

Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la Torre's Women in Concrete Poetry: 1959–1979 by Ted Dodson

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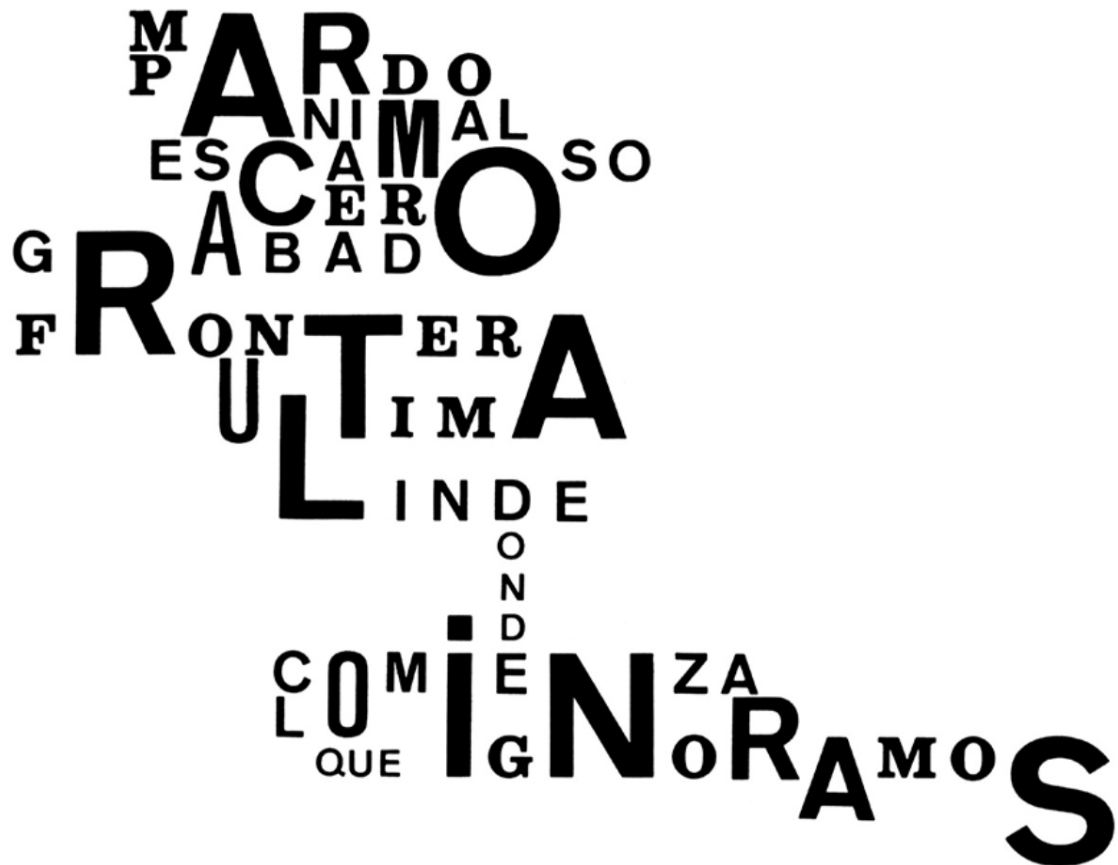


Lenora de Barros, *Poema*, 1979. From *Women in Concrete Poetry*. Courtesy of Primary Information.

(Primary Information, 2020)

Poema (1979) by Lenora de Barros is the de facto alternate title for *Women in Concrete Poetry: 1959–1979*. In the series of images, which occupies the front and back covers and the first few pages of the new anthology, de Barros licks a typewriter's keys, then its typebars, before becoming increasingly ensnared by the typewriter until the final image: The artist is gone, and a tongue of crowded typebars is in her place, mirroring the first image of the series, a shot of the artist's lolling mouth. This series, like much of what is

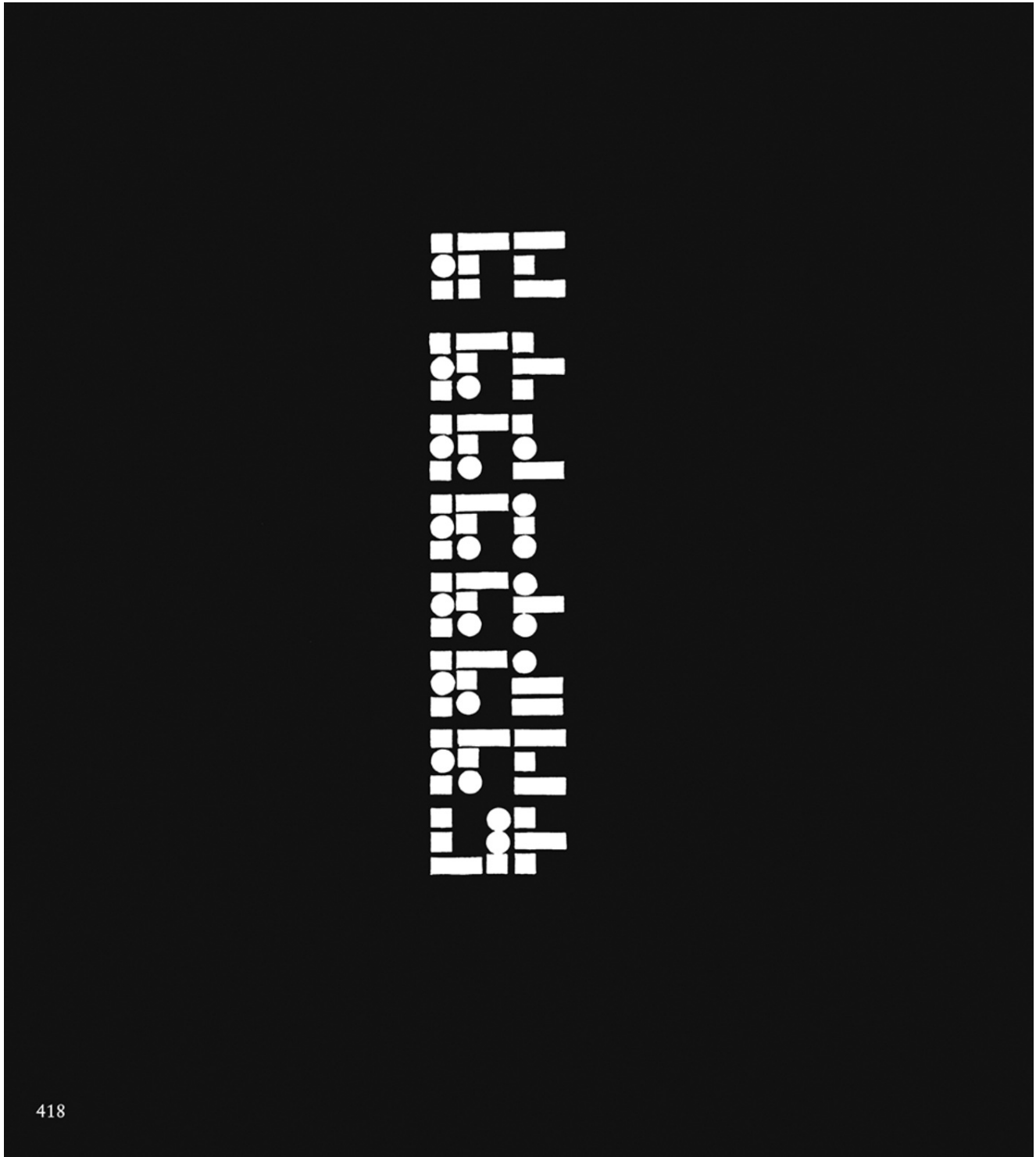
considered “concrete,” could belong to any number of arts: It is photographic, it is narrative, and it is performative. But de Barros is specific in her determination of what it is. *Poema*.



Amanda Berenguer, *Composición de lugar* (excerpt), 1976.

In a 2013 interview, Mirella Bentivoglio—the 1978 exhibition of *poesia vivisa* she curated, *Materializzazione del linguaggio*, is the separationist inspiration for *Women in Concrete Poetry*—came to the same conclusion about her artistic practice, which spans text, sculpture, performance, and video: “If I have to sum up my various bodies of work in one word, I will choose the word *poetry*.” To conceive of poetry as self-determined not only yields the most expansive definition for what poetry is but also invariably reckons with how and why something would be imagined as such instead of simply brushing one thing or another aside in retrospective disqualification. There is undeniable equitability coupled with a necessary onus of responsibility in a sweeping validation of what says *this is* when eliminating *this isn't*. This “sense of reflexivity,” as editors Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la

Torre term it in their adroit preface, is suffuse in *Women in Concrete Poetry*. “...we perceive in concrete poetry,” the editors write, “... an epistemology that considers how information is produced, circulates, and is transformed.”

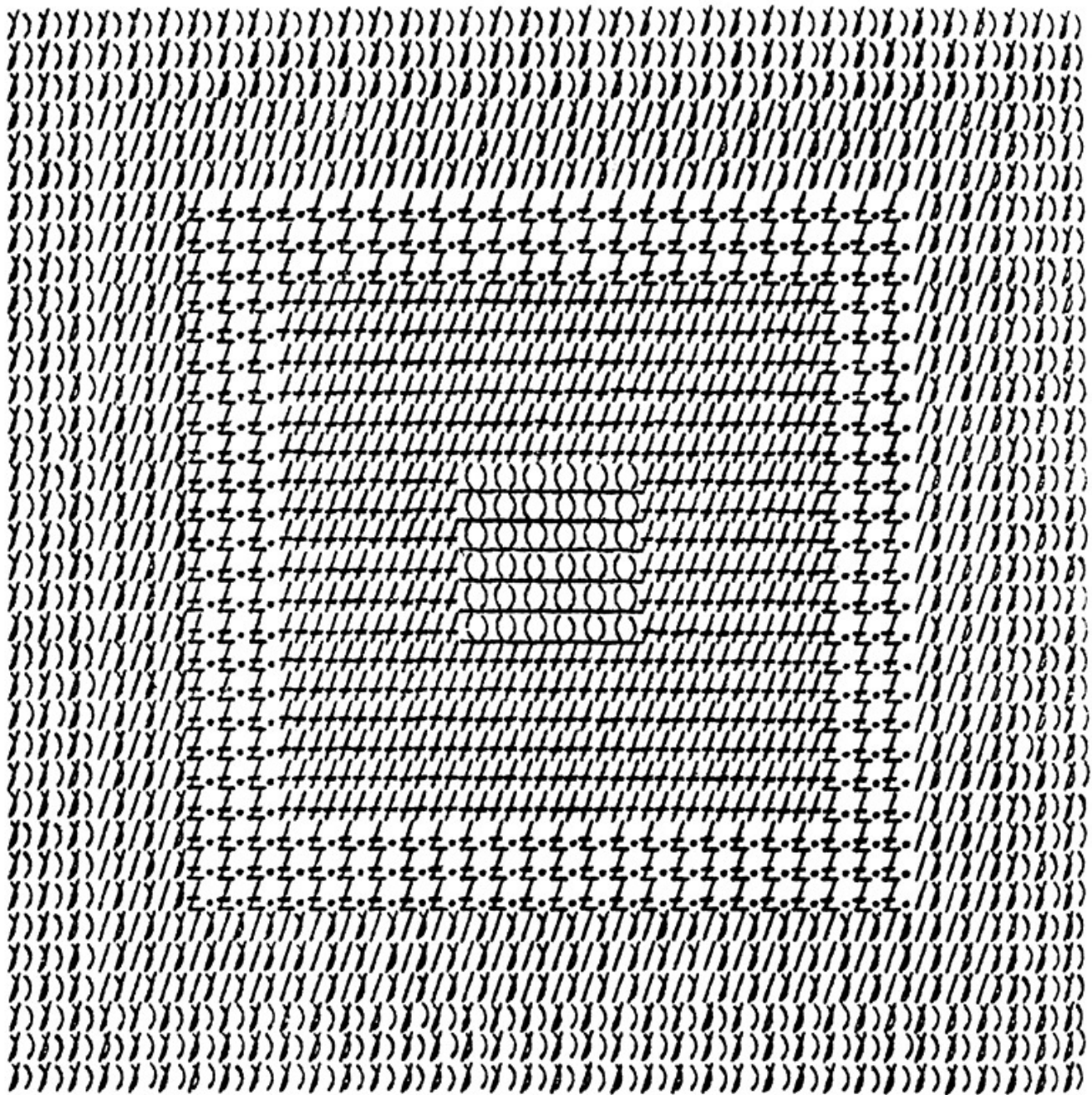


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Hannah Weiner, *Signal Flag Poems* (excerpt), 1970.

The common denominator among the many definitions of concrete poetry has been, unironically, concrete’s capaciousness to include all varieties of visual, text, performance, and sonic arts. And perhaps that’s what is so historic about *Women in Concrete Poetry*.

Balgiu and de la Torre gather a portion of Bentivoglio's original coterie, though there's a substantial expansion away from European centers to include writers and artists from the Americas, including de Barros, Amanda Berenguer, Madeline Gins, Susan Howe, Rosmarie Waldrop, and Hannah Weiner. Each of their bodies of work marks a distinct iteration of what could be considered concrete—typesetting experiments in semantic obliteration, diegetic deconstructions, archival assemblages, synesthetic automatism—but this is a classification after the fact. The work is first and foremost self-described as poetry. There are some face-value correspondences with these poems and other concrete work, but they are here less for their aesthetic and formal similarities and more their functions as largely instructive of a poetry of diachronic engagement. More simply, they are poems whose reading requires language be comprehended as disclosing of a history rather than being a point in one. What is concrete then, by extension, is the editorial work of Balgiu and de la Torre, a preliminary induction of a liberatory, Feminist epistemology rather than a means of organizing a field's notable figures across a period of time. A canon can always be elaborated, the easy scaffold of hegemony propping it up, but it's entirely different to strike out former lingering ideas of mediation and to renew the possibilities of a history in its place.



Amelia Etlinger, *Untitled*, 1971.

In 2013, Primary Information, *Women in Concrete Poetry*'s publisher, reissued what is considered one of concrete poetry's foundational texts, Emmett Williams's *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (Something Else Press, 1967). This anthology ends with a post-scriptural "To Be Continued." I can't be exactly sure whether this was expressing a hunch concrete poetry would continue to develop (it has) and Williams's book would require addendums, an invitation for others to amend work Williams was aware of being incomplete (it was, though I can't attest to any awareness), or whether this was a concrete poem in and of itself, a plastic gesture repurposing a torn bit of narrative language and leveraging its ubiquity into the realm of visual artifact. As for the latter, the only evidence is

context. If it were to be considered as such, it could be that book's only actionable endowment. A continuation of a concrete methodology, as Balgiu and de la Torre have evinced in their new anthology, is more an open-ended gallery than a list of loose genre adherents, that the monolith of patriarchy—and those of other regressive supremacy for that matter—shows itself to be brittle and insubstantive against what anyone can call a poem.

Ted Dodson is the author of *An Orange* (Pioneer Works / Wonder, 2021) and *At the National Monument / Always Today* (Pioneer Works, 2016). He is BOMB's Director of Circulation and a contributing literature editor. He is also an editor-at-large for Futurepoem and a former editor of *The Poetry Project Newsletter*.