

# Women in Concrete Poetry 1959–1979

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## Art Books

**This addendum to the history of concrete poetry makes evident the connections between concrete poetry and artist books, while allowing for chance visual connections.**

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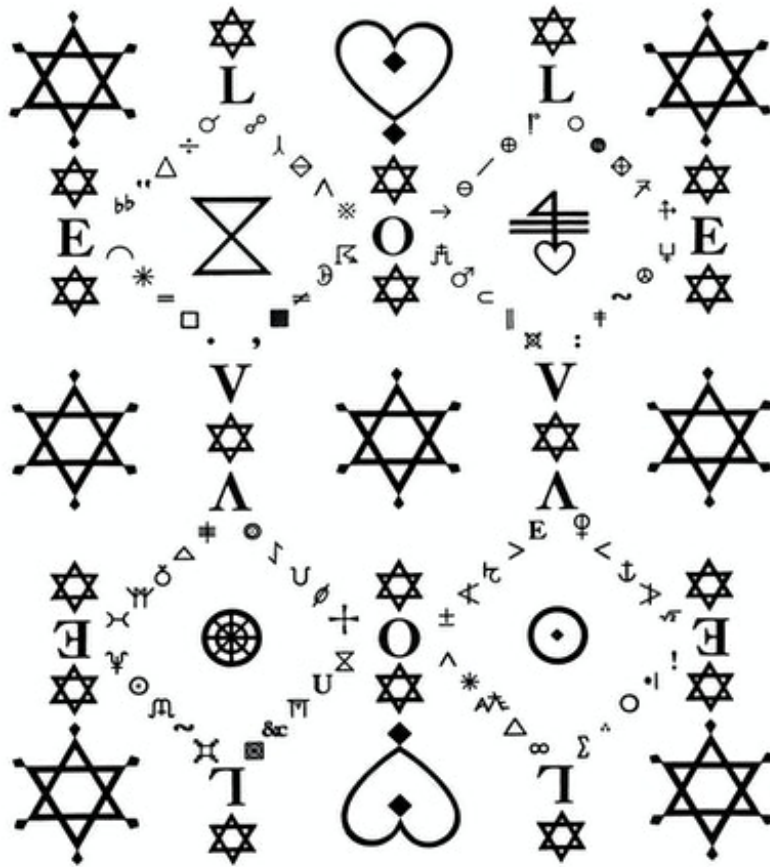


Edited by Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la Torre  
*Women in Concrete Poetry 1959–1979*  
(Primary Information, 2020)

In 1967 Emmett Williams and Something Else Press published the first major international anthology of concrete poetry, which gathered over 300 contributions from over 70 international poets and artists. Out of these, only three women were included, Ilse Garnier, Bohumila Grögerová, and Mary Ellen Solt, of which the first two were represented only by

works made with their male partners. As this moment of historical correction shows, this lack of representation is not unique to concrete poetry or the literary and visual arts. *Women in Concrete Poetry 1959–1979*, is therefore less a collection of work by women, than it is an addendum to the history of concrete poetry that highlights previously unrecognized contributions. Editors Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la Torre situate the anthology in relation to other efforts to bring to light the women poets working in the “verbivocovisual” realm, such as curator Mirella Bentivoglio’s 1978 exhibition *Materializzazione del linguaggio* [Materialization of Language] for the Venice Biennale, devoted entirely to women artists (and whose own poetic works are included in the anthology).

Rather than make any bold claims about women concrete poets, the book instead draws broad through lines between the artistic practices gathered. These include: “activation of the word via sound,” gender equality, and the “tension between the body and the machine,” linguistic experimentation as opposition to state control, activating language in space and poetry as street performance, and evolutions in printing technology. These conceptual and technical interests, as well as the limited time frame of 1959 to ’79, meant to capture “the shift from a focus on the objectification of language in the early concrete program to the materialization of language through bodies that activate the word on and off the page,” frame the otherwise geographically and visually diverse selection of writings by 50 women.



Mary Ellen Solt, *Marriage Poem* (excerpt), 1976.

An anthology necessarily samples, taking work out of its original context and instead placing it in sequence with perhaps unrelated work, in this case organized alphabetically. For the editors of *Women in Concrete Poetry*, this is particular challenge for concrete poetry: “the poets in this volume in fact challenge the autonomy of the individual poem in isolation from its context, proposing instead that the final work is not just the isolated composition on the page, but the publication as a whole.” This emphasis on the whole book as singular idea gestures towards the artist book, as the editors note, “the publication itself constitutes a deliberate intervention into the world of artists’ books.” This is an important

link between concrete poetry and artist books. Many of the artists in the collection, including Madeline Gins, Susan Howe, Agnes Denes, and Mirtha Dermisache, produced works that can be considered artist books.

As much as the anthology format reduces these book-specific works to single pages, it also serves as a means of making surprising visual connections—the chance encounter of poems that appear back-to-back. For example, Denes’s computer-generated piece “HamletFragmented” (1971), which includes just Hamlet’s lines void of articles and prepositions, and Dermisache’s “Diario No. 1 Año 1” (1972). Denes’s work is a multi-page typed text, while Dermisache’s is a painstakingly hand drawn multi-page layout that contains no actual words. But when placed back-to-back, the computer printout at the end of “Hamlet Fragmented,” which lists the required buffer and memory space followed by six columns of numbers, visually leads into Dermisache’s blocks presented in columns that approximate the layout of a newspaper. The redundancy and near illegibility of the sequence of numbers becomes linked by chance with the six columns of the first page of “Diario No. 1 Año 1.” Through this logic of chance, another common aspect of some concrete poetry, other visual resonances emerge, for example, though not back-to-back, between the bureaucratic design of Dermisache’s wordless pages and Mira Schendel’s “Datiloscritos”(1970s). Written in Portuguese, the text about “ARMS RACE/ECONOMIC STAGNATION” and “SPOILAGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT/DEMOGRAPHIC EXPLOSION,” appears in a template that appropriates the visuals of a government form, with small text in boxes and sections left blank. The alphabetical organization allows for broad visual echoes across this range of work.

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Mira Schendel, *Datiloscritos* (excerpt), 1970s.

*Women in Concrete Poetry* asserts, as many previous anthologies and exhibitions of concrete poetry before it have, that concrete poetry does not have a singular definition; instead it is a movement, a loose grouping for artists that use the materiality of language as medium. As the editors note early on:

the women you will encounter in this volume often chose to disengage themselves from the task of making prescriptive pronouncements. Instead, they focused on multiplying the possibilities opened up by attending to language's materiality, and on challenging the very constructs that support the binaries divorcing a poem's physical properties from its more subjective ones.

This resonates with Williams's own assertions about the "movement" of concrete poetry in the introduction to his volume: "Such diversity, reflected in the pages of this anthology, may seem to rob the label 'Concrete' of any concrete meaning whatsoever. On the other hand, it shows the extent to which the dynamic concepts of the new poetry have been accepted as a *Poetics* valid for our time." And in her book *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, published the year after Williams's, Mary Ellen Solt—the only woman in Williams's anthology with a solo contribution, writes simply, "There are now so many kinds of experimental poetry being labeled 'concrete' that it is difficult to say what the word means." She goes on to explain that, "Despite the confusion in terminology, though, there is a fundamental requirement which the various kinds of concrete poetry meet: concentration upon the physical material from which the poem or text is made." *Women in Concrete Poetry* underscores the materiality of *words* with each entry, starting with the cover image from Lenora de Barros's *Poema* (1979), a black-and-white photograph of Barros's tongue running across a keyboard. Concrete poets make visible the otherwise unseen ways in which we consume language in all its multifaceted forms.