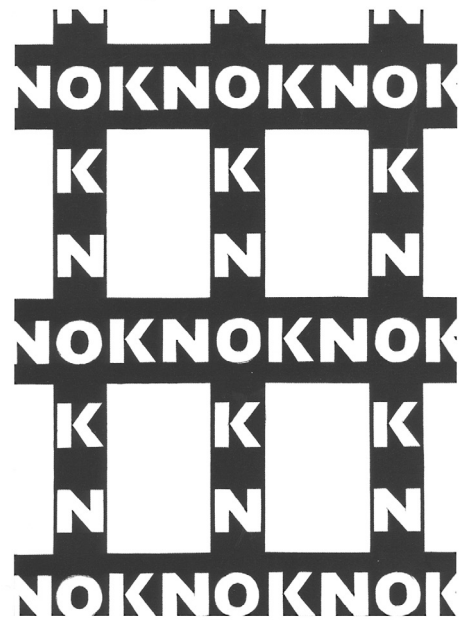


WOMEN IN CONCRETE POETRY: 1959-1979

Edited by Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la Torre
Primary Information (\$30)



Okno, 1971 by Barbara Kozłowska
from *Women in Concrete Poetry: 1959-1979*

Women in Concrete Poetry: 1959-1979 is—to mix masonries—a brick of a book. It weighs over two pounds, and it's worth its weight. Most of its nearly 500 pages of coated paper feature crisp reproductions (some color) of an enlightening array of visual literature by women from the heyday of concrete poetry.

While women contributed regularly to experimental magazines and exhibitions of concrete work, they were woefully under-represented in the canonical anthologies. Emmett Williams's *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967), a selection from 72 poets, included only three who were

women; in Mary Ellen Solt's *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (1969), of 75 contributors, only five were women. This new setting straight of the record is overdue and welcome.

In their short, smart introduction, editors Alex Balgiu (a Parisian graphic designer) and Mónica de la Torre (a poet, translator, and academic based in Brooklyn) explain that they were inspired by a show at the Venice Biennale in 1978, *Materializzazione del linguaggio*. Although it's now considered landmark, the show opened “months after the Biennale's official opening in July—only after feminist groups threat-

ened to stage protests about the fact that, among the approximately 150 artists in that edition of the exhibition, only a handful of women were included.” The show's curator, artist Mirella Bentivoglio (1922-2017), explained her intentions in her catalogue essay: “Obviously women aren't the only ones engaged in this work, but they do have double the motivation for engaging in the discourse: in the past they've been rendered immaterial . . . by the 'abstract sublimity' of their public image, paralleled by their public absence; privately confined to daily, exclusive contact with the material world, women are now using every fiber of their beings to oppose a world rendered unreal . . . by repetitive mechanisms.”

Not only was the Venice Biennale show innovative in having only women, it relied on an unusually capacious, inclusive definition of concrete poetry, as much the Russian Futurist Kamensky's wild “Ferro-Concrete” as the constrained “Concrete” theorized by Gomringer and the Noigandres

Group. It's a curatorial stance enlarged on in *Women in Concrete Poetry*. “Here we present works by fifty women who may not have identified themselves as concrete poets,” the editors write. “In the first place, the label could have seemed narrow given the myriad approaches to the word-image question, and not precise enough to mean any one thing. Furthermore, some of these women worked on the periphery of the main concrete-poetry circuits, although they shared similar concerns.” As a result, all sorts of visual poetry are on display: pictorial, typographic, typewriter, handwritten, asemic, symbolic, collage, and mixes thereof.

For her show in 1978, Bentivoglio had chosen work made by artists in her own network, Europeans from the adventurous generation of second-wave feminist writers and language artists. *Women in Concrete Poetry* extends the selection geographically: “We've picked up the threads of Bentivoglio's *Materializzazione*,” the editors write, “represent-

ing some of the figures in the constellations she traced and expanding them to include women who were working outside the European milieus during the late 1960s and '70s." So, in addition to the Western Europeans who predominated in *Materializzazione*, we have artists here from Eastern Europe and South and North America. They're arranged alphabetically; some get ten pages, some just one or two. A few are famous now (Mira Schendel, Mirtha Dermisache, Ana Hatherly, Agnes Denes), and their selections demonstrate how good they were even back then; but most, despite also logging years of artistic productivity, are less well known. Among the book's great delights are elegant pieces by under-acknowledged Eastern Europeans like Marzenna Kosińska and Barbara Kozłowska from Wrocław and Tamara Janković from Belgrade.

As a uniquely international literary genre, visual poetry has always had a special obligation to, or at any rate a problematic relationship with, translation. Sometimes, translating concrete work is superfluous, the original being cross-culturally self-explanatory, but often enough it's indispensable. Unfortunately, non-English visual literature is frequently reproduced un-translated, as if the picture and the concept mattered, but not the writing. The editors of *Women in Concrete Poetry* are therefore to be commended for including translations wherever appropriate and possible, and inventive ones at that. Long texts from Ry Nikonova's Russian and Mira Schendel's Portuguese are especially appreciated.

The book's only lapse is its failure to supply adequate information on the sources of the selections. Where exactly did these presumably reprinted pieces appear originally? Where and what else did these poets publish or exhibit? A few details can be gleaned from some of the bios at the back, but the book needs a bibliography (though interested readers can consult Kathleen McCullough's massive *Concrete Poetry: An Annotated, International Bibliography* (1989), where about half the artists in this anthology have listings). That aside, *Women in Concrete Poetry: 1959-1979* is a great success, a really enjoyable and inspiring album. It's also a salutary reminder of overlooked work that politically elaborated and stylistically extended modern visual literature.

— M. Kasper

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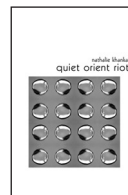
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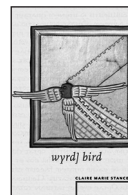
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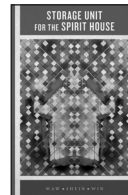


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