

Mónica de la Torre on Women in Concrete Poetry: 1959-1979

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January 8, 2021



Interview with Mónica de la Torre on *Women in Concrete Poetry: 1959-1979*

by Chime Lama

Adding to the great efforts of anthologizing concrete poetry undertaken by Emmett Williams, Mary Ellen Solt, Victoria Bean, and Chris McCabe, among others, Mónica de la Torre and Alex Balgiu's latest work gives us another collection of breathtaking poems by concrete poets around the word. In order to shed light on the context of and motivations for this anthology, Professor Mónica de la Torre has graciously agreed to answer the following questions.

Chime Lama: Why choose the time frame 1959-1979? Was there something notable about the concrete poetry produced during that time?

Mónica de la Torre: The earliest work in the anthology is from 1959, the latest from 1979, but the dates are not entirely coincidental. One of concrete poetry's foundational manifestos, the "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry" by the Brazilian Noigandres Group, formed by the brothers Haroldo and Augusto de Campos and Décio Pignatari, is from 1958. Eugen Gomringer's "From Line to Constellation," another seminal text, is from 1954. Once they realized they were venturing into similar territories, Gomringer and the Noigandres Group agreed to call their formal experiments concrete poetry. Suzanne Bernard's works in our anthology, gorgeously hand-drawn constellations of syllables and letter forms strewn about the page, are from the book *Poèmes*, published in 1959. She was based in Paris, and Lettrism and Situationism would have informed her writing more than the early concrete poems of Gomringer and the Brazilians. In the autobiographical text *Le temps des cigales* (The Time of Cicadas, 1975), Bernard describes a moment of reading in which "words suddenly became silent, their meaning floating away in the distance, but my eyes remained irresistibly attached to the characters, there had been a tiny stimulus, like a door that opens, and closes, a flash of light, a little patch of empty blue ... and soon the words, these tiny masses of black signs, stopped forming continuous, enclosed figures, they were nothing but the envelope, the encounter of living cells, active, in perpetual vibration. ... I genuinely experienced white space, the signs, reading suddenly becoming a concrete operation, a form of auscultation of thoughts ... freed thoughts, meaning, all lights turned off ... meaning from which only a waning trail remains. ..." (Alex Balgiu, co-editor of the volume, translated Bernard's excerpt.) It's interesting that Bernard uses the word *concrete* in personal terms, but not necessarily in relation to the movement. The latest series of works in the book, typewritten phrases including the word *corps* (body) alongside minimal geometrical forms, are from Ilse Garnier's *Blason du corps féminin* (The Female Body's Coat of Arms, 1979). She and her husband Pierre Garnier were frequent collaborators. They founded Spatialism, an inclusive movement that embraced visual poetry, sound poetry, concrete poetry, permutational poetry, etc. We decided to stop at 1979 for the sake of consistency, wanting to foreground an engagement with language as material that involved manual typesetting and dry transfer lettering (Letraset). By the 1980s, desktop computing completely transforms the way in which type is handled and therefore the composition process as well.

CL: Why is it important to focus on women concrete poets? Do they have a history of underrepresentation, and if so, why?

MT: Very few women were included in the major anthologies of concrete poetry. In the context of the U.S., there are two: Emmett Williams' *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (Something Else Press, 1967) and Mary Ellen Solt's *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Indiana University Press, 1968). Solt's gorgeous concrete poems of flowers are represented, as well as collaborations between Ilse and Pierre Garnier and the Czech poets Bohumila Grögerová and Josef Hiršal, who were also a couple. Oddly, a lot of the women in our book were close to the

movement's prominent figures too, such as Jennifer Pike and Paula Claire, close collaborators of the British poet Bob Cobbing, or Giulia Niccolai, whose partner in life and poetry was the poet Adriano Spatola, with whom she ran two important publishing endeavors: the journal *Tam Tam*, and the publishing house Edizioni Geiger in the 1970s. Besides resulting from the obvious workings of the patriarchy, women's underrepresentation might have been related to the fact that some of the earlier exhibitions and anthologies helped disseminate ideas that only later would take hold in the imaginations of a wider circle of practitioners. The early advocates of the movement were part of identifiable constellations working in Brazil, the U.S., the U.K., and other European countries. But once their ideas had attained a certain amount of visibility, they were simply in the air, and one didn't have to be an official member of the concrete poetry movement to compose works in that vein.

A key figure for us is the Italian artist and poet Mirella Bentivoglio. Her indefatigable efforts to connect women working at the intersection of word and image led her to curate fourteen women-only exhibitions between 1971 and 1981 in Italy and abroad. One such exhibition was *Materializzazione del linguaggio* (Materialization of Language), which she curated for the Venice Biennale of 1978. It featured the work of over eighty women artists working primarily with either *poesia visiva* (including text and images, often collaged) and/or concrete poetry (concentrating on the visuality of typography and writing and the sonic properties of words). Her work provided us with a map whose boundaries we expanded so as to include the work of women outside the European networks that she focused on.

We felt the need to present a more accurate representation of the poetry that was engaging language's material properties at the time. So many women were incorporating typography, handwriting, and graphic space as part of the poem's syntax—and were doing so critically in an attempt not only to arrive at formal innovations but also to articulate a radical politics and a feminist critique. When I was beginning to work on this book a very knowledgeable friend dared me to come up with the names of more than three women concrete poets. It delights me that there are around forty of them in this book that he didn't know about.

Mirella Bentivoglio's formulations still strike me as relevant. In the catalogue for *Materializzazione* she writes: "Mark-making and handwriting follow the circuits of memory, opening the floodgates to create intriguing maps of the energetic tensions presiding over the formation of thought before it's crystallized into verbal articulation. ... Writing-space and sound-time (sound-tempo) recreate the previously unified entity under the sign of a strangely interwoven rhythm." In this era of heightened dissociation and disembodiment, I welcome her emphasis on writing that returns language to the body and that minds the body of language.

CL: How does an editor know when an anthology is complete or, rather, when to cease collecting work?

MT: The work is never finished. Thankfully editorial parameters are determined by the availability of certain resources: mainly, time and money. The book was scheduled to go to print on July 1. Once the novel coronavirus entered the picture, we had to work with what we had. That was that.

CL: Did you encounter any unforeseen limitations or challenges in the making of this anthology?

MT: Does the pandemic count?

CL: It certainly does.

MT: I was hoping to track down more women working in Canada, Latin America, and the Caribbean, but with shutdowns everywhere, it simply became impossible to visit libraries and research centers. Not everything can be found online, and, expectedly, inequality in representation is reproduced online as well. Regardless I'm not sure I would've found much.

CL: Concrete poetry, which began to take shape in the 1950s, engages the latest technology that a poet can get her hands on. How do you think the computer, with its easy access to design software, has affected this literary art form?

MT: I am surprised by the limited ways in which poets continue to present their work on the page now given that, more than ever, there are so many tools at one's disposal. Beyond composing directly on the computer with design programs such as InDesign, for instance, there are a variety of printing technologies that make it easier to produce one's own publications, from good old inkjet printers to Risographs. The creative process does not need to restrict itself to writing only. It can incorporate production and distribution of the work as well. Possibilities seem endless, with video, social media, and new forms of sociality made possible by technology. ... It can be overwhelming to stray from traditional paths. Then again, isn't that the magic of poetry? A brilliant line break is all you need to turn a sentence into verse.

CL: Yes, I too find that the conventions of writing are hard to break, despite the limitless opportunities for experimentation. On that note, would you please offer aspiring concrete poets some advice on how to break their conventional writing habits?

MT: I'd love to hear what you have to say about this, Chime, since your approach to composition works *against* habit. You seem to find a different formal solution to the set of issues thematized in each of your works. That's a sure way to proceed. I'd recommend minding your materials. Avoid top-down composition, forcing words to behave the way you want them to. Activate them by collaborating with them, with the page, with sound, with silence. Acknowledge the agency of all of your materials: listen to them, take in their forms, their sounds, their history—the ways others use them. And make room for others to engage

with your work on their own terms. I know this may sound really abstract and thus hard to implement. All I can say is that I know I'm on the right track when I'm able to keep an open mind, when I surrender to the process and stop fetishizing results.

CL: Yes, when working with your materials leads you to unexpected places, I believe you're on the right track.

Deepest gratitude to Professor de la Torre for her time and wisdom.