

VISUAL POETRY : Artists' Writing in a Para-literary Age

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Fig. 1: John Riddell from *Criss Cross*, 1977.

Poetry is Art

Nothing better illustrates the problem of literature's ambiguous aesthetic status than the term "artists' books"¹. If literature were truly considered an art, this phrase would be redundant. Any cheap paperback edition of Shakespeare, or Baudelaire, or Saarikoski, would – quite obviously – count as an "artist's book". But it doesn't.

Why doesn't it? Why, to put it differently, don't students of literature have to take studio courses? Or, the other way around: Why isn't poetry taught in the art department, along with painting and sculpture, or even in the increasingly common "intermedia" or "interarts" programs?

To question the separations that exist between literature and art is to dig at some of the fundamental distinctions structuring western culture and contemporary consciousness: language vs. matter, word vs. thing, thought vs. perception, content vs. form, mind vs. body. However much they may have in common, poetry and painting,

poetry and music, literature and art, are taught in different departments, and according to different pedagogies, because they are believed to deal with fundamentally different things, and to involve fundamentally different human faculties.

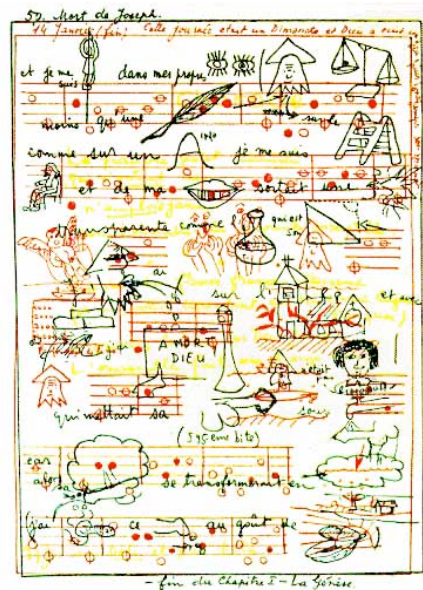


Fig.2: In the "hypergraphic" writing of Lettrist poet Isidore Isou, words, icons, musical notation and abstract symbols mix in a hybrid language. To be "read", the images have to be transposed into words, the words into music, and the music into visual patterning. From *Les Journaux des Dieux*, 1950.

Visual poetry, on the other hand, one of the many modern trends to begin mixing once-separate art forms, challenges these assumptions. To engage a visual "poem", to try to "understand" it in the multiple ways it requires, is to watch these distinctions lose their certainty. If the distinctions do not disappear altogether, they at least blur significantly. In visual poetry, words behave as things, or things as words, thought takes on perceptual qualities, and there is often no way of separating the content of a poem from its visible forms, what it means from how it looks.

As the distinctions blur, the modes of culture and consciousness built on them discover new freedoms, new possibilities, new ideas of art emerging out of new relationships between materials and our modes of perceiving or "reading" them. Where a pattern of colors and lines, or the expressive likeness of a natural object, are as important to the logical or lyrical argument of a text as any words that might be there, we are dealing with both art and literature simultaneously, inseparably, as one thing – call it *litarture* – not just two things set next to each other. We are not on one side of the cultural divide or the other, and we can no longer use only half our mind to process it.

The Verbal is Visual

Historically, visual poetics originate in an exploration of, or in an exultation in, the visual forms of language. Whether we consider the millennial arts of calligraphy (East Asian, Islamic or European), the ancient tradition of shaped-text or “pattern” poetry (Simias of Rhodes, ca. 300BC; George Herbert, 17th Century; Guillaume Apollinaire, 1910’s, etc.) or the particularly modern practice of spatialized free verse that begins with Stéphane Mallarmé at the end of the 19th Century, visual poetry emerges where writing realizes the complementary potentials of its own visual forms.

In the case of Mallarmé, for example, whose *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* (*A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*) (1897) represents the true beginning of visual poetry as a sustained and self-aware practice, the visual component was a way for printed language to do more of what it was doing already. Mallarmé, the high poet of *Symbolisme*, was the most literary, the most dedicatedly verbal of poets, and was not interested in “mixing” the medium of his poetic expression by bringing in foreign visual elements. On the other hand his very dedication to language as an art, to poetry as an art of ideas that is reliant on an art of sound, led him to discover the role typography and spatial form could play in replacing the poet’s voice on the printed page. For him the visual layout of a text, varying the typeface, size and positioning of words, was a way of presenting a poem as its own performance score, of delivering language with just the right emphasis or delay to maximize its poetic effect. Visual variations were to produce variations in how the text sounded in the inner ear of the reader, larger words appearing louder, smaller words softer and less intoned, while loose spacing would slow the reading, allowing each word more resonance and ambiguity.

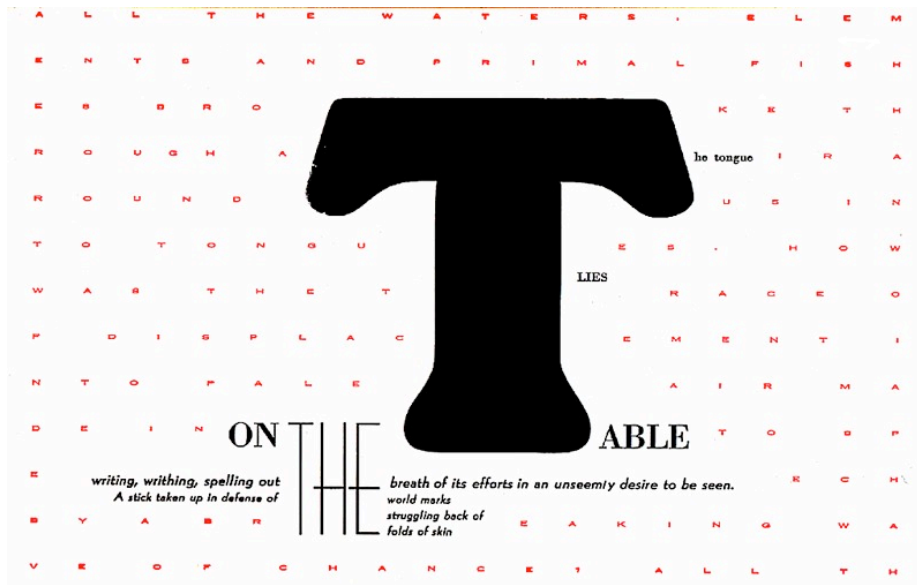


Fig. 3: Johanna Drucker, from *The Word Made Flesh*, 1996.

Printed language is always visual, and so if those cheap paperbacks of Shakespeare or Baudelaire are poetry, they should count as visual poetry, too. The difference is that in

conventional printing, as in conventional writing, the visual aspects of the language are kept as standardized as possible, so as to be effectively invisible. Seeing the text, needing to notice specific articulations in its visible form, would distract from *reading* it, which in the traditional conception requires us to ignore the body of the text (typography, spacing, margins, ink quality, paper) in order to grasp the spirit. In visual poetry, body and spirit are reunited, and the visible is embraced as a rich possible source of meanings. Potentially, everything is used.

The Visual is Language

The emergence of visual poetry at the experimental margins of literature parallels the rise of print advertising and other forms of visual communication at the heart of modern consumer society. Mallarmé was in part attempting to turn the blatant attention-getting strategies of newspaper typography to higher literary purposes, and the Dadaist, Futurist and Surrealist poets all made active use of the product labels, slogans and commercial iconography that had come to characterize their increasingly visual culture, and to seriously challenge the hegemony of religious and “high art” symbols in the visual imaginary.

The fact that visual poetry today remains a marginal practice, rarely given much attention within the academy, is strange considering mainstream literature’s own anxieties in the face of the advancing visualization, or de-literarification, of culture. Where conventional literature now appears marginal, even archaic, within a cultural formation which increasingly privileges modes of viewing and mediated interactivity over traditional reading, visual poetry deserves recognition for having long ago assumed a position much more central to the major media shifts at work within culture.

If visual poetry’s founding intuition was that writing was already visual and the visual could be used, its full maturity came with the realization that visual images are already a language, or many languages, available for writing in. The advancing mastery of visual communication evidenced in advertising and the mass media, together with the semiotic analysis that allowed these media to be understood as linguistic or “language-like” systems, gave rise to the now-common notion of visual language. Obviously, it would seem in retrospect, if there was visual language there should be visual poetry. And particularly in the 1960’s and 70’s, when the semiotic analysis of visual media was applied to the wide-spread socio-political critique of media’s manipulative powers, a growing number of “engaged” writers identified visual language as the key terrain on which to do the poetic work of challenging official systems of representation.

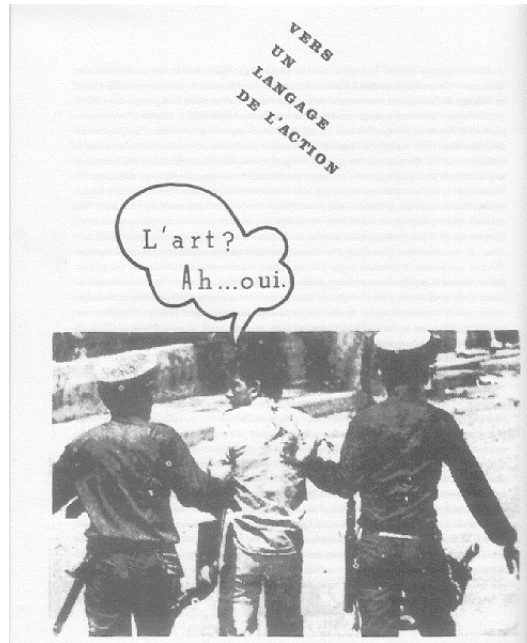


Fig. 4: Clemente Padin, "L'art ah oui", DOC(K)S no. 1 Folio 95. 1976

Concrete in the Visual Mix

This second realization, that poetry could move beyond the visual aspects of writing and employ any type of visuals as signs in a poetic construction, was delayed for many years by one of visual poetry's own greatest successes. Emerging in the 1950's (simultaneously in Switzerland and Brazil), the movement known as *concrete poetry* achieved the highest cultural profile and greatest literary influence visual poetry as such has yet enjoyed. Replacing linguistic syntax with the logics of spatial structure and material presence, concretism sought to evolve a new art of words in which seeing and reading were called upon to do equal work in the production of meaning. The "catchiness" and conceptual poignancy of many concrete poems and the seeming endlessness of the possibilities it offered brought the form a real popularity, and the clarity of its theoretical statements (in particular the writings of Eugen Gomringer and the Brazilian Noigandres poets, Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos and Decio Pignatari), won a small place for it in many academic curricula and literary anthologies from the 60's onward.

Gomringer's stated enthusiasm for concretism as a literary form had a lot to do with his interest in the international signage systems being developed for airports and train stations during the mobility boom of the 1950's. He saw his literary activity as conspiring in the advancement of important worldwide, trans-national modes of communication. Despite the obvious role imagery and icons would have to play in such languages, his own compositional theory and practice propagated an orthodoxy that effectively excluded the use of non-verbal elements. The (relative) worldwide success and academic influence of concretism thus limited the semiotic range of visual poetry at the moment of its broadest public recognition. It wasn't until that orthodoxy softened, with the "clean" concretism of the 50's yielding to the "dirty" concretism², *poesia visiva*³ and *poesie élémentaire*⁴ or "*langue DOC(K)S*"⁵ of the following decades, that the dominant

trends in visual poetry resumed the full range of visual language resources available to them. However, because no single movement or trend since concretism has attained the same visibility, the fame of that movement continues to interfere with the spreading of a fuller picture of what visual poetry is or might become. Indeed, for many, “concrete poetry” is “visual poetry”, rather than just an historically and generically limited sub-species of it; though this prejudice is fading. Perhaps the single most fully realized vision of what a rigorous visual poetry might be beyond concretism, featuring intricately readable texts of both language and visuals, is to be found in the extensive and beautiful work of Klaus Peter Dencker.

Objects, Actions, Architecture

Visual poetry is often described as an “intermedia”, a fusion of different media in an integrated practice. In the simplest version, and this is true for Dencker, the media fused are language and the graphic arts, or language and visual art more generally. Usually what we are dealing with are two-dimensional works on paper, perhaps created for display on a gallery wall but eventually transferable to the pages of a book, where it can be viewed/read in a format comfortably preserving at least some aspects of the conventional poetry experience. But boxes, clothing, short films, odd stage performances, holographic projections, bread, rooms, buildings, and information architectures are all on the long list of media that have been used in avowedly “poetic” productions; some of them without the intervention, written or spoken, of even a single word. Amid such a variety of forms, it would seem that the term “visual poetry” is either ill-defined, or too all-encompassing to have any useful meaning. And that may be true. As a literary genre, visual poetry sprawls beyond definable boundaries, but as a culture of experiment and exploration there are certain underlying coherences that unite much of what is otherwise a very disparate corpus.

One underlying logic accounting for many very different kinds of work goes as follows: if poetry is the art of language, any artwork made of words or letters is a poetic work. Language here is taken quite literally, or rather “concretely”, pushing the logic of concretism to its material extremes. Thus, especially in the 70’s and 80’s, a huge range of works is generated by artists/poets exploring the endless ways in which language manifests among the objects and devices of our everyday material culture. Archaic letterpress type, LED screens, the brilliant but obsolete IBM Selectric typewriter ball, ABC refrigerator magnets, letter-shaped pasta, Kellogg’s-brand “Alphabits” cereal, or things, like bagels, that just *look* like letters – all these become material inspirations for a new type of poetic play. Sometimes this play consists in composing poetic texts whose meanings incorporate the generally anti-literary values of their material base. But often the play is as much sculpture, performance or conceptual art as it is writing, and the poetry of it has more to do with imagining poetic potentials into objects and devices that are outside of literature, but may ironically reflect new possibilities back onto it. Since these materials highlight how language is embodied as tool or toy in every aspect of life, a major sub-text of such explorations is language’s problematic role in *constituting* us as socialized, gendered and ideological beings.

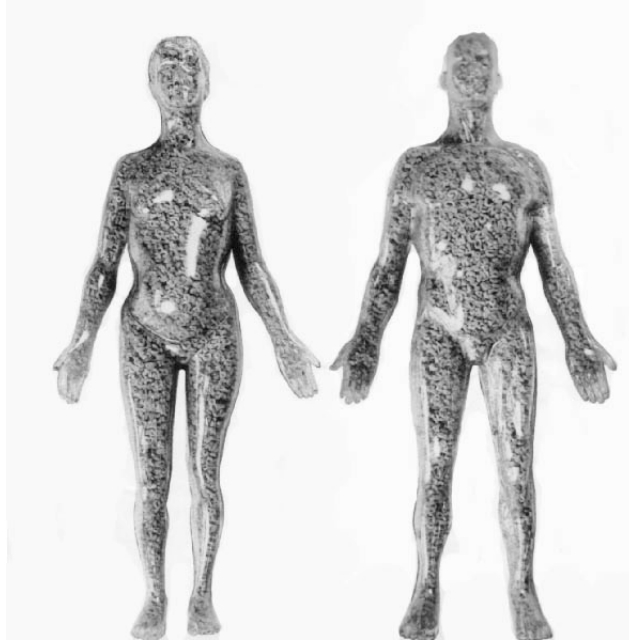


Fig. 5: Patty Arnold, "Visible Woman/Visible Man", Café Solo 2 3/4, 1979.

Another logic that can help us understand another wide range of works is the semiotic logic that sees potentially everything as a sign in a language-like system, and every sign as a possible resource for poetic composition. On the one hand this explains widespread experiments (e.g. Max Ernst's *Une semaine de bonté*, Giuseppe Steiner's *Drawn States of Mind*, or the collage works of John Heartfield or Gerhard Rühm) in using visual imagery to construct texts that in some way "read" like poems, often with little or no verbal language involved, or alternatively texts whose poetry arises precisely in the tensions and interplay between visual and verbal meanings (cf. Clemente Padin or Julien Blaine). On the other it explains the fascination with pre-existing visual codes – semaphore, traffic signals, assembly instructions, body language, sign language, the "language of flowers", fashion, dance-step notation, gang signals, weather maps, every manner of diagram and technical illustration – and their ambition to recruit the conventional or prosaic meanings of these systems into poetic service. Whether such codes are employed carefully to constitute legible "texts", or more abstractly or playfully, and whether the works employing them are presented on the page or on stage, in the gallery, on screen, or out in the urban environment, they reinforce the notion of poetry even as they abandon the medium it is traditionally done in. The notion that poetry is a liberatory extra, a potential trapped in every system, waiting for release, an imaginative surplus of meaning that breaks the conventions of language to free up new possibilities for expression and experience; this is the age-old mission of poetry served in a new way by these radically innovative forms.

Poetry – the remainder

Historically visual poetry is associated with the exhaustion of traditional literary forms, with the crisis of literature as such. And as a parallel or counter-literary activity, it can be seen as asking, and perhaps answering, two critical, related questions. First, what is left for poetry, when everything has been done, when culture itself, which once held poetry in the highest esteem, seems done with poetry? And secondly, what is left of poetry, when the traditional forms have been abandoned, and we want to keep using the word?

To address the first question first, visual poetry *per se* may not be the future of poetry, but it is certainly part of the bundle of experimental practices that have already identified and established a future for poetic activity in a post-literary age, where language and literacy themselves are being radically redefined by new modes of inscription and communication. The computer age has given rise already to several waves of poetic innovation, in many of which the efforts and experience of visual poets have played important roles. Appearing in the 1980's, hypertext poetry began exploring the poetic potentials of spatialized, interactive text navigation even before the internet emerged as a mass extension of those potentials into the basic functioning of our wired society. Then, since the 90's, the development of text and text-image animation tools (e.g. Java, Flash, Director) has supported the emergence of new kinetic poetics. These new forms, arising at the forefront of our evolving language- and media-scapes, are fulfilling important potentials intuited since the very beginnings of visual poetry. On the one hand, expanding on earlier experiments with cinema, they have added movement to the resources of textual presentation, literalizing an effect Mallarmé could only hint at through suggestive typography. On the other hand they have brought the poetic enterprise into an environment of near-total media integration – text, sound, image, animation and video blended in a single compositional platform, and viewable on a single screen, or navigable within a single immersive virtual environment.

Here we have in some sense the imaginable maximum of the poetic text, the complete realization of Apollinaire's famous futuristic vision from 1917:

a new art (vaster than the simple art of words), where, conductors of an orchestra of unheard-of extent, ...[poets] will have at their disposal: the whole world, its noise and its appearances, thought and human language, song, dance, all the arts and all the artifices, more mirages yet than Morgane could have lifted on Mont Gibel, to compose the book seen and read of the future. (Apollinaire, "L'Ésprit nouveau et les poètes")

But add to this still the possibilities of full interactivity, co-authoring, tele-presence, multiple-user interaction, computer text/sound/image generation, and the self-organization of media environments as virtual worlds, and we enter the 21st Century not merely at the conceivable limit of our conventional notion of a text, but in fact on the doorstep of a radically new and alien paradigm of textual authoring and participatory reception. Bill Seaman, an MIT-trained artist, has theorized the poetics of this new paradigm, where the poetic enterprise adventures forward into still largely unknown territories of an emerging world, as a "recombinant poetics", organizing "an expanded computer-based environmental semiotics".

So plenty left for poetry: to explore the creative potentials of each new (visual) media regime as it emerges. But what is left of poetry, when those explorations lead it beyond the limit of poetry's traditional materials – voice, page, book – beyond even language as traditionally understood? Already the term, “visual poetry”, should alert us to a strain this trend of experimentalism has placed (along with its sister forms, sound poetry, action poetry, and computer or “code” poetry) on our fundamental notion of what poetry is. The effect, after over a century of such questioning and experimentation, has been a progressive differentiation of poetry as principle from the conditions of its historical embodiment, a distillation of poetry as an essence out from the conventional poems of words in which that essential thing was first made known, named and propagated. If poetry in this sense is the principle of fundamental creativity and liberatory play within systems of meaning and representation, then moving beyond the traditional forms of literary language and publication can be seen as simple evolution in some cases, or in others as a survival strategy.

If poetry feels endangered today (as it perhaps has always felt endangered), it is not because the cultural institutions of high literary art have lost much of their prestige, nor simply because of any possible decline in literacy or the social importance of words and reading. A greater danger lies in the encroaching uniformity of cultural messaging and human experience, the progressive domination of public discourse and common thought by corporate media, and of corporate media by a narrow set of political allegiances. What is in jeopardy is not state funding for the humanities, but an ecology of human alternatives, as the world increasingly submits to a single political/economic model and to a single version of what to expect from life, entailing the defeatist consensus that no large-scale, substantial change is possible. When poetry, as poetry, is no longer able to exert any effective leverage against these diminishments, there is no point in preserving it in its usual forms. Already in the 1950's the Situationists, who saw poetry as “the revolutionary moment of language” and developed an important critical poetics of visual media, had applied this test to poetry and declared: “One thing we can be sure of is that fake, officially tolerated poetry is no longer the poetic adventure of its era” (Situationist International 115). Instead of continuing poetry within culture, they undertook the direct poetic adventure of transforming everyday life outside it.

More recently, Steve McCaffery, without abandoning poetry as a cultural activity, has argued “that contemporary poetics has reached an impasse in *exclusively* poetic territories”, and argued that “an exclusive focus on the poem-as-such severely curtails the potential critical range of poetics,” and that “for the latter to maintain a vital critical function then a radical readjustment of its trajectories seems required.” McCaffery refers to this vocation of poetry outside of poetry as its “parapoetics”. More than blending poetry with other media, as in “intermedia”, parapoetics implies the contamination of non-literary discourses and societal forms with poetry's essentially critical/creative spirit. Thus, in looking to the future of poetry beyond literature, we can expect certain forms of visual poetry to remain highly relevant for poetically engaging society and the largely visual media that suffuse it. On the other hand, as our society and its forms of communication go on evolving together, we should not be surprised to lose sight of poetry even in the new places where we have learned to look for it. The impulse that first led poets to embrace visual materials, at the onset of our

modern media regime, is now urging them to go further, to seek more effective forms in new, unexpected places. To escape the neutralizing and banalizing influence of official culture today, poets may have to disappear off the literary radar screen entirely, jettisoning all but the most essential of their creative/critical tools, to reemerge elsewhere without papers, and begin the search for employment among the unsuspecting architects, legislators, news broadcasters, marketing executives, computer programmers and economists who seem to run our world.

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¹ This article was originally commissioned to accompany an exhibition of artists' books at the Lönström Art Museum in Rauma, Finland: http://www.lonnstromintaidemuseo.fi/kirjahduksia/files%20fin/lisat_fin.html. For a useful scholarly introduction to the world of artists' books, see Johanna Drucker's *The Century of Artists' Books*.

² "Dirty" is a designation often used to proudly distinguish the material range and aesthetic diversity of the generation of visual poets that broke the "clean" stylistic orthodoxy of Swiss concretism.

³ The Italian term for visual poetry, also used to distinguish an important Italian current of visual literary production triggered in the 60's by Lamberto Pignotti and Eugenio Miccini. The movement, which also used the term "*poesia totale*" to describe its approach, was characterized by a highly intermedial practice (relying heavily on found visuals from popular print media) and by an inherently intermedial understanding of language. See for example Adriano Spatolo's "Vers la poesie totale".

⁴ Another term coined to express the practical idea that poetry is a something that can be made of the signifying potentials inherent in any media, this time in the context of a major French movement spawned in the 70s by Julien Blaine and advanced in his vastly inclusive and highly international journal, *DOC(K)S* (1976-2001). The journal is catalogued at http://www.sitec.fr/users/akenatondocks/DOCKS-datas_f/larevue_f/la_revue.html#, and eulogized in the excellent and informative book, *Doc(k)s mode d'emploi*, by Philippe Castellin.

⁵ A pun on Langue D'Oc, the name of a region of France, the term was coined to characterize the widely intermedial language resources used by the poets featured in *DOC(K)S*. During its first long phase, Blaine devoted *DOC(K)S* to gathering visual poetic texts from the various regions of the world (Latin America, Italy, the US, France, Japan, USSR, etc), making the subsequent volumes of the journal invaluable as portraits of the creative networks behind visual poetry in the 70s and 80s.