTITIONS

For the first two sequences, only one word appeared on the screen at a time; for the next two, two words apiece; for the next two, three words apiece and so on, until ten words metamorphose simultaneously and 96 words in sum were poetically enhanced through such discovery of their parts.

Another variation was "Repartitions" (1990) in which the letters available within extended words are divided into squares that are either four letters by four, or five by five. (Neither smaller nor larger numbers work as well.) Yet another variation, currently in progress, involves additional letters appearing one at a time. Here the idea is that the next letter redirects whatever semantic flow had previously

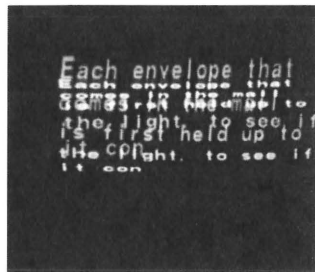
been established. First you see BRA, then BRAN, then BRAND, then BRANDY. Or PI, PIN, PINT, PINTO. One quality I like about these poems is the discoveries come from combining chance with rigor before making choices that generally reflect a desire for wit and surprise, which is another way of defining my poetic style. These last poems also offer me another possibility for live presentations, especially in intimate (coffehouse) settings, in which I put along a horizontal board a sequence of individual pages with eight-inch high letters (ink-jet printed one to a page), the addition of a new letter (page) resembling a magic-trick in literally changing the prior semantic effect.

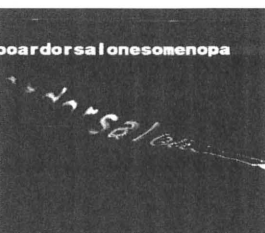
I later made Spanglish Repartitions by discovering English words with longer Spanish words. A somewhat similar sequence is "InSerts," in which capital letters are used to reveal unexpected short words within longer ones: CrumBled, PhenoMenOn, Ass-AssINation, GrasShopper, GeogRapHer, TemperAte, etc. As I add nothing to these words other than capitalization, they might be called "Found Poems," to use a category initiated by my Canadian colleague John Robert Colombo; but since capitalization is essentially a visual enhancement, I'll stick with the epithet Visual Poetry.

VII

The question for an audience to ask, when confronted by an exemplative or other non-cognitive work, is not the usual "Who did this and why," but the newer "What is this and how does it work?"
Dick Higgins, "An Exemplativist Manifesto" (1976)

Almost as early as my experiments with words, I began to consider whether I could write poems and stories composed of numerals alone. That hypothesis forced me in turn to think about the fundamental difference between poetry and fiction, even on avant-garde fringes. Whereas the former tends to concentrate both image and effect, fiction creates a world of related activity, which is to say movement from one place to another, or narrative, while nonfiction prose, to introduce yet another term, is generally syntactic sequences of words about an extrinsic subject. At a time when many literary theorists have tried to blur the differences among poetry, fiction and prose, I consider the distinctions important and these definitions applicable in nearly all cases.





Though most of my initial numerical works would be classified as fiction (and then as numerical art, to introduce a term apart from literature), a few were poems, such as "1024," which incorporates both the parts and the factors of that variously divisible number, or "Indivisibles," which is a visually diffuse field of numbers whose common property is that nothing can be divided into any of them (except, of course, themselves and one). In addition, these number-pieces realize an empirical ideal that, though aesthetically heretical, has long interested me — that all the artistic activity (in this case, numerical relations) that one identified in the work could be *verified* by another observer and yet be rich enough to be appreciated again and again.

Numbers: Poems & Stories (1976) reprints several works in a large newsprint format, while *Numbers Two* (1977) collects several more in an envelope. *Exhaustive Parallel Intervals* (1979) is a 160-page novel in which a single complicated structure is exhaustively developed. A principal difficulty in communicating this work, I belatedly discovered, is that audiences must be *numerate* to comprehend and respond to them, much as they must be *literate* to read and respond to modernist poetry and fiction.

VIII

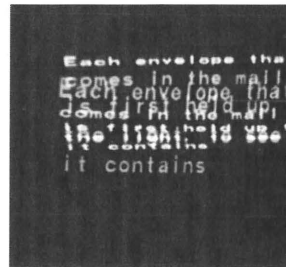
Words need not be the building blocks of fiction, or sentences the glue, or paragraphs the frames, or human beings the "characters"; for realized fiction, no matter how unusual, cannot but create its own subject, its own style, its own "events," its own life. Richard Kostelanetz, "Twenty-Five Fictional Hypotheses" (1969)

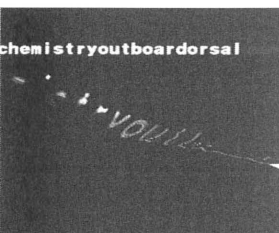
In doing poetry I had already discovered the idea of constraints so severe that they would prevent me from using language in familiar forms. Very much like meter in traditional poetry, the constraints I chose also encouraged puzzle solving and other forms of linguistic playfulness. Early in 1968, I began to think about a similarly severe constraint for writing fiction; and after a few abortive experiments, I hit upon the hypothesis of writing a story with no more than two words to a paragraph. For a subject, I chose the conveniently familiar one of boy meets girl. This plot appears frequently in my fiction, not because I have anything particularly profound to say about heterosexual encounters but because a familiar, transparent subject makes both myself and my readers more aware of the formal issues that really interest me. Once the two-word paragraphs of "One

Night Stood” were drafted, I typed them out, indenting alternate lines; and the following winter I realized that each two-word phrase could take up the entire page of a small-format book, thereby expanding the story into a minimal novel (that was not published until 1977).

In the summer of 1969, I discovered how to make visual fiction, realizing an implication of my much-reprinted “Football Forms” — that images in sequence could tell a story whose temporal rhythm, whose narrative, is based upon the time a typical reader takes to turn the page. That perception informed not only my alphabet novella, *In the Beginning* (1971), but also my initial abstract fictions — those consisting only of lines, lacking words, save for their titles. That summer I also drafted the theoretical statement, “Twenty-Five Fictional Hypotheses,” which suggests, among other notions, that anything can be used to tell a story, not only nonsyntactic language but visual materials as well. Of course, I practiced what I preached, creating the sequences that appear in *Short Fictions* (1974). Early on, to repeat, I identified a fundamental difference between poetry and fiction, even on the experimental extremes: Whereas the former tends to concentrate both image and effect, fiction creates a world of related activity.

A further development in my storytelling is the work composed of sequential four-sided symmetrical line-drawings that metamorphose in systemic sequence. Begun in 1974 these “Constructivist Fictions,” as I call them to acknowledge a debt particularly to Moholy-Nagy (on whom I edited a book a few years before), quickly became two collections of short stories that were published soon after they were written, *Constructs* (1975) and *Constructs Two* (1978), and two ladder-books each with a single narrative, *Modulations* (1975) and *Extrapolate* (1975). Much later I self-published several other collections in limited photocopied and velobound editions: *Constructs Three* (1991), *Intermix* (1991), *Constructs Four* (1991), *Flipping* (1991), *Constructs Five* (1991), *Fifty Constructivist Stories* (1991) and *Constructs Six* (1991). Constructivism became the subtitle of two similarly squarebooks, *Tabula Rasa* (1978) and *Inexistences* (1978), whose pages beyond the title are blank, implicitly suggesting that they could contain (or do contain invisibly) the same kind of sequences. (Johanna Drucker, apparently unaware of the context established by my constructivist books, insists in her *The Century of Artists’ Books* [1996]





that these should be read as “suprematist”! That mistake scarcely exhausts her ignorance evident in her criticism about my work.) A variation on this constructivist theme is *And So Forth* (1979), in which the geometric images, by contrast, are *not* perfect symmetries and their order is *not* fixed. Visual fictions resemble comic strips in having framed elements — panels, so to speak — but in visual fiction the elements are usually entire pages, because the narrative depends upon the reader physically turning the book’s paper, which is quite different from moving his eyes from one panel to another.

In the summer of 1970, I drafted another verbal fiction, “Openings & Closings,” which remains in one crucial respect the most conventional imaginative piece I have ever written — it contains full sentences! Nonetheless, it resembles my other verbal fictions in observing a truncating constraint; for whereas the earlier stories had one or two words to a paragraph, here I decided to suggest, within single sentences, either a story that might follow or one that could have gone before. The isolated sentences were literally either the openings (of hypothetically subsequent stories) or the closings (of hypothetically previous stories). These could be considered incomplete stories, it is true; yet it was my aim to make a single sentence be artistically sufficient (and let readers imagine the rest). As there is no intentional connection between any particular opening and any closing, my visual solution was setting the two kinds of stories alternately in two different styles of type — italics for the openings, roman for the closings, thanks to the IBM Compositor available at the time — with plenty of white space between them; a book of them, in this form, appeared in 1975. Invited, in 1976, to exhibit “Openings & Closings” in a gallery, I typed the sentences out on individual cards — one card to a sentence — again using italics for the openings and roman type for the closings. These cards were then scattered, initially over a display board and later around a gallery’s walls. The experience of sentences visually displayed becoming different from reading those in a book.

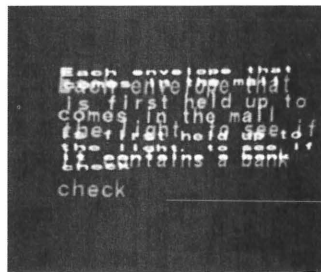
In 1979, I began drafting “Epiphanies” which are likewise only one sentence in length, in this case meant to be a revelatory moment — the epiphany in the James Joycean sense — of an otherwise imaginary story. I would offer them to magazines with the advice to select whichever ones they like best and design them to their taste. The most inventive solution by far appeared in the early 1980s in

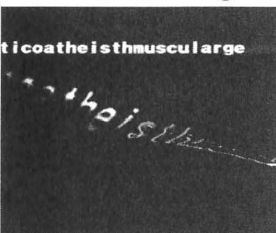
Portland Review, an undergraduate literary magazine, where the designer, who never introduced himself or herself to me, used various typefaces to put several visibly separate stories on a single page. This sort of composition became more feasible with computer-generated typography.

Another visual fiction, *Reincarnations* (1981), draws upon a single 8 x 10" photograph of myself, cut into eighty squares, and then recomposed in various faintly representational ways, each of the sixty-four images implicitly suggesting another version of my reborn facial features. As there is no development within the images, this is less a linear fiction than an episodic one. I cut apart another photograph, this a view of the Brooklyn Bridge whose left side mirrored its right side, to make systemic sequences that were either twenty-one or forty-one images in length. Though some of these sequences, collectively titled "Recall," appeared in literary and art journals, the whole never became the book I initially had in mind.

Later visual fictions depend upon the desktop computer's electronic ability to do rapidly the kinds of variously inventive typography that once took hours with "Letrasets," "Photolettering" and the like. *Minimal Fictions* (1994) contains stories no more than three words in length in various typefaces, in different sizes, in various shapes. With several stories to a page, all visibly separate from one another, this book in sum has nearly five hundred discrete fictions in its eighty pages. In *Openings* (forthcoming), full individual sentences, each the opening of a hypothetical story, assume several extended shapes within individual pages. Technically, each of these stories could be considered a panel, albeit eccentric and various in shape, within a single page, because in these visual fictions the narratives are autonomous, rather than continuous. I've begun working similarly on "1001 Single-Sentence Stories" and "Epiphanies," both of which could become exhaustive book-length collections.

I confront the issue of panels again in *TRAN\$MATIONS* (1998), "Poetry-Film Storyboards" that are initially arrayed as frames on a single page. Here I wanted to write storyboards, as animators call them, or image frames for successive images of words whose semantic would change with the shift of a single letter within the word. Thus, SOLO, SILO, SILT, GILT. However, since I





string diagonal

wanted to suggest the pixilation that animators can generate as one set of lines dissolves into another, I asked the intern designer Eun-Ha Paek to make intermediate images in which the changing letters overlap. Thus, in the first change just noted, the second letter in the intermediate image is the letter I superimposed over the letter O, which is a printed semblance of pixilation. Regardless of whether these actually become films, I thought the text-images could stand as pages in a visual book. (This poem was later published in *Visible Language* 30.3 as a “flip book” running on the edges of the text pages much as some of my video poems are running in this issue.)

IX

Part of the reason that Duchamp's objects are fascinating while Picasso's voice is fading is that the Duchamp pieces are truly between media, between sculpture and something else, while a Picasso is readily classifiable as a painted ornament. Dick Higgins, “Intermedia” (1965)

Late in 1975, I was invited to be a guest artist at the Synapse video studio of Syracuse University. Here I worked not with a single engineer, as I had at WXXI-FM and at subsequent audio studios, but with an institutional staff of young instructors, graduate assistants and undergraduates. With their help, I realized video versions of four fictional or experimental prose texts already available on audiotape: “Excelsior,” “Plateaux,” “Openings & Closings” and “Recyclings.” Not until I returned to a video studio in 1979 did I discover a video technology whose artistic possibilities have scarcely been realized — the character-generator, which is the machine that electronically creates letters appearing on the television screen, most familiarly in the credits at the end of a program.

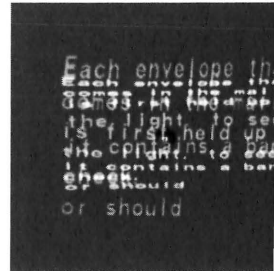
Initially, I worked with experimental prose and fiction, adding a footnote-like explanatory text to my recital of “Declaration of Independence,” and then letters alone for setting my single-sentence “Epiphanies” in various static typographical arrays, white letters against a dark background, mostly one story to an image. Not only did the structure duplicate an idea I had developed earlier in a film composed entirely of words, which thus must be read, quite rapidly, to be “seen,” but also the common joke is that these imageless films and tapes are “all titles, no action.” It could also be said that my format resembled book pages, on the assumption that the standard small television screen resembled the pages of a book (in

contrast to the more enveloping screen of a moviehouse), thus favoring imagery that was intimate and devoid of excessive detail. Finally, I made video poems, first with *Partitions* (1981), discovering, as noted before, short words that are embedded within longer words, in increasingly complicated arrays and later video poems that depended upon words in kinetic relationships.

Two constraints — two negative assumptions — favored from the beginning in my video poetry were that the television set must be used for presenting images other than the solo talking heads that predominate in public transmissions, and then structures other than the sequential collages favored by most “video artists.” In video as in poetry, there was no need to duplicate what others were doing, no matter how opportunistic, in poetry as in video, such aesthetic butt-kissing might be.

The next development in my video poetry began in 1985 with a series of almost annual residencies at the Experimental TV Center in Owego, New York. Here, working with Hank Rudolph and Peer Bode, I had access first to slightly more sophisticated character-generators or electronic letter-making machines. Instead of a single machine, I now have two, with different typefaces, each able (unlike before) to do smaller letters as well as full capitals. These character-generators also have electronic memories that allow me to store a large number of successive images, or pages, that could then be summoned back while the video recording tape is running. Attached to this system is a tape drive that can store on a single “data-cartridge” cassette as many as three hundred separate pages of text, any or all of which can be random-accessed.

The ETC studio offered processing equipment that facilitates such kinetic moves as dividing the screen between two sets of letters or adding color backgrounds that can be electronically changed as we record the visual poems onto video tape. Thanks to rescanning, or the process of transferring an image from a television screen, we can do more radical image-modification. I also use the so-called text programs of an Amiga 500 computer to generate letters that, as they move on screen, make and unmake words. As is my custom in guest residencies, I try to exploit artistic possibilities within technological limitations, rather than enter a studio with detailed schemes to be realized at any cost.



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tririalolide

With these technologies, I made a series of short pieces whose only content is language, some only a few seconds long, others perhaps a minute, and thought of these as *Kinetic Writings* (1988), to quote the title of a twenty-two minute tape collecting the best of them. But I also realized that the bulk of them could be divided into two categories echoing my traditional distinctions — “Video Poems,” which realize a conciseness of image and effect, and “Video Fictions,” which imply movement from one place to another, which is to say narrative. That pair of hour-long one-person tapes, when done, would represent, as far as I can tell, the first of their literary kinds in America. Thanks to the data-cartridge technology, along with the character-generator’s capacity to make letters “crawl” in an evenly paced horizontal line across the screen, I could cast on tape the “strings” I had written several years before. Thus, *Stringtwo*, which has a two-letter overlap, opens with the following:

Stringwomenteroticystitisolatenderotogeniceapplesbiannultimaterminuse. . .

whose opening can be read as: **string(wom)ent(er)ol(tl(cly)stit(is)olate).** . .

Once these extended strings of letters were entered into the data-cartridge, they could be continuously unwound (and recorded) in several ways: with just a single stream of letters running across the screen, at one of three available speeds, at times with colors changing in either the letters or the background; with an enlargement of the middle letters running as a counterpoint either above or below; with on-screen windows that contain changing fragments of the continuous imagery. Excerpts from these shorter strings were incorporated into a thirty-minute tape titled *Videostrings* (1989). The entire German text became *Stringsieben* (1989, 12’), while *Stringtwo* (1990) alone runs well over thirty-five minutes.

I also used the character-generator and data-cartridge to put on screen the text of *Turfs/Arenas/Fields/Pitches*, whose video version opens with those four words arrayed in the four corners of a single page and contains sixty more poems similarly structured. Attractive though such verbal chords were in theory, they were more problematic in practice, especially on first hearing, and what was difficult with four-word poems became even less feasible with eight-word poems composed to a similar spatial principle (*Grounds/Gridiron/Scrubs/Vocabularies/Tracks/Proscenia/Lists/Theaters*). So it seemed appropriate to put the words of all these poems on screen not in their original geometric forms, but as horizontal lines, for durations roughly corresponding to their appearance on audio-track. (The videotape concludes with arrays of sixteen-word

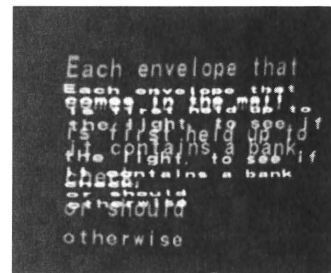
poems, likewise similar in structure, but now silent, because they have not yet been aurally recorded. Since this videotape has three sections, I decided to title it with an opening word from each section: *Turfs/Grounds/Lawns* (1989, 23').

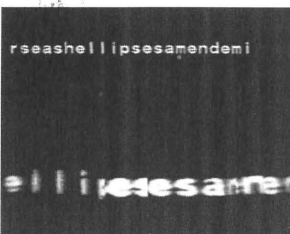
As the soundtrack was processed at the Electronic Music Studio in Stockholm, it was transferred in stereo to the 3/4" master videotape (and copied onto the stereo hifi tracks of VHS tape). Such sound, apart from its picture, is thus best played back not through the single small speaker of a standard television monitor but a stereo system customarily used for records and compact discs. Because the audio track of such videotapes is as important as the pictures, I classify them, unlike the others, as Audio-videotapes, which is an honorific I hope others would find acceptable. (I later used a more complicated video lettering to make visible the text of my audio poem *Onomatopoeia* [1988].) A few years ago I received a query from a woman preparing an master thesis on videotapes produced by published American poets, as distinct on one side from videotapes with literary language and, on the other, from tapes displaying poets as performers. She asked if any other native poets publishing in print had produced their own tapes. She did not know of any others. Nor did I.

X

Literary shape cannot come from life; it comes only from literary tradition, so ultimately from myth. Northrop Frye, "Myth, Fiction, and Displacement" (1961)

A principal thrust of my artistic activity has been working with language and literary forms in media other than small printed pages. While publishing my poetry in the literary magazines that continue to represent the foundation of our culture, I have, in addition, produced drawings, large graphics, audiotapes, videotapes, films, photographic sequences and even proposals for public art, all containing words and/or literary structures such as narrative (as in photographic sequences). Among my purposes has been the discovery of alternative possibilities for both organizing words and then "publishing" that writing (from publicare, to make public), simply to do in these media what could not be done in print. Behind this last thought is my assumption that media other than the printed page are feasible for Literature. Even though I consider myself less interested in expressing a particu-





lar vision or in exploiting an idiosyncratic “look” than in exploring these media for literary experimentation, the results invariably reflected earlier poetic ideas of mine, if not particular poems. I seem to have, as noted before, characteristic ways of handling language that extend from print into other media.

Since I had no official training in any of these media, most of this work was produced in collaboration with professional technicians — at radio stations, electronic music studios, video production facilities and film schools — mostly during invitational residencies. Rather than arriving with a complete vision and an accompanying list of projects, my customary way of working involves defining first the character of the new medium, then identifying the particular potentialities available at the host installation and finally discovering the tastes and competences of the technicians. Once these factors are understood, I generally favor the most optimal technical possibilities.

Working in 1976 with Barton Weiss at Columbia University’s Oxberry animation stand, I made a film of *Openings & Closings* in which words for the stories appear one at a time, with the openings as black type over a white background and the closings as white type over a black background. Collaborating with Peter Longauer, at the time a Columbia University graduate film student and now a distinguished filmmaker, I animated several Constructivist Fictions (1976- 77) to make continuous movement between the images, creating pixilation unique to film animation through the dissolve mechanism, realizing the narrative line mentioned before of movement from one kind of shape to another not through the turning of pages but as a continual visible flow. Both films “adapt” my fictions, so to speak, but in ways quite different from the standard cinematic practice for realizing literature.

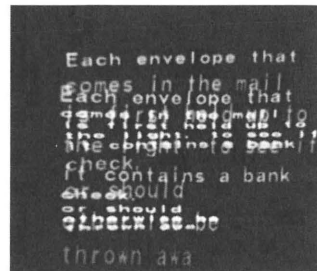
Although I remember clearly the first laser I ever saw, in 1967 at the Bell Laboratories in New Jersey, my recollections of holography are hazier, probably because it little impressed me until a decade later, when I saw a rotating cylindrical (360-degree) white-light transmission hologram. As the three-dimensional image suspended within the cylinder was continually revealing the other side of itself, the impression was not just photographic, like too many other holograms I had seen, but a three-dimensional representation in time that could not be grasped in a single viewing. The cylin-

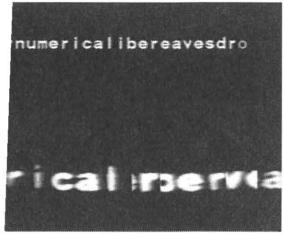
dricial hologram differed as well from a panoramic photograph, where the camera spins-around-an axis, rather than, as in the hologram, focusing-upon-its axis. The second advance in my holographic awe came a few years later, when I saw three-dimensional imagery extend not back from the visible plate, as in most holograms (and three-dimensional photography before them), but forward to points between the plate and the viewer's eye. My third epiphany came from noticing that parts of an image could be hidden from view, forcing the viewer to move, usually from side-to-side, to complete his perception of the whole. I continue to remain impressed by the medium's basic mystery to implant in clear material an image that becomes visible only when illuminated in appropriate ways.

With the first discovery of cylindrical holography in mind, I produced in 1978, during a residency at the Cabin Creek Center in New York City, my first hologram. *On Holography* is a rotating cylinder with five syntactically circular statements that, as the cylinder continually turns to the left, pass endlessly before the viewer's eyes. In each of the statements, the words were about holography and the ends were tied to each other to make a continuous circle:

- A) . . . holos = complete; gram = message; . . .
- B) . . . representation indepth = hologram. . .
- C) . . . the hologram creates a world of incorporeal activity that exists only within.
- D) . . . the illusion not only of depth but of equal focus to all distances are characteristics particular to holography.
- E) . . . by capturing on photosensitive material the amplitude, the wave-length and, most important, the phases of light reflected off an object a hologram reconstructs as a three-dimensional image. . .

In form and in their self-referential subject, these syntactically circular statements about holography echo the four circles of the visual poem-manifesto introducing *Visual Language*. One difference between the circles of this poem and the hologram is that, whereas the language of "Manifestoes" must be read at angles that some of us find less accessible — upside down or sideways — the circular statements of the continuously revolving hologram remains entirely horizontal. Similarly, whereas the printed poem





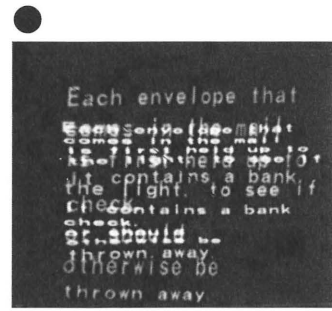
is best read from a location perpendicular to the face of it, the circular poetic hologram lacks fixed perspective, that is, it is equally legible from every side of its stationary base. For the presentation of language, in short, holography offers possibilities unavailable on a flat printed page.

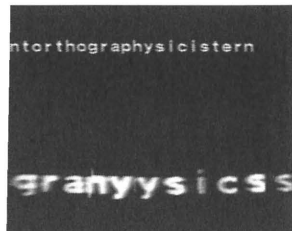
Once *On Holography* was completed, I discovered two problems. The first and most obvious was that I had hardly utilized the medium's capabilities for creating the appearance of depth. Since the words appeared to emerge from behind an invisible door on the right and then pass across the face of the cylinder to disappear behind another invisible door, now on the left. While shorter state-ments, set higher within the hologram, appear to be deeper in space, few would notice a second, more complicated perceptual problem that must be described in fuller detail.

I thought initially of stacking the statements into a single pyramid, with the shortest one on top and the longest one at the bottom, but to fill the cylinder with only a single rotating image struck me as clumsy (and unholographic). If the words at the bottom level of a single pyramid were to move across the viewer's eyes at a legible speed, the upper levels would have been boringly slow. Conversely, to key the motion of words to an upper level would have necessitated making the bottom levels illegibly fast. I decided instead that each line should revolve independently, in the ratios of 1:2:3:4, counting from the bottom up, so that statement #D (twenty words) would be seen twice for every rotation made by #E (twenty-nine words), and then have #C (twelve words) be seen thrice, and #B and #A (each four words) be seen four times during each rotation of the cylinder. (This was realized by having each circle of words filmed individually on a drum to exactly equal lengths. However, the film of #D was step-printed, as they say, to omit alternate frames, and then duplicated to equal the length of #E. The film of #C was step-printed to omit two of every three frames, and then triplicated; the single film of #B and #A was step-printed to omit three of every four frames and then quadruplicated. These four films were then superimposed to make a single continuous film whose images were then anamorphically compressed into vertical slivers that comprise the holographic film that lines the inside surface of the exhibition cylinder. (The imagery on this film becomes apparent only when illuminated from below by an uncoated, single-filament lightbulb.)

While this restructuring of the holographic representation of five statements may have been conceptually clever, the inadvertent result was a remarkably unclever illusion [no, delusion]. Instead of moving at different speeds, the letters in five rows appear to move roughly in unison. (Twenty-nine at the lowest level is roughly equal to two times twenty and three times twelve.) Thus, the viewer initially perceives all five lines as belonging to a single rotating pyramid, all contrary to fact! If the viewer examined the relationships among the lines closely, he or she would realize that a four-word statement could not possibly rotate at the same frontal speed as a twenty-nine-word statement. Likewise, if the viewer made vertical comparisons among the lines, he or she would notice that whenever the word “holos” appeared in the top line, a sequence or cycle, of four different words would appear directly below it in the bottom line. However, few viewers would “read” *On Holography* that meticulously, alas, in part because the tradition of perceptually photographic holograms accustoms them to a more instantaneous kind of looking. Instead, this hologram offers visual-verbal experience that can be appreciated only in time and is, in that respect, perceptually closer to film or, of course, literature.

When *On Holography* was initially exhibited in a crowded group show at New York’s Museum of Holography, I noticed that it could scarcely compete with the pseudo-photographs whose images were quickly recognized, whose ideas were readily grasped. On Holography not only required more patience literally to be “seen,” but it posed perceptual problems that were not immediately apparent. To make its presence more competitive in the gallery, I decided to add a multitrack audiotape accompaniment of five voices reciting the same five lines of words repeatedly and simultaneously at a rate roughly matching the rotational speed of the hologram, so that viewers could hear in five-voice unison the same words they saw simultaneously in five-line unison. If nothing else, they could hear that “hologram = representation in depth” occurred far more often than the longest statement. I figured that perhaps the addition of an aural-verbal element might generate questions about visual-verbal perception.





XI

Literature may have life, reality, experience, nature, imaginative truth, social conditions or what you will for its content; but literature itself is not made out of these things. Poetry can only be made out of other poems; novels out of other novels. Literature shapes itself, and is not shaped externally: the forms of literature can no more exist outside literature than the forms of sonata and fugue and rondo can exist outside music. Northrup Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957)

To produce a second poetic hologram in 1985, I first had to win another residency competition, this sponsored by the Dennis Gabor Laboratory at the Museum of Holography for "artists who have had limited or no experience in making holograms, yet have a strong body of work in a different medium." An invitation in hand, I decided to work more with the medium's awesome capability for generating literal three-dimensional experience. One difference between the Gabor Laboratory and Cabin Creek was that the former had only pure holography, where original images were shot directly with laser light; there was no intermediate transfer onto movie film. Since holography transcends stereography in allowing the viewer to look literally around and behind a foreground image, my first notion was to put words behind other words, thus requiring the viewers to move their bodies up and down, if not from side-to-side, to find back words that would complement the front words; for one of my aims was realizing an unfamiliar kind of *reading* indigenous to holography. (The trade epithet is "laser limbo," which differs only in degree from the physical activity normally associated with reading — turning the page.) I also thought of working with letters whose parts (lines) evolved out of one another, so that as you moved to the left, say, the left-hand vertical line of an "E" would become the right-hand vertical line of an "H" all while the middle horizontal lines would flow into each other.

However, Dan Schweitzer, the same holographer who gave me that vision of words behind words, also showed me how images could be projected forward to rootless points between the viewer's eye and the hologram's plate, and then how the side parts of this forward-image could be made to fall outside the viewing field. In a subsequent conversation, the holographer Scott Lloyd gave me the structure of a two-sided plate, with different images on each side. Necessarily illuminated from behind, this would become a trans-

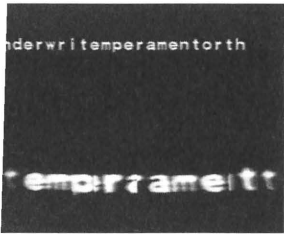
mission hologram, in contrast to a reflection hologram that is illuminated from the front. When the Museum of Holography assigned me to work with Fred Unterseher, the co-author of the standard *Holography Handbook* (1982), we decided to put each set of words on four planes. Here, as in other media work, I was dependent upon professionals to tell me what the machinery could do (or what they could do with the technology).

Once I conceived this last form of two sets of words on four planes apiece, the question became how best to fill it with language. In recent visual poems, I had been using the form of constellations of individual words that relate to one another in various ways; that seemed appropriate here. Which collections of words would be most efficacious? I thought in terms of antitheses such as "love/hate" or "good/evil" or "white/black," but my biases toward visual symmetries found such plus-minus combinations wanting. If one side were more sympathetic than the other, in prejudicial ways, I could have made of this imbalance a hologram in which the imagery on the plus side came forward, while the other (minus-side) retreated.

Though I might later use that out-in form, I chose instead to project both sides forward with an antithesis of equal value: Warm and Cold. Upon those pegs I wrote thirty-five additional pairs of words of roughly equal length: Summer/Winter, Chaud/Froid, Char/Numb, Love/Hate, Devil/Ghoul; Flammable/Frigorific, Eat/Diet, Febrile/Niveous, Mead/Beer, Home/Jail, Incandesce/Glaciare, Pussy/Putty, Calid/Gelid, Head/Feet, Bonfire/Icecube, Punctual/Dilatory, Ecstasy/Stasis, Palm/Pine, Reverberate/Evaporate, Conflagration/Congelation, Erect/Supine, Sultry/Boreal, Knife/Spoon, Sanguinary/Sanguinity, Leap/Dive, Ginger/Yoghurt, Bubbly/Sleepy, Right/Left, Patrimony/Parsimony, Demagogue/Politician, Independence/Subordination. Seethe/Shiver, Scramble/Leisure, Affection/Obedience, Antinomies/Congruences.

While I wanted through words alone to make one side feel warmer/colder than the other, I also wanted to use striking words in unfamiliar relationships. If I were to typeset each pair in a typeface unique to it, each word, in addition to contributing to its field, could be connected to a word in the opposite field, in terms not only of antithetical meaning but similar typeface — not only semantically but visually.





I figured that since the last twenty pairs were verbally the most interesting (and less obvious), they should go to the back planes. The next ten pairs should go on the planes one up from the back, on the third planes forward should go the first five pairs, and on the front planes, as far forward as possible, should go only "warm" and "cold." Also, each of the two front words would be so large, and so far forward that they would never be entirely visible — parts would fall outside the viewing field. Thus, if the viewer deciphered the letter "A," he or she would be prompted to move to the left to find the "W" and to the right to find the "R" and "M." Another preliminary consideration was to make black letters on an illuminated field, which would make a shadowgram (that visually echoed the photograms of my artistic hero Moholy-Nagy).

To realize the sort of forward projection I wanted, it was necessary to make a hologram of a hologram. This technique required locating an "image plane," which would be the level with the greatest illumination. Confronting the question of where to place the image plane, Fred Unterseher favored the second levels, each with five words; I insisted that the back group receive the clearest focus, as those words required the most illumination for legibility (in part because they had to be visible behind other words), but also because within my structure of verbal values I could allow for the forward planes being increasingly less illuminated (and less legible). One risk of putting images behind one another is losing the back row, but one advantage that words have over abstract imagery is that recognition of a few letters prompts the viewer to find the remainder of the word (and thus move beyond an immediate perception). A second problem involved the thickness of the front letters, which were initially set boldface four inches high with scarce space between them. Since we feared that even with less illumination they would block out the back planes, we decided to rescreen those letters at forty-percent benday dots. However, when that turned out to lack presence, Samuel R. Delany, the literary colleague to whom *Antitheses* is dedicated, proposed increasing their visibility with strips of black tape along the letters' edges (and then, bless him, he actually sat down and started taping!).

One inadvertent result is that the words on the three front planes have a peculiar visual-verbal status. As holographic imagery differs from photographic and few viewers are accustomed to per-

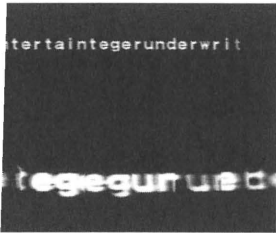
ceiving objects floating unattached in space (illustrating the holographic truth that visualized objects exist only in the eye), these words are not immediately seen. (Indeed, some people discover much faster than others that words are sharing their space, so to speak. A few won't discover them until a guide physically positions their head in an appropriate place.) For each plane forward, the letters lose density, their thick bold lines becoming progressively more vaporous (an effect that must be seen to be believed). My sense is that words which appear partially dematerialized have a status that I have yet to understand. Clearly they require more time to be "read," while they individually lose semantic presence (and thus become more dependent upon others in the field for their communicative value). I also wonder how many will recognize that every word in one field has a typographic mate on this other side, for this cross-referencing over opposite sides of a physical space also transcends photographic/bookish perception.

The two front words, poetically the least interesting, are perceived initially as lines that flash into the visual field as the viewer's eyes move from side-to-side, in the course of such movement discovering yet other letters, no more than two of which are visible at any time. The fear is that viewers accustomed to expecting pseudo-photographs will never examine these mysterious floating lines. Perhaps *Antitheses* has turned out to be as perceptually difficult as its predecessor. Another result of such extreme dimensionality is a holographic image that cannot be still-photographed adequately. Because cameras are designed to focus upon a particular level, especially in such darkness, it would be more effective (but less feasible) to film it through a succession of focus-changes; and because standard cameras have only one eye, rather than the two of most human beings, every picture loses much. Perhaps such nonphotographability (sic) should be considered a sign of holographic integrity.

Within the context of my poetry, I think *Antitheses* the best of the constellations in any medium, partly because in three dimensions, with the spatial experience of language, I can better realize my earlier poetic idea of complementary words within a single visual frame, as well as my general aesthetic of reading in unfamiliar ways and doing with new media what could not be done in print. This complements, even surpasses, not only my visual



Thirty Years of Visible Writing: A Memoir



poems but also *On Holography* in revealing the medium's capacities for unusual verbal-visual experience.

XII

I would like to suggest that the use of intermedia is more or less universal throughout the fine arts, since continuity rather than categorization is the hallmark of our new mentality. There are parallels to the Happenings in music, for example in the work of such composers as Philip Corner and John Cage, who explore the intermedia between music and philosophy, or Joe Jones, whose self-playing musical instruments fall into the intermedium between music and sculpture. The constructed poems of Emmett Williams and Robert Fillous certainly constitute an intermedium between poetry and sculpture. Dick Higgins, "Intermedia" (1965)

In 1987, Fred Unterseher and Rebecca Deem invited me to a Hamburg (Germany) installation where they were working. Here we shot a series of image masters with the pulse technology that reduces considerably the set-up time, enabling us to shoot several masters in a few days. However, once I got these masters, I had to deal with the problem of making "transfers," or copies that can be viewed under single-filament (uncoated) light. A holographic master, you see, can be viewed only under laser light; otherwise, it looks like a large sheet of thick cloudy film. Everyone new to holography imagines that copies are made by photographic process, where light passing through a negative produces a positive. While conceptually credible, that assumption is false. What is required is that a hologram be made of a hologram, by situating the master between a laser beam and a photographic plate. Once this arrangement is made and tested, in a procedure taking several days, the door to the lab must be shut until the situation "settles," which is to say that vibrations are eliminated. Once the shot is made, with an extended exposure, the glass plate is then developed, washed, bleached and washed again before being deposited in a "fotoflo." Once removed from the last liquid, the plate is dried, initially with a squeegee and blotting paper, then, say, hung on a line or blown with a hair-dryer. I know, because for a second residency at the Museum of Holography, once my colleague Doris Vila set me up, I did this all myself.

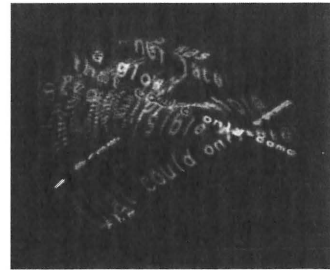
These new holograms deal with withholding parts of words forcing viewers to move to complete their linguistic understanding. For instance, you see a horizontal string of only the letter "A," move

a bit and you see “BR”s, move further and you see “C”s and then “D”s. It becomes apparent that the word represented here is ABRACADABRA. (My Polish colleague Petr Rypson reminds me that the word comes from a Chaldean term that means “perish like the word.” That accounts for its use in sympathetic magic.) Another device has letters appearing in continuously overlapping sequence, from “HO” to “HOG” to “LOG” to “LAP” to “RAG” to “RAP” to “HAP” to “HEP” to “HER,” in sum revealing a multitude of words embedded within HOLOGRAPHER. In another case, the white letters on the black background of “MADAM” slide into the black letters on a white background of “ADAM” over a shifting horizontal divider, creating at one point the letters “MAD” in white on one side of a line that has “AM” on the other. A final work, of the numerical poem “Ambiguity,” has four vertical rows of numerals whose middle parts add from right to left and multiply from left to right, creating on the outer parts pairs of sums that, though they cannot be seen at once, turned out to mirror each other. I call this most recent sequence *Hidden Meanings* (1989) for its various poetic explorations of a certain holographic capability. One way that my holography differs from my video and audio, not to mention printed literature, is that all my holograms can be classified as poetry and prose.

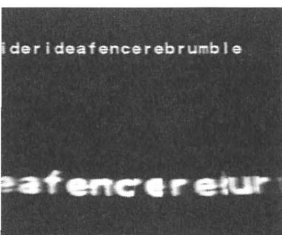
XIII

The water we swim in is our life — and swimming is an art. Any art (from Latin: art — skill) is tested here by how it works in the water. The rest is dross: “gaudyverse” the romantic poets called it. Our world is vast and growing: we always knew it, but now we’re acting upon it, trying to be as complete as each of us uniquely can. We are trying to be altogether together. As the old joke says, the whole of the doughnut is its most valuable part. Dick Higgins, “An Exemplativist Manifesto” (1976)

One fact I should like to note about my creative career is the absence of any early conventional work; there is no juvenalia — no poetry in either traditional or modish forms, no linear fiction, no representational drawings, which is to say, none of the trappings that indicate that I mastered some academic lessons. I began my creative career at an extreme position and have, I think, simply moved only further out. The idea of imitating what is taught in school — or either proving myself or establishing my credibility through the mastery of classroom exercises — has



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never interested me. One reason for this absence is that I came to creative work not from an apprenticeship in poetry and/or fiction and/or visual art, as nearly all creative writers and artists do nowadays, but from the neutral territories of intellectual history and expository prose which, of course, I continue to do as work distinct from my poetry. On the other hand, I think it can be seen that my poetry belongs to a tradition, mostly American, that is concerned with radical inventions within the machinery of poetry — a line that includes Walt Whitman, E. E. Cummings, and Gertrude Stein among the classic Americans; Dick Higgins, Paul Zelevansky, Norman Henry Pritchard II, Bliem Kern, and Harry Polkinhorn among my contemporaries. Indeed, if there is a single ambition for me, it is not to write acknowledged masterpieces or to become a poetry professor, but to be the most inventive poet ever in American literature, forging poetic possibilities that others might choose to develop, perhaps surpassing me in excellence. Even though there are few competitors in such pioneering enterprise, I'm not done yet.

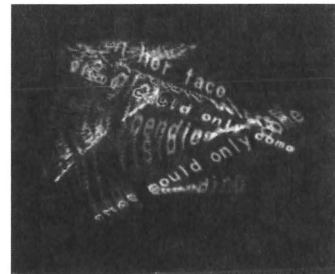
Though superficially diverse, not only in media but styles, my creative works still exhibit certain unifying marks: risk-taking, rigor, clarity, structural explicitness, variousness, empiricism, conceptual audacity, signature, avant-garde ambition, noncommercialism, and high (or late) modernism (rather than "post-modernism"). These qualities might also characterize my critical writing, perhaps because they define my personal temper (and are thus as close as the work can be to being me), as well as my creative concern with innovative structure, which is, to no surprise, a principle theme of my arts criticism and my anthologies. Two goals in mind for both my art and my criticism are that they be more complex and yet more accessible, if only to prove that these aims need not be contradictory.

Just as no one else has produced a body of work like mine, it is doubtful whether anyone else, even a loyal acolyte, has sufficiently various experience to write anything remotely resembling this introduction. I am less interested in being "acceptable" to those who cultivate professional power than popular with those who don't. That accounts for why hundreds of my poems (and my fictions) have appeared in American literary journals. It is not for nothing that poetry such as mine is customarily not included in the textbook anthologies nowadays and why people doing such poetry, even if widely published, are never invited to teach in the M.F.A.

poetry programs. All my creative work also can be seen as the dialectical result of pitting my traditional education and professional experience (with expository writing) against a series of antithetical efforts to transcend conventional forms — to write a poetry of intentionally limited language, to cast words into media other than printed pages, to compose literature with numbers, to multitrack declaimed language, to work in media in which I had no training, etc. Since much of the work involves the mixing of materials, the process of perceiving it customarily combines at least two perceptual modes — the visual with the verbal, the verbal with the aural, the numerical with the visual, the static with the kinetic, etc.; for my work is usually meant to be perceived in more than one traditional way.

It could also be said that I have endeavored, first, to combine my university education in literature and history with a growing interest in music and the visual arts and, second, to test my inventive proclivities against the resistances of several unfamiliar media. This background may explain such idiosyncracies as why my work seems at once so intellectual and so anti-intellectual, or why I am more interested in results than in processes, or why I've never reversed direction by dismissing earlier work as "too radical for me now," or why I find myself so often talking and writing about the work (even drawing upon earlier memoirs, as here), and finally why this essay is as it is.

One might also characterize my art as premeditated, impersonal, experimental and intellectual, although eschewing such traditional symptoms of how intelligence functions in art as abstruse symbolism or allusions to past literature and history. My works are particularly indebted, in different ways, to such precursors as Moholy-Nagy and Theo van Doesburg, in addition to John Cage and Milton Babbitt; and I gladly acknowledge the influence of such earlier cultural movements as constructivism, dada and transcendentalism, in addition to the "intermedia" developments of the past two decades. Given such aesthetic history, it is scarcely surprising that, except for my video art and holograms, I have so far favored black and white as the sole colors indigenous to art, believing that all other hues belong primarily to "illustration."



Thirty Years of Visible Writing: A Memoir



string

XIV

Discovering that history — be it social, political, or literary — belongs to whoever owns the erasers is always a disconcerting lesson, regardless of how frequently one learns it. Alan Nadel, Invisible Criticism (1988)

Though I once said that my creative work made me “a poet,” I now speak of myself as an “artist and writer,” nonetheless wishing that there were in English a single term that combined the two. “Maker” might be more appropriate, its modesty notwithstanding. The variousness of the work confuses not only the art public but also those critics who still expect someone to be just “a poet” or just “a composer” or just “a visual artist,” rather than all of those things, and *much else besides*. The principle problem with person-centered epithets such as “painter” and “writer” is that they become not descriptions but jails, either restricting one’s creative activity or defining one’s creative adventure in terms of one’s initial professional category (e.g., “artist’s books”). As Ad Reinhardt warned, “Art disease is caused by a hardening of the categories.” In truth, anyone realizing a radically different kind of poetry will probably have a radically different kind of poetry career as well. Even so, it should be possible for any of us to make *poems* or *photographs* or *music*, as we wish, and better yet, to have these works regarded, plainly, as “poems” or “photographs” or “music.” Perhaps the sum of my artworks, including poetry, is ultimately about the *discovery of possibilities*, initially in the exploitation of available media, and then in art and, by extension, in oneself as a creative initiator.

XV

Some of us, then, seem, simply, to work in a number of areas because our personal sensibilities lead us to do this. I write, do visual art, compose music, and theorize: all are part of the whole. But neither does it make me one whit better in any of those areas than a poet who only writes haikus, a visual artist who only works with geometric forms, a composer who only does electronic music, or a theoretician who produces no art at all. . . nor, I am arguing, does it necessarily make any one of the areas which I explore suffer, though perhaps I am a better poet than visual artist, or vice versa. Dick Higgins, “On Doing Too Much” (1977)

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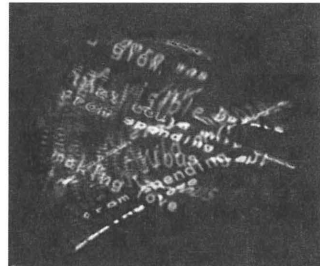
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