The Concrete Poetics of Mary Ellen Solt

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If you ask a poet what poetry is, these are the kinds of answers you can expect:

Poetry is an empty basket.
Poetry is a turning loose of emotion.
Poetry is a slipknot.
Poetry is a puppet show…an echo, a slit in the face of a bronze fountain goat,
a holy thing, a plank laid over a lion's den….

One might start to believe that if there is any singular criterion for what makes a poem, it might be that it suffers an endless identity crisis, always pushing past the boundaries of its own domain, use, and function. And if anything is demanded of a poet, it might be that they always question what it is they do. At the very least, these are things Mary Ellen Solt wonders about in almost every line of verse she writes—and they are also the subject of those lines, quoted above, which belong to Carl Sandburg, Mary Oliver, James Baxter, and T.S. Eliot, respectively, and were written in the attempt to define exactly what a poem is. Yet Solt is both like and unlike other poets in her choice of form.

Just as anything might well be considered a poem, a concrete poem—the form Solt specialized in—provides even fewer conclusive criteria for its form. Photographs, a video, lines of Morse code, protest posters, calligraphy, typography, a sculpture—all of these things could be a concrete poem. Finding homes in both constructivist and expressionist poetics, concrete poems grasp at the space between logic and intuition. Borrowing from the concrete art movement, often using graphic space as a structural agent, concrete poetry is primarily concerned with producing an object to be perceived and not solely read, asking the reader to take part in the process of creating it. These objects are composed of words, but they are meant to be regarded like a painting or a sculpture, not parsed line for line as one would a story.

For decades, concrete poetry was a genre forced to defend itself, and only recently has it gained any real recognition from the broader literary world. Contemporary poets like Tyehimba Jess, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Diana Khoi Nguyen might be considered concrete poets for their use of graphic space, fragmented language, repetition and seriality, but also for their shared desire to conjure whole worlds, complex lives, and experiences concretely, through form and reader perception.

Regardless of definition, the concrete poetry movement seeks to give shape to our words, to raise them off the page entirely and re-form them in a multidimensional and multimedia representation of what a poem feels like. In keeping with concrete poetry's resistance to rigid categorization, *The Collected Poems of Mary Ellen Solt* provides readers an entry point into this world. It is a truly beautiful collection, as well as a visually stunning one. It begs readers to comment on its design, as some of the poems are more visual art than text. Indeed, Solt asked whether poetry and fine art had to be separated, or whether the way words looked on a page might be just as important as what those words meant.

Solt identified strongly as a concrete poet and dedicated her career to the academic study of semiotic theory. In 1970, she published *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, an anthology of her work that established her as a leader of the emergent form. She shared in her friend and mentor William Carlos Williams's belief that the work of a poet is to imbue their poems with what she called "the movement of experience—a life—that gets into the poem."

Solt feared that concrete poetry would be viewed as a niche of the poetry world and argued that it was important to understand it as a "genuine constituent of contemporary literature and contemporary thought" rather than as "merely playful, that the element of play we advocate for should not result in a facetious kind of poetry." In fact, her goal as a poet was lofty: She subscribed to Max Bill's definition of concrete art as the "production of the esthetic object for spiritual use" and believed strongly that poetry has the potential to transmit new and radical forms of communication.

In her introduction to *Concrete Poetry*, Solt writes:

> [T]he concrete poet is concerned with making an object to be perceived rather than read. The visual poem is intended to be seen like a painting; the sound poem is composed to be listened to like music. Concrete poets, then, are united in their efforts to make objects or compositions of sounds from particular materials. They are disunited on the question of semantics: some insisting upon the necessity for poetry to remain within the communication area of semantics.… But no matter where the concrete poet stands with respect to semantics, he invariably came to concrete poetry holding the convention that the old grammatical-syntactical structures are no longer adequate to advanced processes of thought and communication in our time…. [T]he concrete poet seeks to relieve the poem of its centuries-old burden of ideas, symbolic reference, allusion and repetitious emotional content; of its servitude to disciplines outside itself as an object in its own right for its own sake.

The concrete poetry movement was a response to early modernist poetry—its emphasis on subjectivity, abstraction, and meter—which the members of this avant-garde believed to be antiquated and impotent. Instead, concrete poets valued the aesthetic over the semantic and aimed to create work that made the form and content of their poems interchangeable. Solt

credited the concrete poetry movement's foundations to the Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer as well as to the Noigandres Group in Brazil, which was established in the years after World War II.

In Gomringer and his acolytes, she saw the desire for abbreviation, or what Gomringer called the "quick, concentrated visual message." His work distills expansive ideas to a shorthand, leaning on readers to make meaning from inverted words and compositional arrangements, encouraging their gaze to bounce across the page, constructing sentences from words unconfined by lines. He believed that, like an advertisement, a poem should be catchy, memorable, and imprint in a reader's mind like a picture. The Noigandres Group favored anti-discursive, ideogrammatic poems because they believed them to be more functional than traditional poetry, which was formulaic and received both its value and interpretation through analysis, and was therefore always at the mercy of discourse. In the aftermath of World War II, there was a longing for connection, for art to bring about a sense of optimism. What these groups shared was a desire for a universal form of poetry in the service of cross-cultural understanding. In order to achieve this, they sought to make poems that resisted convention and instead encouraged readers to experience their poetry, to consider all the ways that poems could be not only read but perceived.

For Solt, concrete poetry offered a departure from the kind of sentiment and limited psychology of traditional poetry, which seemed to suggest that there could be no emotion without subjectivity. Instead, she wanted the aesthetic elements of her words to intensify their meaning, thus imbuing them with emotion. She was dedicated to what Williams referred to as the "psychic integrity" of poetry; more plainly, she had an allegiance to her intuition rather than to any institution of traditional poetry. It was through her talks with Williams and her study of his ideas of what made for a particularly "American" use of meter and prosody, divorced from the conventions of British English, that she began to understand that his goal was "a revelation." For Williams, revelations were best rendered through idioms. Solt's pursuit of a revelation similarly hinged on stepping outside of convention, playing with mediums, and inventing new containers for her poems, striving to achieve that psychic veracity.

In what is perhaps her most experimental work, "The Peoplemover: A Demonstration Poem," from 1968, Solt staged a performance of a demonstration, with protesters holding posters with concrete poems printed on one side and ideograms on the other. Fragments of political speeches played as the protesters marched, in an actualization of what might have otherwise been a protest poem printed on paper. The performance was meant to be concluded with a libretto, which was never performed. The intent of the demonstration was to express her horror at the political upheavals of the late 1960s and early '70s: Watergate, Vietnam, the Watts riot, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The title is borrowed from Disneyland's amusement park trains, an ironic commentary on the political power of collective physical movement and the commodification of culture.

Through the excerpts from political speeches and the posters with deconstructed slogans ("Civil Rights" rendered as "Civ ILL rights," for instance), Solt sets in motion a fragmentation of language that mirrors a rapidly polarizing culture questioning whether words are adequate in the face of political horror and suggesting instead that there is something powerful to be understood in the breakdown of language. Without the mobilization of demonstrators, the poem would lie flat on the page; only in its combination with other elements of performance —the sonic experience of speeches and the reproduction of Solt's demonstration posters as concrete poems—could the spirit of a protest really be captured. Photographs of demonstrators and her signs were published in book form after the initial performance of "The Peoplemover" at Indiana University in 1968. In the collection, we see the poems rendered as reproductions of texts from Solt's protest signs, and they retain some of their political bite, but one imagines this one is still best experienced live.

It is in Solt's best-known book of poetry, *Flowers in Concrete* (1966), that she is most explicit in her intent to marry the lexical to its visual representation, transforming her poems into objects. This interplay between visual art and language is meant to open up a poem to new interpretations, urging readers to question the very structure of the poem, the order in which they read it, and how white space manipulates meaning. While she intends to free the reader from linear interpretation, some of the poems in *Flowers in Concrete* are so literal that it can feel hard to arrive at any personal or collaborative interpretation.

In "Forsythia," for instance, the word *forsythia* serves as the root of the poem, with the leaves shooting out from it to create an acrostic with the words *forsythia*, *out*, *race*, *spring's*, *yellow*, *telegram*, *hope*, *insists*, and *action*. These words might spur inquiry, compelling a reader to make their own connections, to form a narrative in which these seemingly unrelated words grow together and shoot off in all directions. But the forsythia shape makes it natural to interpret the poem, and the word's associations, more literally: as a bush. The visual product is interesting and the project itself satisfying, but some of these floral poems are rendered in a way that is visually arresting but not necessarily emotionally resonant.

It is Solt's lesser-known poems, which are also her more formal and arguably her most unapologetically emotional poems, that moved me—poems that might be overshadowed by her more experimental and visual works. The collection opens with *What the Girl Might Have Said*, a book of poems that were written before her debut, *Flowers in Concrete*, and that, until now, had not been published together in full. They reveal a poet mesmerized by the arcs of love, its demands and limitations, its crescendos and spectacular extremes.

In "Saturation Point," she writes:

> love goes
> that's bad e-
> nough

Love comes
there's no such
joy

Love comes
and goes
while old love

bleeds still—
that's
too much!

And in "YOU HAVE FAILED but":

do not say love
disappoints you
now
that love is
grace
grace is

love
given in trust
freely
trust fails

While visually they appear more orthodox than some of her other work, these poems encapsulate the ecstasy and terror of falling in and out of love in a masterfully concise, nearly schematic way. For this reason alone, Solt's love poems succeed at achieving something more resonant, I think. Her meditations on love might seem contrary to a movement that opposes sentimentality, as well as to her own lack of interest in what she refers to as the "emotionalism" of traditional poetry. The difference, Solt might argue, is that sentimentality is a crutch that conventional poetry relies on to evoke emotion, whereas true emotional resonance is a hard-won response to the most succinct and thoughtfully constructed art.

In 1976, Solt published *Marriage: A Code Poem*, a composition made from the prehistoric "universal language of signs and symbols." Inspired by the composer Iannis Xennakis, who believed that musical scores conveyed the most complicated ideas of all the art forms, Solt thought of the most complicated arrangement she could imagine—marriage. On one page she constructs a design she calls marriage, and on the facing page she deciphers her design with a glossary of signs and their respective meanings. The symbols are categorized into groups: relationships, moods, dimensions, and conclusions. They look like this:

⬗ = “lying next to: touching but clear of”
Λ = “omissions”
◠ = “hold”

And they represent the range of elements that form coupledom. In assigning the universal signs and symbols her own definitions, Solt manipulates the very form and function of such a pragmatic glossary, providing readers with a personal understanding of the essential components of a marriage, and lays bare the perimeters of her experiences as a poet who sees relationships in a truly expansive way. It feels correct, this universal puzzle of togetherness.

These poems, too, are literal, but instead of feeling predetermined, they possess a breadth and a playfulness that require a reader to project onto the poem what they might project onto a marriage itself. There is the fatigue of puzzling through something together, but also, if you are successful, the thrill of establishing, from the puzzle itself, a common language.

One of the most basic tenets of concrete poetry is a resistance to poetic form and narrative as a structuring system. There is a kind of monastic reverence to be found in the efforts of a poet like Mary Ellen Solt, whose dedication to the concept fueled her tireless desire to construct new containers in which to hold each new iteration of the same feelings. One could argue that her visual poems, in their adherence to an architecture or their sturdy permutations, can at times feel lacking in emotion. This argument is easily disproved if you believe that central to any desire for subversion is a kind of yearning, a reaching for a new way to express the most human of emotions: grief, joy, love, and fear.