

REVIEWS

Emmett Williams, ed., *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*. Reprint. New York: Primary Information, 2013. 342pp. \$28

The concrete poetry movement of the 1950s and 60s is notable for having unfolded in exactly the way international literary movements are not supposed to. Initiated by a Bolivian-born Swiss artist, concretism arose nearly simultaneously in a number of literary peripheries. Its centers of activity were not New York and Paris but Bern, São Paulo, Darmstadt, Scotland, Tokyo, Vienna, and Toronto; its most energetic theorists emerged in postcolonial Brazil. Indeed, by the end of the 1960s concretism had gained only a tenuous foothold in the centers of literary modernism and avant-gardism (via Ilse and Pierre Garnier in Paris and Aram Saroyan in New York) but continued to flourish in its outposts.

In releasing a facsimile reprint of Emmett Williams's 1967 *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, Primary Information provides us with a magisterial document of concretism's emergent period. Along with Mary Ellen Solt's *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (1968), Williams's anthology originally appeared at the end of the 60s, providing a cumulative view of the achievements of the prior two decades. The reprint should continue to serve as an excellent introduction to concrete poetry, offering a cross section of the concrete movement's first two decades. It should also reopen unanswered questions about this curious episode in the history of literary modernism: why concretism happened when and where it did, and what its formal aims and accomplishments were. Marjorie Perloff, in her most recent monograph, describes concretism as an *arrière-garde* consolidation of decades of modernist innovation, synthesizing the prewar achievements of the Euro-American avant-garde into something that looked and felt new. (The de Campos brothers, notably, understood their project to be a Poundian one, and took the name of their influential journal, *Noigandres*, from *The Cantos*.) Yet Perloff's account does not explain why concrete poetry's emergence was so geographically anomalous, or why the movement and its products spread so rapidly and widely, despite being ostensibly resistant to translation. While none of it quite matches the dazzling virtuosity of later generations of visual poets (for example, Johanna Drucker and Derek Beaulieu), the best of the early concrete work documented in Williams's *Anthology* clarifies the unifying impulse behind the movement's disparate activities. This impulse lies in a sensitivity to the medium of the printed

word, especially to the fissures and discontinuities that arise when it comes into contact with other media. Despite the group's preference for sans serif sleekness, the strongest of the early concrete poems remain visually and conceptually fascinating because their attempts to triangulate letters, sounds, and things never quite go smoothly.

Concretism, in its heroic phase, resided somewhere at the intersection of text-based visual art, the older tradition of "pattern poems," sound poetry, commercial design, Cagean proceduralism, Poundian modernism, semiotic theory, and perhaps even Black Mountain objectivism. Despite this pedigree, concretism is sometimes accused of a naïve Rousseauianism that seeks to repair the rift between words and things, writing and speaking, writing and acting. Yet one of the movement's seminal theoretical documents refutes this accusation. In their manifesto "Plana-Piloto para Poesia Concreta," (1958) the illustrious Brazilian trio of Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari define concretism as the "tension of word-things in space-time." That is, the concrete poem opens up a "verbivocovisual" "linguistic area" that maximizes the differing capacities of "digital" textual representation and "analogical" graphic design, but does not reconcile the two. The effect produced by the concrete poem is, as the trio puts it, a "coincidence and simultaneity" of the phoneme and grapheme, but not their identity. Far from being a naïve instance of the iconic fallacy, then, concretism seeks to produce tension, and not reconciliation, among "word-things in space-time."

Take, for example, a seminal classic by the poet generally thought of as the father of concretism, Eugen Gomringer:

silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio

This poem is more than a twee visual pun in which typographical silence stands in for the notion of silence itself, form fitting its content snug as a glove. When one looks a bit closer, the form-content correspondence in "silencio" is riddled with fissures. The term "silence" posits the absence of something, is a negative rather than a positive description. The typographical silence here consists in the absence of the word "silence" itself. Strictly speaking, then, the absent center of the poem is more silent than silence. The insistent repetition that surrounds it, in contrast, is oddly garrulous: its form consists in continuously rearticulating a designation of absence, as if ineffectually castigating a noisy child. If one repeats oneself when speaking of silence, one can only be responding to noise, and responding to it by creating

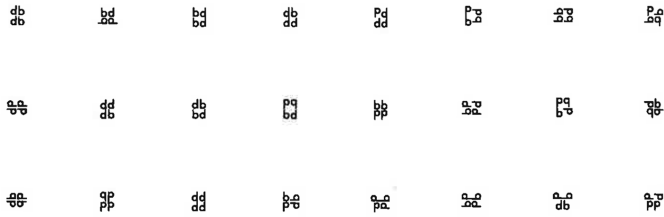
more of it. Gomringer's poem, then, misses the concept it is trying to iconize in two directions. On one hand, it posits something more silent than silence, a negation without negated content; on the other, it repeats the word "silence" so strenuously as to drown out any silence that there might be to hear. The poem reaches a third level of incongruity when one considers that any printed text, and especially an unrecitable visual poem, does its work in silence. Far from being a tidy illustration of the concept announced in its title, the poem strains toward an impossible feat of triple negation: a silence more silent than the articulate silence of printed words.

Gomringer's poem is not some kind of enhanced multimedia presentation of the concept "silencio," but rather an interrogation of the possible meanings that the term might take. The more one looks at a poem like "silencio," the more letters, sounds, and things become unstable in their relations to one another. Williams's republished *Anthology* gives us occasion to take a new look at such early classics of concrete poetry, and makes it clear that they are sustained by a sensitivity to the different media and materials involved in writing poems—speech, writing, thoughts, things—and the kinds and degrees of misalignment among them. In addition to Gomringer's "constellations," the book collects a large number of well-known early poems: the Brazilian Noigandres group's mystico-erotic constructions, printed versions of Ian Hamilton Finlay's installations, and the sober word-play of Friedrich Achleitner and Gerhard Rühm, among others. Several relatively forgotten names and poems also stand out in the collection. Minimalist typographical experiments by Heinz Gappmayr meditate on single words (*ich, sind, etwas, ver*) to forceful effect. Notably, one Gappmayr poem consists in the word *alles* repeated twice: once in luxurious typographical elongation, and once with all five letters superimposed illegibly over one another:

a l l e s

This slender poem crystallizes the weighty epistemological problem of how to imagine totality. Is the “all” a collection of discrete elements or a homogenized mass? Can there be totalization without deindividuating compression? Ronald Johnson’s “Io and the Ox-Eye Daisy,” lettered by John Furnival, appears in its entirety, a timely and long out-of-print supplement to the recent publication of Johnson’s magnum opus, *Ark*. Furnival’s own work is represented by a detail from “The Fall of the Tower of Babel,” a large typographical collage that struggles to contain swarms of characters from different alphabets within a larger structure.

Williams’s *Anthology* also includes lesser-known work by a handful of important figures whose paths intersected with the international concrete movement. Henri Chopin’s poem about “viandes,” written in response to a stomach ulcer, and his plan for a poetic skyscraper in homage to Charles de Gaulle, display the French sound poet’s bizarre humor. Selections from the artist’s books of the prolific Swiss bookmaker and sculptor Dieter Rot (Dieter Roth) are among the most dazzling and conceptually forceful in the anthology. “Some variations on 4⁴,” for example, is a proceduralist tour de force, systematically arranging lowercase “b”s (or perhaps “d”s) into a permutational grid:



Deployed in miniature constellations, the alphabetic characters become simple directional vectors, reduced to a level of semantic minimalism even more radical than that of the phoneme.

Not all of the work included in *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* holds up so well after half a century; like much respectable but ultimately discardable writing, some of the poems understand all too well what they are doing. Williams’s own “SENSE SOUND,” which gradually exchanges the letters of the two titular terms until they change places, and Mary Ellen Solt’s famous floral letter-images do not withstand the ravages of time, probably because they succumb to the iconic literalism that stronger concrete poems elude. More durable is a forgotten and rather inscrutable Solt poem called “Moon Shot Sonnet,” constructed in the proper fourteen-line pentameter form out of nonsemantic directional symbols (inspired by TV coverage of the first moon landing). This poem presages the more recent alliance between visual

poetics and conceptualism, its elegant graphic presentation embodying a meditation on formal and technological positivism. Here Solt reminds us that the urgent imperative to innovate haunted both literary modernism and Cold War-era technological development:



As one of only three women (alongside Ilse Garnier and Bohumila Grögerova) to appear in its pages, Solt's presence in *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* emphasizes how masculinist the movement was, despite its geographical diversity. This is not the only reason that, six decades after Gomringer and the de Campos brothers first began experimenting with typography, concretism is beginning to look as if it unequivocally belongs to the history, rather than the present, of the literary avant-garde. The tidy miniatures characteristic of the early concretists have since been incorporated into parallel streams of experimentalism (as in the work of Susan Howe), reimagined within the new conceptualist paradigm (as in the work of Derek Beaulieu), and abandoned in favor of extended artist's books (as in the work of Johanna Drucker). However, Williams's *Anthology* remains excellent as a document of the extraordinary energy and diversity of the early concretists (in geography and aesthetic orientation, if not gender). A poetics of the print-medium, concrete poetics explores the dissonances and blockages that are the inevitable remainder of attempts to fit medium to message and form to content. The early work documented in *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* addresses these problems with exceptional clarity and energy. Such issues are not specific to any particular language, national tradition, or gender; they concern the very material basis of written (or printed) language itself, and this may at least partially explain the international character of concretism.

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