

But Is It Concrete?

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The law of imitative representation, aka mimesis, reigned supreme in Western art for so long that its resisters sometimes found it hard to stop battling it, even when and where it had lost its grip. Consider, for example, some responses to so-called concrete poetry on the part of advocates of so-called conceptual art. The writer and critic Lucy Lippard differentiates between concrete poetry's naive strategies of linguistic resemblance "where the words are made to look like something, an image" and conceptualism's more sophisticated liberty "where the words are used only to *avoid* looking like something, where it doesn't make any difference how the words look on the page or anything."

Lippard makes these claims in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. She also cites the artist Joseph Kosuth, who maintains that "Most of the concrete poets are now starting to do theater and getting out of concrete poetry. ... They realize the sort of decadence that follows from that sort of materialism." Kosuth was presumably referring to the situation in New York City. He names just three poets: Vito Acconci, John Perreault, and Hannah Weiner, all of whom are debatable as card-carrying concrete poets. Certainly, Acconci and Perreault would have adamantly identified otherwise. Then there is historian Liz Kotz, who in her study *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (2007)

describes a “reliance on rather quaint illustrational or pictorial modes—as in poems that take on the shape of their subjects” that allegedly characterizes all concrete poetry and makes it so “out of touch” with innovative artistic practices of the 1960s.^[1]

These characterizations are mistaken, of course, landing at once too far and too short. However, it’s worth pausing on the ways in which they fail. On the one hand, they insist myopically on understanding the term *concrete poetry* as synonymous with the long-standing tradition of pattern—or shaped—poetry, of which George Herbert’s famous 17th-century “Easter Wings” is one ready example. The bow tie contours of this poem’s two stanzas are credibly winglike. Herbert resuscitates a legacy from ancient Greece, that of *technopaegnia*, poems lineated to imitate the visual appearance of that which they describe. Sometimes the Modernist Guillaume Apollinaire cutely styled his works this way too (see “Il pleut”; fortunately, this was not the only manner in which he engaged with the page). On the other hand, descriptions that limit concrete poetry to this imitative purview joust at windmills, refusing to acknowledge the movement’s genuinely interesting and prescient innovations. Again, this is probably born of routine: ever since Plato’s bizarre character Cratylus insisted that names are natural and irreplaceable rather than arbitrary, many artists and writers have been guilty of an overweening interest in the representational power of words.^[2] Observers have frequently followed them down this rabbit hole.

One such obsessively commentated rabbit is Ezra Pound, who came to believe, by way of an incorrect understanding of the etymology of Chinese characters, among other eccentricities, that written language could successfully partake of material dynamics present in the physical world. It is therefore remarkable that Pound’s ideas were so fruitfully transmogrified by the *Noigandres* group in Brazil. This cohort of concretists—Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari—took the name of their journal from a line in Pound’s *Cantos*, grounding their materialist theory of poetry in what, in their 1958 manifesto “Plano-Piloto para Poesia Concreta” (“Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry”), they termed the “tension of word-things in space-time.”^[3] As others have pointed out, the *Noigandres* writers were not alone: Bolivian-born Swiss artist Eugen Gomringer was at the same moment exploring the verbal and visual qualities of printed language. Far from New York City, that cradle of the dematerialization of the art object, in Bern, São Paulo, Darmstadt, Scotland, Tokyo, Vienna, and Toronto, various practitioners investigated the remarkably productive *lack* of coincidence between the word as pronounced and the word as written.^[4] They did not strive to celebrate iconic fallacies or “quaint ... pictorial modes” but rather boldly played upon the ambiguities inherent to the various misalignments that exist between and among writing, speech, images, thoughts, and things.

The major innovation of the early or “orthodox” concretists, circa 1952–1958, was to observe—a bit contra Pound—that language did not need to be rendered more material and/or fitting to the material world. They saw that it was *already* material and, therefore, social and political in its material manifestations, and they progressed from there. The adjective *concrete* indicates unity or connection through growth in its earliest usages, and certainly the

19th-century invention of reinforced concrete, a substance subsequently employed in modernist architecture, cannot but have been enticing, metaphorically speaking, when it came time to name the movement, given its avant-garde orientation. So-called *musique concrète*, involving the manipulation of recorded sounds by such composers as Pierre Schaeffer and Halim El-Dabh beginning in the 1940s, may also have been a useful model. The (mostly male) originators of concretism in poetry were somewhat technodeterminist in their outlook and concerned with broad statements about culture and society. In his 1960 essay “The Poem as a Functional Object,” Gomringer asserts that concrete poems should be “as easily understood as signs in airports and traffic signs.”^[51] Haroldo de Campos meanwhile writes of concretism as fundamentally populist and as speaking “the language of today’s man.” He rejects the insubstantial rhetoric of lyric poetry in favor of an “objective” poetry, marked by the “technological progress and non-verbal communication” that also, he maintains, characterizes the Cold War era.^[61] Beyond these rather macho assertions, there are three other main tendencies worth underlining in relation to this practice:

1. Its interest in what might be termed a “new reader” created by the advent of mass media, someone who is enmeshed in a post-Gutenberg style of literacy in which word, image, sound, and movement are not cleanly separated and active interpretive work from readers is required for understanding;
2. Its interest in the material conditions involved in writing and publishing, particularly the lack of alignment between and among media and messages, as well as the possibilities inherent to mediated space once it is explicitly set in tension with the virtual time of signification through the maneuvers of a given poem;
3. Its disinterest in traditional literary categories. Where once there was silent reading in one’s armchair, now there might be looking, feeling, hearing, witnessing—perhaps in a gallery or other communal space. The concrete poem was designed to liberate language from print’s fixed paradigms into various semiotic configurations. Or, as the publisher, counter-cultural advocate, Fluxus member, and pattern poet Dick Higgins wrote in 1966, “Much of the work being produced today seems to fall between media.”^[71]

As so often seemed to happen with Modernism’s later and perhaps less concertedly modern manifestations, the orthodoxy and manifesto writing of concrete poetry in the 1950s was followed in the two subsequent decades by something more complex, diverse, and challenging to describe. One way to characterize these changes is to say that subjectivity reemerged as a concern. Another might be to observe: women began to adopt and transmogrify ideas associated with concrete poetry. They opened the space of the “concrete”—a space, in truth, of combination, metamorphosis, switching, process, and remediation as much as a space of strictly objective or static media—to their own experiences. This included liminal forms of expression related to interaction with textiles and the space of the home, the life of the body, child-rearing, and language acquisition as well as resistance to mass cultural systems that tended to exclude and anonymize them. As the

Italian artist, writer, and curator Mirella Bentivoglio wrote in 1978, “Surely there is a deep relationship between women and the alphabet, and not just because it is they who first transmit its form to children.”^[8]

This period of reluctant admission of female practitioners into male-dominated hybrid literary and artistic spaces is explored in a new anthology, *Women in Concrete Poetry, 1959–1979*, edited by Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la Torre. Published by Primary Information, *Women in Concrete Poetry* functions as a sort of rejoinder to the 2013 re-publication, also by Primary Information, of *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, edited by Emmett Williams and originally published in 1967. Williams’s anthology, first brought forth by Dick Higgins’s Something Else Press, overwhelmingly features the work of male poet-artists. Among its female contributors are the ever-undeterred Mary Ellen Solt, who compiled her own anthology of concretism, *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Indiana University Press, 1970); Ilse Garnier, who is listed in tandem with her partner, Pierre; and Bohumila Grögerová, listed with her partner, Josef Hiršal. Williams’s anthology collects some 73 authors in total—hailing from Brazil, Czechoslovakia, Japan, Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Western Europe—meaning that women represent approximately 4 percent of those who appear. In the period from 1963 to 1978, there was a veritable boom in anthologies and critical studies of concrete poetics, gathering and discussing the work of hundreds of practitioners.^[9] The female artists gracing those seemingly endless pages can be counted on two hands.

This state of affairs was addressed, if not resolved, in 1978 when, after an outcry regarding the paucity of women participants in that year’s Venice Biennale, the organizers belatedly invited Mirella Bentivoglio to curate an exhibition. Bentivoglio produced *Materializzazione del linguaggio* (*Materialization of Language*), displayed from September 20 to October 15, 1978, a momentous remapping of the intersections of poetry, visual art, craft, and design through the efforts of female practitioners. Bentivoglio brought together work from more than 70 contributors^[10], including herself, for a gallery show and essay-based catalogue that also presented biographies of the artists. Bentivoglio’s brilliant act of anthologizing forms the key point of reference for Balgiu and de la Torre’s 2020 effort.

Women in Concrete Poetry gathers 24 artists from *Materializzazione del linguaggio*: Annalisa Alloatti, Mirella Bentivoglio, Tomaso Binga, Irma Blank, Paula Claire, Betty Danon, Agnes Denes, Amelia Etlinger, Ilse Garnier, Bohumila Grögerová, Ana Hatherly, Katalin Ladik, Liliana Landi, Giulia Niccolai, Anna Oberto, Jennifer Pike, Betty Radin, Giovanna Sandri, Mira Schendel, Mary Ellen Solt, Chima Sunada, Salette Tavares, Biljana Tomić, and Patrizia Vicinelli. Appended to this roster are 26 additional poets, all active during the two decades named in the book’s title. On a certain level, *Women in Concrete Poetry, 1959–1979* functions as a linguistic, geographic, social, and temporal translation of *Materializzazione del linguaggio*. The welcome presence of work by beloved poets familiar in the North American experimental context but not tapped by Bentivoglio for the 1978 show—Madeline

Gins, Susan Howe, Rosmarie Waldrop, and Hannah Weiner—suggests possible links between conversations taking place on the East Coast in the 1960s and 1970s and a broader international context.

Particularly striking among the new contents are asemic writings by Mirtha Dermisache, which provide a counterpoint to the tick marks of Irma Blank and photographs by Bogdanka Poznanović of letter-based actions. Yet I found myself a bit puzzled by the 2020 title. Is it correct or even helpful to raise the flag of capital *C* capital *P* here? Though I hope that I am not guilty of the same kneejerk disdain displayed by Lippard, Kosuth, and Kotz, I did wonder if the women featured in the current collection were in fact “in” concrete poetry. Concrete poetry was a bit allergic to female participants, wasn’t it? And its concerns (proclaimed in the various essays and manifestoes summarized above) seem to overlap in only limited ways with the explorations of the practitioners so adroitly gathered by Balgiu and de la Torre.

I admit that titles are impossible and that grouping varied artistic and literary practices under a single phrase is a thankless task (everyone complains bitterly about the names of so-called movements but goes on using them anyway). I myself hunted for viable alternatives. Everything I came up with required a colon and at least one subtitle. Still, I think it is worth clarifying some of the tensions and ambiguities at play here.

First, I should note that *Women in Concrete Poetry*’s introduction does not shy away from the difficulty where the anthology’s title is concerned. Balgiu and de la Torre explain that the 50 individuals whose work they gathered “may not have identified themselves as concrete poets.” They also observe a “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,” writing that they have come to understand “concrete poetry ... as a practice rather than a movement.”^[11] Bentivoglio, significantly, did not title her exhibition *Materiality of Language* or *Objectification of Language*. Rather, she chose a term that implies a possibly chaotic and/or mixed process of becoming, *materialization*, a verbal noun that does not foreclose an ongoing or even infinite series of transmutations and manifestations in varied locations. (For an earlier show in 1971, Bentivoglio used the expression *visual operators* to describe the authors of the interdisciplinary work that interested her.^[12])

Although Balgiu and de la Torre have taken care to expand their selection beyond the limits of Western Europe and North America, including Argentine, Brazilian, Polish, Russian, Serbian, Uruguayan, and Yugoslavian artists, it seems to have been a greater challenge to expand the book’s conceptual paradigm beyond objective or statically material language, i.e., the language of print. Perhaps this seems like a ridiculous quibble. Yet—of the handful of works of criticism quoted in the introduction, two are by residents of North America and stress objectivity as opposed to subjective experience. Mary Ellen Solt maintains, “Emotions and ideas are not the physical materials of poetry,” and Rosmarie Waldrop advocates a “revolt against the transparency of the word.” These positions, to my ear, ring of the somewhat stiff Marxian poetics we now associate with Objectivism and the Language movement in the United States. The programmatic tendencies of these ways of considering

writing is surely inadequate to the practices anthologized here—a point on which I think Balgiu and de la Torre would concur. As the biographical notes at the end of *Women in Concrete Poetry* observe, many of the women included worked in real time and space with numerous materials, curious about the indivisibility of things and feelings. They often understood themselves as conceptualists or interdisciplinary artists. Agnes Denes, for example, is primarily known for her work in land art, notably 1982's *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, a 2-acre wheat field planted in a landfill created in the decade following the construction of the Twin Towers in lower Manhattan. For the last three decades of her life, Madeline Gins identified primarily as a practicing architect and philosopher. And Hannah Weiner, a designer of undergarments by day, was concerned with flags and clothing as well as the immaterial, psycho-social medium of clairvoyant visions.

What I longed for in the anthology—so elegantly designed and thorough, with its selections ranging from two to a dozen or so pages—was more messiness and, even more urgently, more weirdness, more irrationality, more bodies and sensations and ephemera. Bentivoglio was a fantastic prose stylist, and it might have been nice to republish her 1978 catalogue essay, perhaps along with another essay included in that volume that I find endlessly fascinating, poet Giovanna Sandri's "Origine lunare dell'alfabeto" ("Lunar Origins of the Alphabet;" Sandri's typographic constellations are among the selections of *Women in Concrete Poetry*). In Sandri's semi-surreal hypothesis, a mystical alphabet guarded by priestesses preceded the Phoenician system, the alphabet from which the Greek and Italic alphabets derive. The letters of this mystical alphabet were composed of cuttings from fragrant trees, meaning that sense and linguistic difference were olfactory in nature as well as visible, etc. A major implication of Sandri's account is that there may exist unacknowledged, unnamed, forgotten, or excluded forms of language and communication.^[13] Art, Sandri suggests, specifically the art of women, can give access to kinds of meaning-making that have been devalued or chased from the public sphere by, for example, the mechanized, standardized, primarily visible word-material that stems from Gutenberg's invention of printing from moveable type.

Anthologies are like maps: they indicate the existence of a given concept, trend, style, movement (or something else), then offer examples that fit within the limits of their chosen concept, trend, style, movement, other. It's an awkward definition, to be sure. Admittedly, some anthologies emerge out of their contents rather than beginning with a received idea. Still, it does seem that many, if not all, anthologies suffer from that existential ailment that Jorge Luis Borges diagnosed in his work "On Exactitude in Science:" since summary by nature, the anthology must necessarily fail to accomplish that which it came into being to do, i.e., present a complete, satisfying overview by way of instances, pieces. Indeed, the word comes to English with a slightly melancholy—to my ears—etymology: from Greek *anthologia*, a gathering of flowers. Although the stems are cut, the resulting arrangement is intended to feed the senses. More often than not, it does, but it will always have left something out,

always have been convened to suit a specific taste and occasion. Anthologies are, thus, frequently ephemeral: they serve living readers and may create new (sorts of) readers. Later on, another collection will supplement or replace the collection that came before.

Where all these questions become more interesting is in the context of art and literary practices of the later 20th century, when it is more difficult to say who is “just a writer” and who is “just an artist”—not to mention what genre of writing someone might engage with or which medium or discipline someone specializes in. The citations from Lippard, Kosuth, and Kotz that began this essay vaguely acknowledge this shift but use the occasion of uncertainty to attempt to “win” points for the side of visual art, which seems to them to borrow inessential techniques from literature rather than become fused with or indistinguishable from it. This resistance to mixture points up a pursuant problem related to the anthology form: how to account for practices that not only fall between and among media and disciplines but also require the substrate of real time to come into being. How does one anthologize a practice not primarily located on the page? To put this more plainly: if I photograph you speaking, have I captured your words?

In this context, the anthology is clearly a site of re-materialization and re-mediation, an opportunity to organize perception from historical, technological, and material points of view. Here older formats (or lack of formatting) are revised for the present moment. *Women in Concrete Poetry, 1959–1979* partakes of many of the same organizational devices as Williams’s 1967 anthology: it begins with an introduction, collects the work in question in alphabetical order by author, and concludes with a series of short biographical entries. However, unlike Williams’s collection, its front and back covers, with images by Lenora de Barros of a mouth and tongue engaged in sensual play with the keys and type bars of a typewriter, do not reveal the anthology’s title; this task is reserved for the book’s spine.^[14] *Women in Concrete Poetry* also has two editors. Its title begins with the word *women*. It feels big and stylish and clean, its smooth pages revealing a shadow of the print on the opposite side in a delightful way as one flips through.

The anthology generates a sensibility, a sort of mental and physical image that is also a stylistic shorthand. As I was considering these matters, I also thought of another series of images, a 1976 video by the artist and poet Theresa Hak Kyung Cha titled *Permutations*. Depicting Cha’s sister Bernadette, *Permutations* has often been mistaken for a self-portrait and, as Cathy Park Hong points out in her recent groundbreaking essay on Cha’s rape and murder, has come to stand in for the artist’s physical presence—even, until early November 2020, on the artist’s Wikipedia page.^[15] I was drawn to this series of images not only because it made sense to consider Cha’s films, slides, and performances of the 1970s and her artist’s book, *Audience Distant Relative* (1978), in the context of *Women in Concrete Poetry* but also because the misunderstanding associated with the video is relevant to the ongoing project of remediating interdisciplinary work that makes no firm distinction between linguistic approaches to literature and art and those in which the body and sensorium play significant

roles. Can editors find a way to satisfy the human liking for iconic images and absolute delineation of categories *and* preserve the complexity and ambiguity of late-20th-century intermedial work that challenges the old laws of mimesis? Should they try?

^[1] I am indebted to Jamie Hilder's smart study, *Designed Words for a Designed World: The International Concrete Poetry Movement, 1955–1971* (Montreal, Kingston, London, Chicago: McGill-Queen's UP, 2016), for these revealing citations. For a longer discussion of possible relations between conceptualism and concrete poetry, see Hilder's chapter, "Concrete Poetry and Conceptual Art: A Misunderstanding," pp. 145–186.

^[2] In this dialogue, the character Cratylus argues that names are not arbitrary but rather derive from divine fiat. Socrates is ultimately moved to give up the study of language in favor of the study of things, perhaps influenced by the extremity of Cratylus's views.

^[3] This phrase is cited frequently in criticism on concrete poetry. See for example Brian J. McAllister's article "Narrative in Concrete / Concrete in Narrative: Visual Poetry and Narrative Theory," *Narrative* 22, no. 2 (2014): 235. Accessed November 5, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24615530>.

^[4] See the opening paragraphs of Sam Rowe's excellent review of the republished Emmett Williams anthology, *Chicago Review* 58, no. 3/4 (2014): 316. Accessed November 5, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24770681>.

^[5] Eugen Gomringer, "The Poem as a Functional Object," translated by Irène Montjoye Sinor, in *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, edited by Mary Ellen Solt (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1970), 69–70.

^[6] Adriano Spatola, *Toward Total Poetry*, translated by Brendan W. Hennessey and Guy Bennett (Los Angeles: Otis Books/Seismicity Editions, 2008), 92.

^[7] Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," originally published in *the something else NEWSLETTER*, Volume 1, Number 1, February 1966; reprinted in *Intermedia, Fluxus and the Something Else Press: Selected Writings by Dick Higgins* (Catskill, NY: Siglio, 2018), 25. I should note that I have also seen this portion of the essay dated 1965.

^[8] Mirella Bentivoglio, "Introduzione a Materializzazione del linguaggio," in *Materializzazione del linguaggio*, Biennale di Venezia, 1978. Bentivoglio writes, "C'è da credere a un rapporto profondo tra la donna e l'alfabeto, e non solo perché per prima ne trasmette la forma ai figli." Translation mine; I use the term *women* to avoid the somewhat old-fashioned generalization of the English singular, *woman*.

^[9] These include La Monte Young's *An Anthology of chance operations, concept art, anti art, indeterminacy, plans of action, diagrams, music, dance constructions, improvisation, meaningless work, natural disasters, compositions, mathematics, essays, poetry* (La Monte Young & Jackson Mac Low, 1963); Stephen Bann's *Concrete Poetry: An International Anthology* (London Magazine, 1967); Eugene Wildman's *Anthology of Concretism* (Swallow Press, 1968); John B Sharkey's *Mindplay: An Anthology of British Concrete Poetry* (Lorrimer, 1971); Jerry G. Bowles and Tony Russell's *This Book Is a Movie: An Exhibition of Language Art & Visual Poetry* (Dell, 1971); Jiří Valoch and bpNichol's *The Pipe: Recent Czech Concrete Poetry* (Coach House, 1973); Miroljub Todorović's *Konkretna, vizuelna i signalistička poezija, antologija* (Delo, 1975); Liselotte Gumpel's *Concrete Poetry from East and West Germany: The Language of Exemplarism and Experimentalism* (Yale, 1976); John Jessop's *International Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (Missing Link Press, 1978).

^[10] The list of artists in *Materializzazione del linguaggio* I located gives 71 names. See <https://www.stsenzaititolo.com/st/prodotto/mirella-bentivoglio-materializzazione-del-linguaggio/>. However, Balgiu and de la Torre count 81.

^[11] Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la Torre, "Introduction," *Women in Concrete Poetry: 1959–1979* (New York: Primary Information, 2020), 12–17.

^[12] The 1971 exhibition in question, at Centro Tool in Milan, was titled *Esposizione internazionale di operatrici visuali* (International Exhibition of Visual Operators). See Balgiu and de la Torre's biographical note on Bentivoglio in *Women in Concrete Poetry*, 464–65.

^[13] Giovanna Sandri, "Origine lunare dell'alfabeto," in *Materializzazione del linguaggio*.

^[14] The cover of Williams's anthology is "illustrated" with the following statement: "The book you are looking at is the largest Anthology of Concrete Poetry to appear to date, and the first major one to be published in the United States. Edited by Emmett Williams, one of the founders of the movement, and with the over-300 selections translated whenever possible from their original languages and glossed where translation would not be feasible, all supplemented by detailed biographies of the poets, the publishers of Something Else Press, Inc., take great pride in presenting a cross-section of this most active of modern poetry movements and in introducing so many major writers from so many countries between these covers for the first time to the American reading public."

^[15] As the essay points out, Cha's rape and murder are seldom if ever mentioned in scholarly writing on her work. See Cathy Park Hong, "Portrait of an Artist," in *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (New York: One World, 2020), 151–180. For the revision history of Cha's Wikipedia page, see https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Theresa_Hak_Kyung_Cha&action=history. Accessed November 15, 2020. The correction of the "biography photo" was made on November 10th, 2020, by a user named Iamevelynk.

