

The Collected Poems of Mary Ellen Solt

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The freeing of letters from their function within words is essential to Mary Ellen Solt’s poem “A Trilogy of Rain”: The varying weights of each typed letter in a text block repeating *rain* visually mimic the pattern of rainfall. In other phases, a cluster of the words *rain* and *CLOUD* release *r, a, i, n* on the page below, and a cascade of *raindown* subsides and stretches into the widely spaced *r a i n b o w*. Given the intensity with which Solt wrote about any one concrete poem in her work as a scholar, including as the editor of the seminal anthology *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (1968), Solt’s poems, like her trilogy, feel especially airy, or casual. Having been a major presence in the concrete movement in the United States and internationally, *The Collected Poems of Mary Ellen Solt* affirms Solt’s experimental reach, as well as the clear affinity she had for splicing a basic word—like rain—only to again and again reorder its parts.

Solt’s work as a poet, editor, and translator provided inspiration for Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la Torre’s 2020 anthology *Women in Concrete Poetry: 1959–1979* (Primary Information), in which Solt’s “MARRIAGE: A Code Poem” appears, and this new collection features that work along with four of Solt’s projects and her later poems. Her books *Flowers in Concrete* (1974) and *Words and Spaces* (1985), republished within, are representative of classic concrete style. In the former, typographic calligrams of the flowers and plants in Solt’s garden merge with mechanical procedures: in “Forsythia,” the letters of the name of the shrub are translated into Morse code with a telegram-like acrostic at its roots. In the latter, each poem appears in a different font, heightening the verbal–visual possibilities of words on a blank page as they intersect with political and environmental themes, such as the bands of text repeating ozonosphere, atmosphere, and aerosol, culminating in the warning “A CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER.” Solt also gives in at times to pure language play, as in the rounded-type formation that reads, “whirl wind / whirl pool / whirl girl.”

The collection’s first section, “What the Girl Might Have Said,” makes Solt’s inner life visible in a rare experience of concrete poetry as distinctly personal. Wrapped up in what she calls “quotidian desire,” Solt connects to the spoken words and daily worlds of her daughters, not unlike other experimental poets—Bernadette Mayer, for one, who famously loved having children. In one poem, Solt’s configurations of the words *daughters* and *poppies* is interrupted by *night*, only for *daughters* and *poppies* to repeat once more, presumably the next day. Things, life, language, and nature evolve in tandem. In the poem “With Child,” Solt ruminates on growing round as the “earth grew round,” but like any concrete poet would, she resists the expected arrangement, writing of her pregnancy: “why is it i / want to vomit / the thing.” This description also evokes Solt’s concretism, its ritualistic expelling of words, forms, and sounds.

References throughout the collection to the Vietnam War and Watergate provide entry points into concrete poetry's formative relationship to the cultural landscape of the late 1960s and 1970s. Solt's project *THE PEOPLEMOVER 1968: A Demonstration Poem* responds to the turmoil in the US that summer in a series of protest posters Solt made for a live demonstration complete with a libretto. More a performance of New Left politics than political action, the posters join concrete poems with political messages: *civil rights* modified to "CIV ILL RIOTS" or the A of "The USnaApalm" soaring downward like a bomb. Not meant to be flippant, the posters put forth what Balgiu and de la Torre call the "liberatory gestures" central to the concrete movement in the US and elsewhere. Like the posters from this earlier context, concrete poems often become fragments of unseen operations. Still, Solt always makes material stuff of the poem pleasurable; the descending type of her poem "Constellation ('look')" takes only six lines: "LOOK // a leaf // the leaf / falls // falls / anyway."

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