

Seeing the Meaning: 'The Collected Poems of Mary Ellen Solt'

editor :: 10/4/2024

Concrete poetry, a literary arts movement started in the 1950s, is meant to reflect the material inspiring a poem through its emphasis on reduced language. One of the movement's leaders, and one of its few American female contributors, was Mary Ellen Solt (1920-2007). Solt used the form to reject previous examples of prose poems and focus instead on creating work that was "communicating" to the reader its physical form and structure before its content could, thus bringing a poem closer to its words true meaning.

Solt would edit the landmark 1968 anthology *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, which was published by Indiana University at Bloomington, where Solt served as professor of comparative literature for decades and where she and her colleagues developed one of the first inter-arts studies programs in the United States. In the anthology's prefatory essay, "A World Look at Concrete Poetry," she notes that concrete poetry's role is "not to be shut away in the dark pages of a book."

The Collected Poems of Mary Ellen Solt (240 pages; Primary Information; foreword by Aram Saroyan), assembled and edited by the academic (and Mary Ellen's daughter) Susan Solt, brings together much of Solt's rare and unpublished work, saving them from obscurity to reveal the true scope of her impact on poetics across five decades. The book is a testament to how and why the reader is an active participant in the manifesting of a poem.

While perhaps best known for her *Flowers in Concrete* series, whose poems have been exhibited in such places as the 2022 Venice Biennale and the Getty Center (and are included here), Solt's output also included many unpublished pieces. They appear in this collection, along with facsimiles of her original correspondences with William Carlos Williams, whose work she long championed as a critic, and the series "Calligraphic Flowers (1963-1965)," the striking, hand-drawn original drafts of Solt's most known "flower poems."

Also included is the "Words and Places" suite of poems, which showcases the breadth and scope of Solt's use of concrete poetry. "A Trilogy of Rain" reflects the life cycle of a storm across a triptych of poems, while "Elegy for Three Astronauts" subtly pays tribute to those who lost their lives in Apollo I, and those they left behind. Devoid of Stars and Stripes, it instead offers three crosses and arrow-shaped verses kinetically housing the poem's text and entertains the meanings between "astronaut" and "starsailor." This homage to a government space program is succeeded by a poem about Watergate and pieces warning of the environmental impacts of aerosols on our atmosphere.

We also encounter here “The Peplemover 1968,” a collection of political posters where the reader turns the page between their front and backs, triangulating meaning among the image, the content, and title of the poem. In one poster, numerous inverted black capital A’s fall across a red background on one side, while on the other side there’s an oversized gray question mark with an equal sign in the center of the page. The piece’s title? “The USnaApalm/EQUALS THE QUESTION.”

There’s a photo, too, taken in 1968, showing poets holding these provocative, nerdy, and meaningful posters outdoors somewhere in Bloomington. It is moving to see humor displayed on avantgarde posters during one of the most tumultuous years in American history, a reassuring reminder of the unique contributing role poets have played in social movements. *The Collected Poems of Mary Ellen Solt* is ultimately an anthology of a life’s work. But more importantly, it’s a worldview of one of America’s most innovative poets and critics.