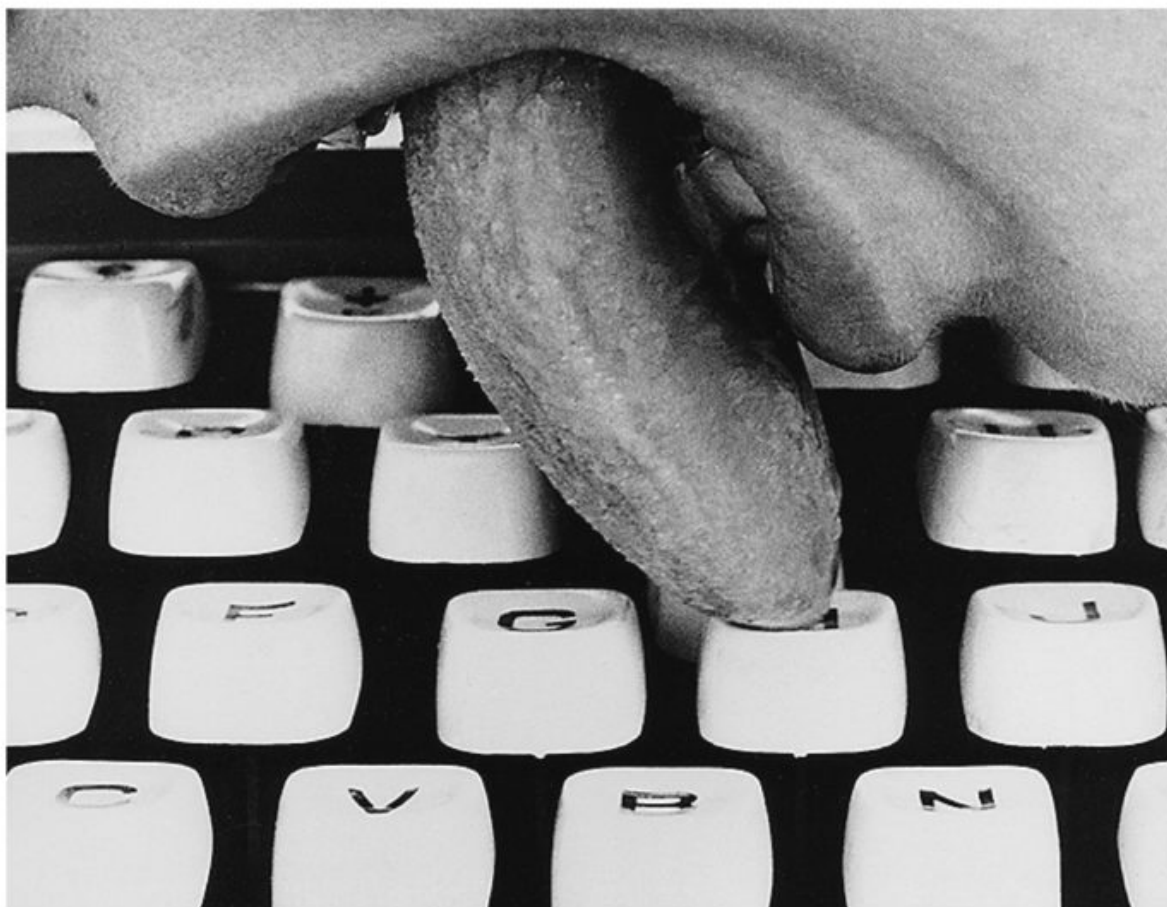


Endless Constellations: On “Women in Concrete Poetry 1959–1979”

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By Theadora Walsh



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ON THE FRONT COVER of the recently published *Women in Concrete Poetry 1959–1979*, a fat tongue with pronounced papillae strikes a typewriter's H key. It's the tongue of the artist Lenora de Barros in her work *Poema* (1979). The image-poem casts her tongue as language — a living, embodied language. It's language represented as a form of life, as Wittgenstein characterizes it in *Philosophical Investigations*.

In the anthology, co-editors Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la Torre cast a porous net to gather 50 artists, poets, performance artists, writers, and activists affiliated with concrete poetry. If the definition “specific, definite” is applied to the word concrete, it becomes apparent that the word, itself, is not concrete. It's also a building material, the fine agglutination of macerated rocks. It can suggest the quality of being succinct, and it refers to a known clarity. But it depends on the context.

“Alex [Balgiu] and I,” reflects Mónica de la Torre, “realized that part of the practice of concrete poetry consists of defining what concrete poetry is. You can't be a concrete poet without investigating the term.”

While the anthology commits to keeping the meaning of concrete poetry in flux, the editors — a poet and a graphic designer in their own right — also had to struggle with resolving a definition. Broadly, they settled on, “any writerly practice that is underscoring the visual or sonic components of language activated in a direction to, or at least in tension with, their semantic charge — that is concrete poetry.” By weaving and collaging poems from disparate geographic origins and entwining various artistic movements, new definitions of the genre are given the freedom to percolate.

The editors situate their collection in the lineage of *Materializzazione del linguaggio*, the first historical retrospective of women's art ever mounted at the Venice Biennial (1978), which was organized by concrete poet, artist, and holder of various other creative identifiers Mirella Bentivoglio. Featuring over 80 women from across Europe, the exhibition attended to the materiality of text, placing thematic emphasis on the subjectivity of language. She argued that visual poetry entailed a distinct femininity by illustrating the way language can function as a form of self-expression and, simultaneously, a site of alienation.

The editors mark Bentivoglio's *Materializzazione* and her constellation of concrete and visual poets as an orientating locus, from which they expanded to include women who were working outside the European milieus during the late 1960s and '70s.

In the '60s and '70s, lettraset, mimeographs, and portable duplication techniques became commonplace technologies. For the first time, artists, poets, and designers were able to easily produce typographical texts. Letraset's rub-down Instant lettering, for example, allowed

typefaces to be manipulated by hand. Visual styles which had always implied professionalism or authority could be torn up, done cheap, and repurposed. Type took on a new materiality.

“When you look at the publications from which we drew,” says de la Torre, “It’s a bit of a shock to realize how various they are. The writing felt inextricable from its support. The concrete poem was the thing that you hold in your hands, and not the content poured onto the page.”

Transposing poems that so explicitly underscore their visual qualities into an anthology presented a challenge in assembling *Women in Concrete Poetry*. Context underscores meaning in concrete poetry — the work of art is as much the letters that comprise it as the empty spaces, the qualities of the paper on which it sits, the margins of the book.

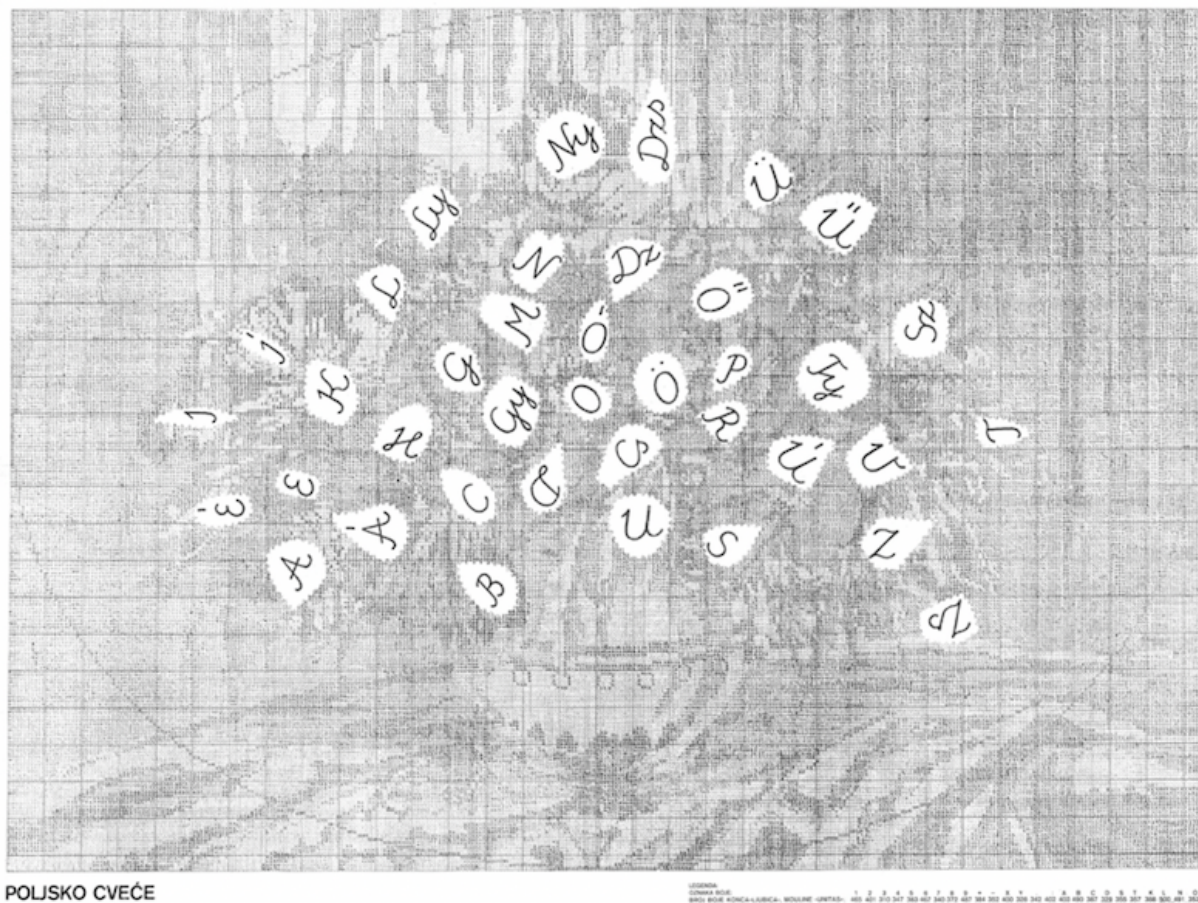
“Eventually,” says de la Torre, “The approach was to be as unobtrusive as possible.” This comes through, the margins change from page to page, the typefaces are various, and each poem is reproduced in its original colors, left to convey its original sense of scale. By placing biographies in the back and keeping para-textual information to an absolute minimum, the works collected in *Women in Concrete Poetry* are left to form unexpected associations and intimacies.

Many concrete poems tap into meaning rooted in spatial dimensions of language. In the compositions of Japanese poet Chima Sunada, for example, context is a central to her sculptural language poems. Unitary characters become social actors in her minimal arrangements. Her work focuses attention on the “true or supposed pictographic etymologies” of words, reflects Bentivoglio, when curating Sunada in the 1987 *Arti visive*. *Poesia Viviva* show in Rome.

Take Sunada’s *Loneliness Doesn’t Betray* — a poem made up of loneliness and pleasure, literally. A rectangular grid of the Japanese character for “loneliness” is hollowed out by a circular expanse of empty space, in which, inscribed and isolated, sits “pleasure.” If combined, the characters for loneliness and pleasure would mean “top,” but, they are held apart, always just failing to signify their combined meaning. Sunada captures the tension between the way in which something is expressed and what it expresses, and she does so with perfect efficiency.

material word.” The idea of “a material word,” an object capable of speaking, may have been theoretical for these architects — but it fit well with contemporaneous definitions of the subjugated woman’s body.

In her work, Katalin Ladik insists on being a speaking, thinking, sounding “object.” Born in Novi Sad, Serbia, in 1942, Ladik breaks through the architectural to make room for the sensual. *Wildflowers* (1978) is a gridded system, in which a pixelated binary gives the impression of an ornate houseplant, is cut up by free floating letters. Each lingual unit becomes its own flower, crudely mapped on the image, engaged in the labor of interrupting the blueprint-like background’s rigid form. Here language, presented not as a signifier but as a picture, disrupts knowledge. It spells out nothing.



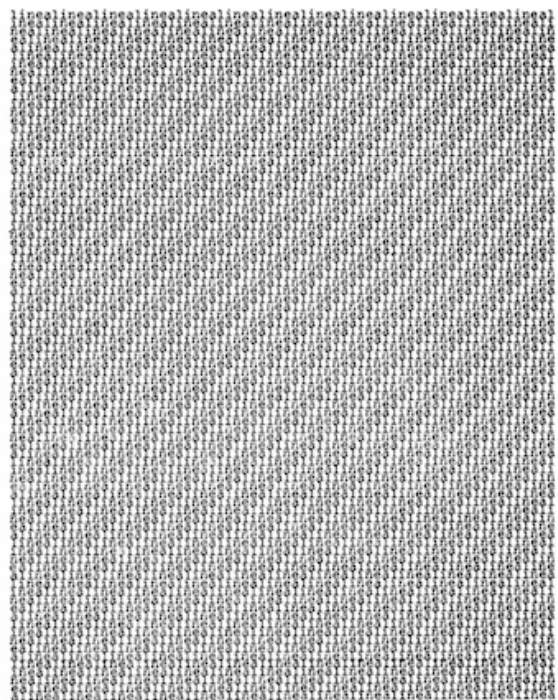
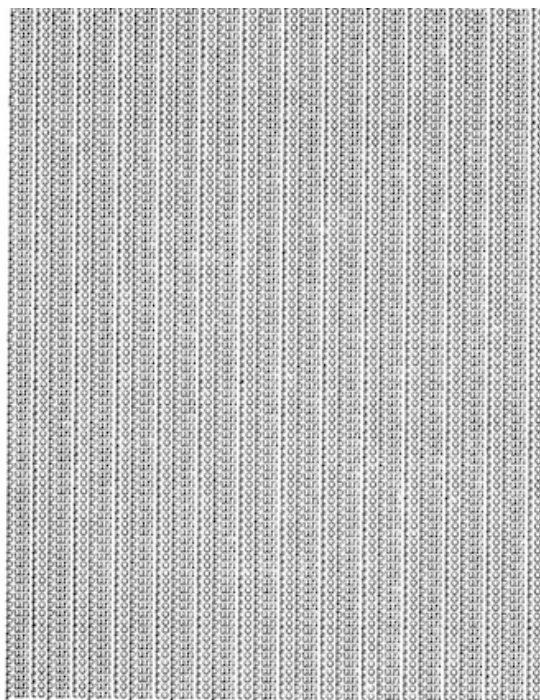
Katalin Ladik, “Wildflowers” (1978)

In the 20th century, it became widely possible for ordinary people to make language without sound, to speak without the mouth. Ladik, would have been sensitive to this peculiarity, as she worked for radio Novi Sad, where she produced multilingual works that involved collage-based graphic scores for many years. There, she often used the sonic resonances of her body as an instrument of composition. Hendrik Folkerts, curator of *documenta 14*, writes that during Ladik’s performances the language of her body takes central presence: “we hear: the

voice. It vibrates, shrieks, rotates, comes from the head, the throat, the belly — all the high and low tones.” The same can be seen in her concrete poems, which seem to sound themselves intrinsically rather than take instruction from external systems.

Concrete poetry manages to be guttural despite the silence of its medium. Born in Istanbul in 1920, Betty Danon moved to Milan in 1956, changed her name, and got interested in Jungian symbology. In her poetry, a sort of hypnotic hum seems to emanate from minimal arrangements of symbols. The composition of the page stands in for sound, perhaps tapping into an archaic collective unconscious — as Jung would have it.

Concrete poems often force a decision between experiencing words as language or as image. In Danon’s *Punto Linea* the choice hovers above the page, oscillating like the needle of a lie detector. *Punto*, meaning point or period in Italian, is presented in gridded repetition beside another rectangular block of the word *linea*, meaning line. If strung together the words would mean “straight line.” However, the language is difficult to read, the margins are tight, and the text is placed in a compact mesh. Language comes unattached from its role as a simple signifier and is instead animated in a kind of lingual motion.



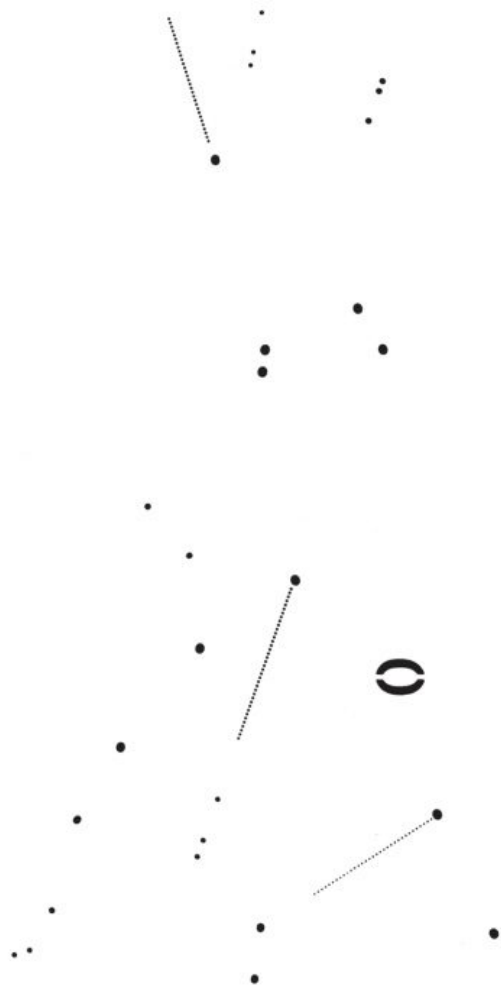
Betty Danon, “Punto Linea” (excerpt), 1976

Many concrete poems — because they are situated between image and language — are difficult, or impossible to translate. *Punto Linea* has countless potential translations. And so, this multiplicity is conveyed by the editors simply by withholding translation, a choice they often made in the anthology. In these cases, the poem retains its structural opacity and is gazed upon as an image. Lingual dimensions of the poem, like Danon’s play on *punto* and *linea*, are there for those who care to put in the effort to uncover them.

The Italian poet Giovanna Sandri is also left untranslated. Working with only portions of letters — an E's central tier or the new-moon portion of a semicolon, her use of fractured text rarely converges to create meaning.

Sandri's work articulates a formal relationship to letters that exists outside of any language. Her arrangements on the page suggest rhythms and cadences that activate sonic landscapes always already present in letters. Words float around, possible syllables hinge on geographic arrangements of the page, but this is provisional. Thinking about the task of translating a-semantic poems such as Sandri's, de la Torre remarks that, "the translations are just one articulation of the poem, there are endless constellations of letters with numerous other articulations."

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The alphabet has a lunar origin, Sandri says, “the rhythm/gesture so sacred to all knowledge is recorded in the forest of Psyche, rendered in letters.” The scale of her fragmented glyphs suggests a density of language. Her poems are minimal the way that the Hubble telescope’s photographs of galaxies are minimal — each component seems to pulsate with bound potential, with endless reserves of possible meaning.

Better known for her land art than her concrete poems, Agnes Denes is included as a testament to the editors' expansive view. And, despite entering cultural consciousness as the woman who planted a wheat field in the landfill beneath the World Trade Center, Denes considers herself a poet. Born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1931, Denes has focused on drawing out analytical presuppositions present in visual forms. In her own words, Denes characterizes her Visual Philosophy drawings as "a new language of seeing and knowing: a summation and dramatization of new associations and analogies." [1]

She often returns to the pyramid as an organizing principle. By reproducing the pyramid in a variety of styles, de la Torre notices that Denes "is trying to visualize an epistemological system." *Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space–Map Projections* (1973–'79), drawings that attach a representation of the earth to geometric forms, can be read as a series of concrete poems, in which a system of representing information is structured by a pictorial form.

The anthology includes just one work by Denes, an excerpt of *Hamlet*, reinscribed in monotype. Denes reverses the text, creating a typed mirror image. She analyzes it, assigning each line a numeral which can be used to present associated data points. In one portion of Shakespeare's text, the word "same" was repeated 11 times — the word "how," 10. The Great Male Art becomes a collection of analytics in her deft revision.

Denes's desire, to make language affect material presence, has now been realized by software and the age of scripted coding, in which language commands can be executed to affect virtual structures and operations. There is a new omnipresence to language's capacity to direct knowledge.

After 1979, the last date of work this anthology covers, emphasis on form, material context, and visual qualities of text found in concrete poetry moved to early feminist digital art. Take, for example, Argentinian poet Ana Maria Uribe's *Anipoems* (1997–2000). Anipoems are simple monochromatic animations of "typography and motion, in that order." A visual poet who used electronic means, Uribe manipulated an early version of flash to distort letters in real time: animating simple adjustments in their form. In keeping with the tradition of concrete poetry, her animations convey the embodied properties of language.

The substance of her poems, their communicative power, lies in the movement of letters. The importance of word choice disappears as attention is placed on semantic qualities of the pictorial. For example, in *Primavera* the letters "q" and "p" are layered in sequence to build verdant columns that grow in infinite loop. It's a simple gesture, but the absence and regeneration is effective in conveying the symbiological potential of the letters.

One could also look at Allison Parrish. A digital artist and educator who created @everyword, a Twitter bot designed to tweet every word in the English language. It ran from 2007 to 2014 spitting out one word every half hour. Parrish describes this project as the creation of "digital objects." Certain words went viral, receiving hundreds of responses and shares. "Yuck" and "Weed" were especially popular. Often people claimed ownership over these "digital-object"

words by retweeting them or commenting “same” or “mood.” Parrish’s work demonstrates that once a word becomes a digital material, it takes on multiple meanings as its context is broken open across thousands of personalized Twitter streams.

The advent of portable typography in the ’60s and ’70s allowed new images of manipulated text to be created and circulated easily. The internet, word processors, and HTML scripts that followed made text editing a daily practice. Now, unfortunately, seamless web design has come to dominate the web’s aesthetic. Text often appears GIF-ified as stickers pinned to Instagram stories or entombed in the ubiquitous emoji form. The proliferation of styles which characterized the early days of the digital technology — when people made personal websites for their dogs, participated in forums, or shared messy and made-by-hand compositions — is a rare encounter.

Any given artist included in *Women in Concrete Poetry 1959–1979* could fill volumes with their work and endless inquiries into language, form, feminism, embodiment, and technology. As a whole, the anthology proves the liberating potential which pours out of language once it is engaged as a structure. Grouped as a collective, this generation of women illustrate a radical blueprint for intervention that artists and poets might consider when making language in our contemporary context.

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