

Women Concrete Poets Who Pushed Against the Limits of Language (and Patriarchy)

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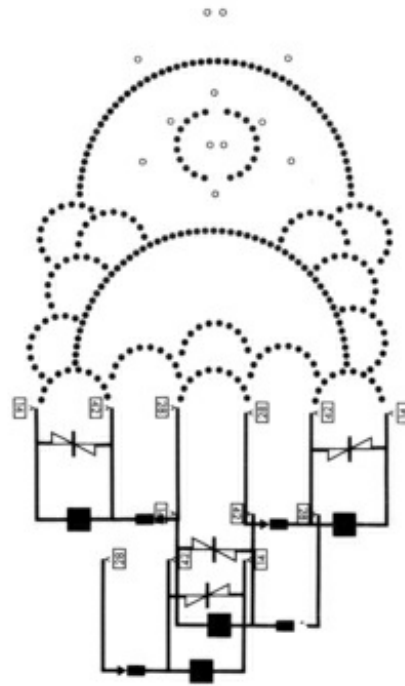
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Lenora de Barros, “Poema” (1979), featured on the cover of *Women in Concrete Poetry: 1959-1979* (Primary Information, 2020), edited by Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la Torre (image courtesy Primary Information)

German-born philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously said that the limits of our language are the limits of our world. Concrete poetry, a transnational movement that materialized in the 1950s, proposed that language was visual, spatial, and physical material: something that could be rolled around with your tongue, that could be seen and felt and tripped on rather than read. This radical approach didn’t free anyone of those fundamental limitations referenced by Wittgenstein, but in challenging semantic convention, it certainly expanded what those limits might look like.

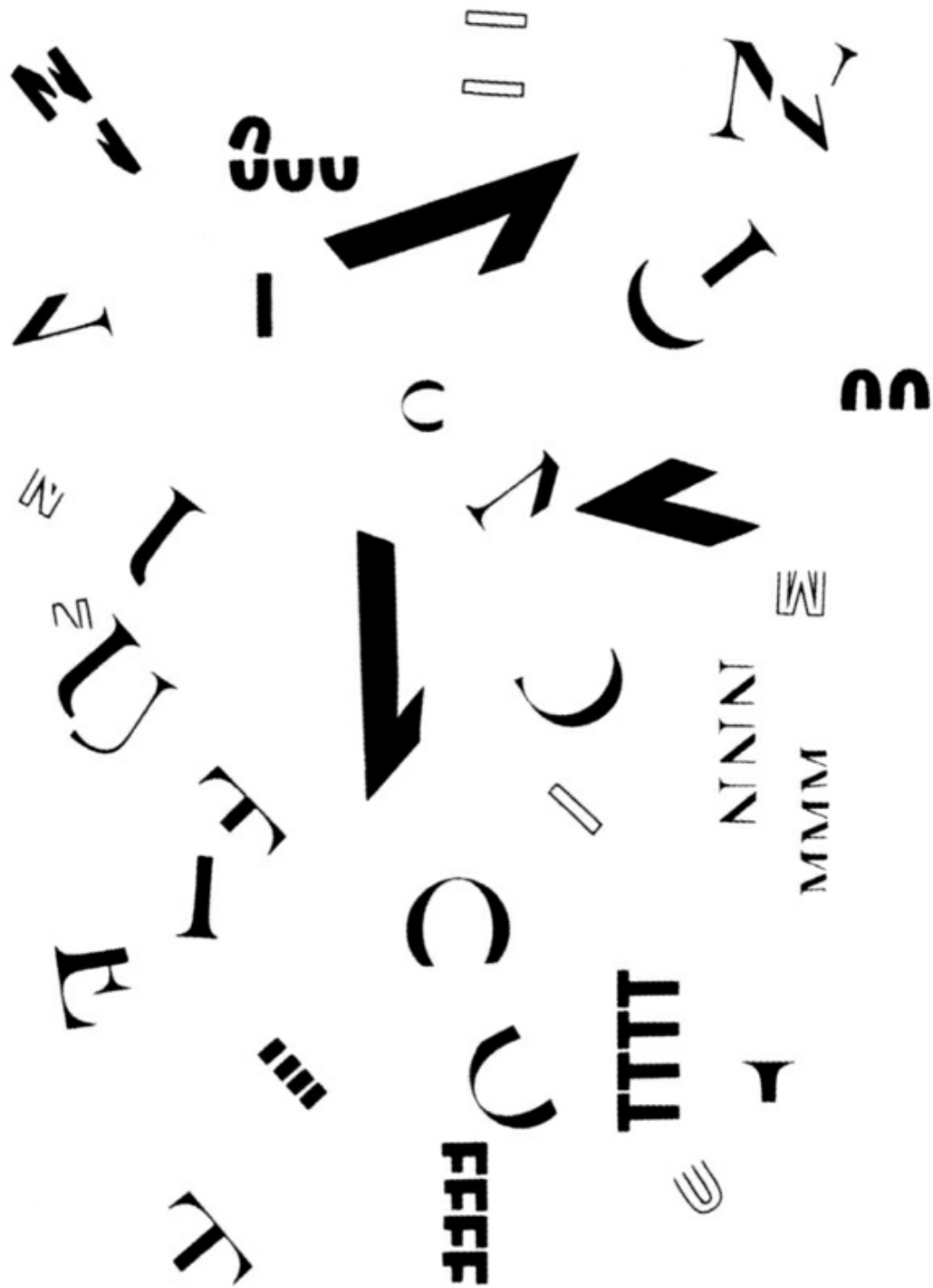
Women in Concrete Poetry: 1959-1979, a new anthology released by Primary Information, coincides with a resurgence of interest in concrete poetry. The past five years have witnessed exhibitions on the topic at institutions like the Getty, the Blanton Museum of Art, and the Badischer Kunstverein — a development likely linked to increased interest in Latin American modernism in the United States and Europe. Around 1953, independent concrete poetry manifestos cropped up virtually simultaneously in Sweden, Switzerland, and Brazil — but it was São Paulo’s Noigandres poets who distinguished themselves as a group and received substantial local recognition at the time, even appearing in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo.



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Liliane Lijn, *Mind Home (Neurographs)*, 1971. Courtesy of Primary Information.

Latin American, European, Slavic, and US poets feature prominently among the anthology’s fifty artist-writers, hyphenates working in fields like performance art, translation, visual art, and graphic design. These poets differed dramatically in their approaches. One of the more performative pieces in the anthology is Lenora de Barros’ “Poema” (1979), in which close-range photographs of a woman’s tongue on a typewriter suggest that writing is an embodied act able to be reimagined by women. Other poems take the structures underlying language to their absurdist extremes, as in Madeline Gins’s “Word Rain” (1969), in which she writes equations like “ $P + A = A(G) + 300W - G$ ” to describe the act of reading. Marzenna Kosińska’s “Od-do, (From-To)” (1978), is a clock that nods to the temporality of reading and writing as the “time” moves between the visually similar words Od (from) and Do (to). While some poems in the book, like the calligrammes, are less conceptually interesting, the anthology is delightful for its sheer range.



Annalisa Alloatti and Mirella Bentivoglio, Monumento (excerpt), 1968. Courtesy of Primary Information.

Women concrete poets are generally lesser known than their male counterparts; one poet, Tomaso Binga, drove the message home when she playfully but pointedly adopted a male name. This new release is a welcome antidote to the bulk of concrete poetry anthologies that focus on men (with an occasional appearance by Mary Ellen Solt, an American poet and editor who compiled one of the first anthologies herself).

Women in Concrete Poetry is indebted to *Materializzazione del Linguaggio* (*Materialisation of Language*), a separatist, all-female exhibition of visual and experimental poetry curated by Mirella Bentivoglio for the 1978 Venice Biennale. The anthology contains one of Bentivoglio's own poems, "Monumento" (1968), made in collaboration with Annalisa Alloatti. In it, a classical-style monument made from the word "MONUMENTO" topples over the course of several frames. As the monument falls apart, so does language itself, with the letters of "Monumento" dismantled, dispersed, and subsequently rearranged by Bentivoglio and Alloatti. These innovative women poets pointedly enact a break from the historicity and homogeneity that can hold language in place, leaving the medium free to take a new form entirely.

Women in Concrete Poetry: 1959-1979 (*Primary Information, 2020*) edited by Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la Torre is available on Bookshop starting October 6.