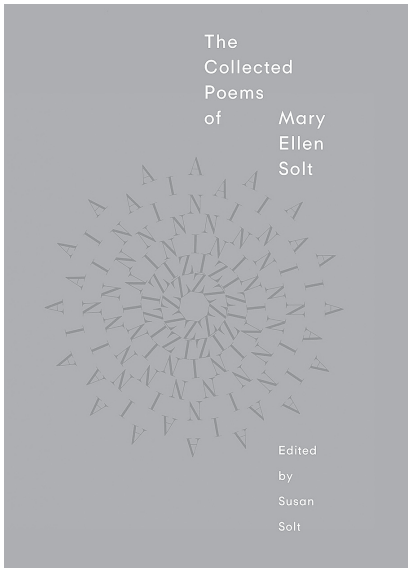
THE COLLECTED POEMS OF MARY ELLEN SOLT

Mary Ellen Solt
Edited by Susan Solt
Primary Information ($24)



Mary Ellen Solt (1920–2007), an Iowa-born poet with a distinctive voice, receives her due recognition in this comprehensive collection of her work. Edited by her daughter, scholar Susan Solt, *The Collected Poems of Mary Ellen Solt* offers readers an opportunity to explore her enigmatic poetry in its entirety. Aram Saroyan, in a brief but precise foreword, refers to Solt as a *happy* poet; the texture of that happiness is evident throughout her corpus.

Solt's path as a poet was shaped by academic and literary influences. After studying Shakespeare at the University of Iowa, Solt moved to New York in 1948, where she found mentorship from poet William Carlos Williams. She later became a professor of comparative literature at Indiana University, teaching from 1970 to 1991.

Solt's writing is characterized by several distinctive elements, with visual or concrete poetry representing a significant portion of her oeuvre. The cover image of this book features the one-word poem "Zinnia," exemplifying her interest in the genre. "Forsythia," an acrostic that turns from horizontal to vertical, blossoms organically in black typography against a solid chartreuse page. "Untitled (so swift)" offers arrangements of parentheses, mimicking the rippling of water from a skipping stone.

Solt's 1966 book *Flowers in Concrete* began as a collection of hand-drawn flower poems. Working with John Dearstyne on the typography, she later wrote that: "there is no doubt in my mind that I feel closer to words when I make my own letters, but the machine makes them so much better."[1] Solt's poster-sized and calligraphic versions of these poems have been exhibited at prestigious venues worldwide, including MoMA, the Getty Center, and three separate Venice Biennales. *Flowers in Concrete*, which one critic described as marked by "luxuriant floridity,"[2] shows how interwoven the visual is with the textual, especially given the layered association of "concrete" in the title.

Decapitalization is another consistent element throughout Solt's work, perhaps in a nod to poet e.e. cummings. Her use of lowercase letters, except in titles, raises questions about her stylistic choices. Is it a rejection of linguistic hierarchy, or some other form of poetic resistance? Additionally, the use of lowercase lettering evokes a distinctly intimate quality when reading these poems, akin to experiencing a whispered conversation.

Nature, domesticity, and motherhood are intertwining themes in Solt's work. Flowers appear as a recurring motif, representing the connection between nature and human emotions. Domestic life is reflected in poems about cats, such as "Totentanz." Motherhood is a prominent subject, with poems like "With Child" pondering pregnancy and "This is Easy" delving into the complexities of raising children.

Intertextuality is also resonant in Solt's approach. In "What the Girl Might Have Said," for example, she responds to T. S. Eliot's "La Figlia che Piange" (which translates from Italian to "the weeping girl"), giving voice to Eliot's silent female figure and effectively challenging the male gaze.[3]

While the poems are in a loose chronological order, only one is specifically dated; otherwise, original writing and publication dates are left to the book's notes and bibliography, allowing readers to contextualize the works if they choose. This arrangement creates a reading experience that feels outside of traditional time, with certain words, phrases, and visual patterns recurring throughout. Despite the presence of section demarcations, the overall structure exhibits a fluid continuity, eschewing rigid beginnings and endings.

Solt's poems in the first section begin to venture towards a specific spatial paradigm. "You Have Failed," for instance, disrupts the traditional delineation of the title from the body of the poem, with the word "but" following on the title line then gesturing on to the first stanza where the phrase "grace is" is set towards the right margin, hovering above the phrase "trust fails," which is also heavily indented.

Words and Spaces is the largest section of the book, with thirty-four poems written from the 1960s to the '80s. Take "Moonshot Sonnet," inspired by the first close views of the lunar surface. Solt designed the poem to resemble the camera equipment used on the Ranger 7 space probe; what we are left with resembles not the moon itself but the apparatus designed to capture its likeness. In "ZIGZAG," Solt departs from lowercase format, instead using majuscules to create a vertical carpet of "Z"s with two blank bands that wind down the length of the shape. A center zigzag spells "ZIG," "ZAG," and occasionally "ZIGZAG." The visual rhythm captivates.

The collection is a vibrant accompaniment to another recent publication from Primary Information, namely *Women in Concrete Poetry: 1959–1979*, edited by Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la Torre, which was released in 2020. In that book, which sketches a wide geography, including Solt's "Marriage Poem," the editors articulate their position that concrete poetry is a "practice rather than a movement."[4]

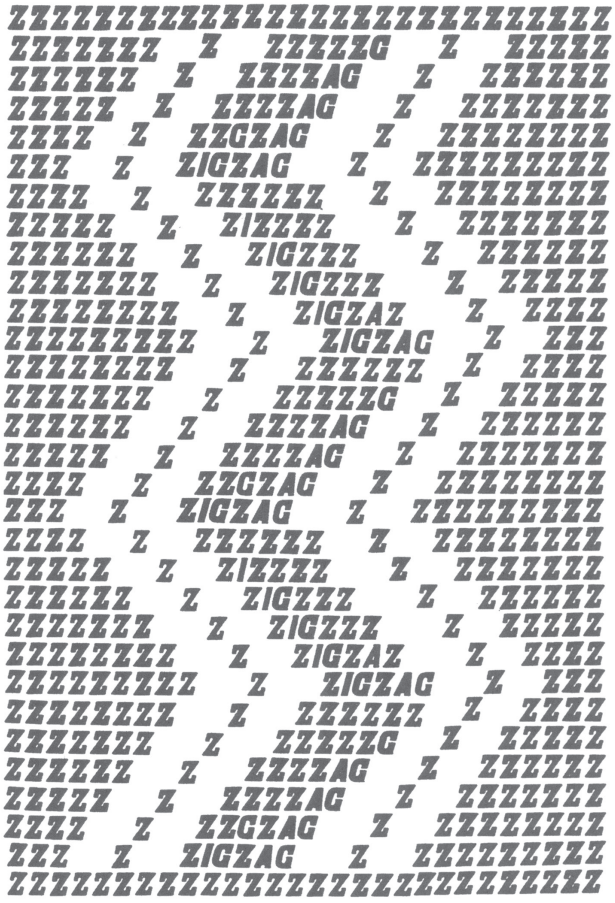
Here, insight into Solt's engagement with her times is provided, particularly in "The Peoplemover 1968: A Demonstration Poem," which addresses the turbulent political

events of that year. The poem began as a series of posters and was performed on August 7, 1968, by students in Donald Bell's experimental design class at Indiana University. A phonograph played Sousa's "The Stars and Stripes Forever" while students carried signs emblazoned with the double-sided poster poems. The work went on to be performed several more times, sometimes featuring scripts and multimedia projections.

The weight of other poets—like Robert Lax, who was an early experimenter with visual arrangements of text—is felt here too. Lax often oriented his text vertically, and Solt included his "Poem" (1939) in her expansive anthology, *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (1968), which Lax called "vertical in both form and feeling."[5] Lax has cited the formative experience of seeing Constantin Brancusi's *Bird in Space* (1923) as a child. He was also close with Ad Reinhardt, whose paintings conjured formal limits within the confines of Western painting. Lax's skinny columns of text seem to have influenced Solt's compositional approach, and she claims him as a semi-reluctant predecessor to the concrete affiliation.

Concrete poetry emerged globally in the aftermath of World War II, and it was Scottish poet Ian Hamilton Finlay who inspired Solt's turn towards the genre in 1962. In her 1968 anthology, Solt defined concrete poetry as focusing on "the physical material from which the poem or text is made," tracing its influence in the United States back to Cummings and Ezra Pound. She was assiduous in her research and analysis of the field and its lineages.

Further, Solt exhibited a deep fascination with religious symbols, metaphors, and allegories, though she didn't adhere to any particular faith. Her approach to spirituality could be described as that of a religious aesthete. "Dogwood," from *Flowers in Concrete*, takes up Christianity; Solt prefaces the work with a note about dogwood as the tree most fitting for the construction of the cross. The dogwood flower thus becomes a symbol of suffering, and Solt explores its properties in a three-movement poem. The piece exemplifies Solt's ability to blend spiritual themes with her concrete style, demonstrating a distinct approach to exploring religious symbolism through visual and textual elements.



"ZIGZAG" from *Words and Spaces* in *The Collected Poems of Mary Ellen Solt*

Collaboration was a significant dimension to Solt's creative process, as exemplified by the 1976 book version of "Marriage," which combined Solt's design with her daughter Susan's typesetting and Sheryl Nelson's linocuts. This collaborative spirit, evident throughout her work, reflects the importance of relationships and friendships in her artistic practice.

The Collected Poems of Mary Ellen Solt offers a complete view of Solt's poetic journey, from her early columnar experiments to her visual works and later return to linear forms. Throughout, Solt demonstrates an ability to blend visual arts, literature, science, politics, and personal observations into a singular expression. Her 1968 statement, "The word the poet doesn't need isn't poetry," reflects a commitment to precision and economy in language, and her desire to bring words into the tangible, visual realm provides an equally salient intervention. This volume invites the reader/viewer to experience the full spectrum of Solt's vision, from experimental verse to expansive visual compositions and back again.

—Liz Hirsch

NOTES

[1] Mary Ellen Solt, "A World Look at Concrete Poetry," in *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 54.

[2] David Rosenthal, "Concretist Poets and Poetry," *Poetry* (May 1968), 127.

[3] We learn in Susan Solt's afterword to the book that Solt saw Eliot read "La Figlia che Piange" at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan in the 1940s.

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

[5] Susan Howe, "The End of Art," *Archives of American Art Journal* (1974), 4.