

# The Collected Poems of Mary Ellen Solt

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By Nicole Kaack

Concrete poetry has defined Mary Ellen Solt's legacy. Published in 1968, her anthology *Concrete Poetry: A World View* outstripped earlier compilations, chronicling the movement's origins through international manifestos and analytically characterizing the visual, sonic, and kinetic manipulations of each work. However, Solt was also fluent in a broader sphere of language that spanned semiotics and modernist poetry. Her research interests were united by an emphasis on linguistic objecthood. In Solt's 1968 anthology, she proposes continuities between concrete poetry and the literary objectivist movement, presenting William Carlos Williams as a proto-concrete model and including a poem by objectivist poet Louis Zukofsky among the collected works. According to Solt, concrete poetry focused on "the physical material from which the poem or text is made," as she writes in her anthology; likewise, in an essay on Williams, she states that modernist poetry admitted "no dislocation between language and material."

There is a direct line of correspondence between Solt's scholarly interests and her creative practice. Solt's concretist collection included two of her own poems, "Moonshot Sonnet" and "Forsythia," betraying her interest in capturing the world around her through symbols and text. In *The Collected Poems of Mary Ellen Solt*—which contains poems written between 1957 and 2007—a body of largely overlooked lyric writing bookends her prolific corpus of concrete poems, showcasing how her concern with linguistic materiality surfaced in different forms across her career. It also includes an afterword written by her daughter, Susan Solt, further underscoring the importance of her mother's scholarly work on and relationship with Williams.

The collection shows that Solt's formalist proclivity—her obsession with the thingness of words—predated her concrete work and engaged in verbivocovisual experimentation. In her early free verse poems "Seascape" and "For William Carlos Williams," Solt breaks her lines to visual effect, in the former, cascading the text like waves down and across the page surface and, in the latter, using breaks and spacing to illustrate verbs such as "sways" and "fall." This typographic technique is isolated in her later concrete poem "ZIGZAG," in which recombinations of the titular word create meandering lines in a reverberant field of Zs. Solt's lyric poem "Mediterranean" evokes a sense of absence by placing breaks after "searching" and "erases" and splitting "re-/moved" and "de-/sire." In parallel, her concrete "Poem Without Beginning or End" quadruples each letter of the word and separates these clover-like clusters with line breaks and spaces in a poetics of separation and correspondence. Solt's minute understanding of visual affect bridges these eras and imbues her work with a visceral resonance.

In keeping with Solt's scholarly and poetic emphasis on the real, her concrete poems intimately link linguistic and material worlds in highly faithful visualizations. "Forsythia" writhes and tangles, as unruly as the plant itself, and the letters that make up the branches and leaves of "Wild Crab" cohere in a convincing, pointillist assemblage. In her afterword to the publication, editor Susan Solt describes her mother holding onionskin paper up to a window to capture these floral likenesses. Despite the literalism of Solt's approach, she doesn't shirk other possibilities encoded in language. A poem from her "Dogwood" suite becomes musical notation, the Ds and Gs used as their sonic equivalents, while proliferating Os are whole notes on a scale. A later work "Marriage: A Code Poem" is accompanied by ambiguously narrative glossaries, beside which the poems braid into ornate geometries like the worked flourishes on a wrought-iron gate—suggestive perhaps of the endurance of matrimony and its potential both to protect and to cloister.

Solt's meticulousness with form did not stop at composition. The Primary Information publication reflects the extreme care with which Solt oversaw the production of works such as her celebrated book *Flowers in Concrete*, reproducing this section on a vertically ribbed stock that emulates the laid paper of the original. Likewise, posters from "The Peoplemover 1968: A Demonstration Poem" have been registered perfectly such that the recto and verso of each page mimic the front-back dynamic of the colorful boards that Solt constructed for a performative countercultural protest. Graphic designer Bryce Wilner's painstaking treatment of Solt's poems cannot be understated; many of the poems were entirely digitally reconstructed for this edition.

Solt's poetry and scholarship provide a roadmap that connects the animating sensibilities of different poetic movements, tethering worlds of language often sundered along literary and visual lines. *The Collected Poems of Mary Ellen Solt* reveals a poet keenly attuned to the material forms that language takes, from the placement of characters on a page to the paper upon which it is printed.