

# direct poetics

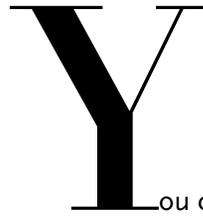
8630 Wardwell Road, Bainbridge Island WA 98110, Drew Kunz, ed.

Guy Bennett · *Concerning the Visual in Poetry*

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*I once found myself not reading a book  
but staring at the letters....*

– GERARD UNGER



You could say that all written poetry is inherently visual, and this is certainly true. Not of poetry alone, however, but of all instances of written language. You could argue that the multiform nature of the poetic text – as opposed to the more uniform appearance of written prose – tends to emphasize the visual qualities of poetry. This is certainly true as well, though it is a question of form, not ontology, and visual poetry is not a poetic form but a form of poetry.

In a broad sense, the term “visual poetry” can be understood to mean any poetry that accords obvious significance to the visual aspect of the poem. The abstract poem, the calligram, the concrete poem, the constellation, the *drukssel*, the elementary poem, the evident poem, the ferro-concrete poem, the free-word poem, the ideogram, the kinetic poem, the lettrist poem, the mechanical poem, the optical poem, the opto-phonetic poem, the painting poem, the pattern poem, the plastic poem, the poster poem, the symbiotic text, the *tiksel*, the typewriter poem, the typoem, the typogram, and the zeroglyph are all types of “visual poetry,” though the terms are far from interchangeable. To paraphrase Mary Ellen Solt, so many kinds of experimental poetry are being labeled “visual” that it is difficult to say what the word means (Solt, 7).

In a more restricted, and thus more precise and useful sense, the term “visual poetry” refers to a particular kind of “visual poetry,” one that flowered in the 1950s and ’60s, but was no longer practiced with any regularity after the early 1970s. Its specificity resides in the emphasis placed on the graphic nature of the printed or written sign, which is brought so predominantly to the fore that it occludes the semantic potential of that sign by obviating any linguistic context in which it might signify something – were it only a sound – thus radically reducing, if

not altogether eliminating the possibility of conventional linear reading, that is, ultimately, reading for meaning.

It follows that the visual poem, in this more specific sense, is inherently meaningless. Unburdened by the conceptual weight of signifiers, signifieds, and other such symbolic clap-trap, it is but itself: an autonomous (i.e. non-referential), aesthetically organized instance of written language. It ignores the figuration of concrete poetry and the calligram and, needless to say, has little if anything to do with the traditional linear poem articulated spatially – whether lexically or phraseologically, formally or typographically – on the page. Visual poetry in this sense is the subject of the present essay.

Schwitters once wrote: “Not the word but the letter is the original material of poetry.” Were I to rephrase that statement for the purposes of the present essay, I would say that the letter *form* is the original material of *visual* poetry, and the study of the visual poem might very well begin by considering the position the poet takes vis-à-vis the letter form. At its most minimal, the visual poem has as both its point of departure and final destination the letter shape, though it is rare that a poem consist of a single sign.<sup>1</sup> More often than not, multiple instances of a given letter are assembled into an abstract composition that plays on the graphic structure of the letter form, perhaps the most characteristic example being Hansjörg Mayer’s 1962–’63 collection *alphabet*.<sup>2</sup>

In these poems (figs. 1, 2 and 3), Mayer combines letter forms according to their structural logic (i.e. their horizontal, vertical and/or diagonal strokes, their curves and counters, etc.), creating purely visual compositions. They are compact, asemantic works that explore the structural relationships of letter forms and the amalgams those combined forms create against the white space of the page. They do not seek to activate any potential meanings the letter shapes may have individually, nor any they may take on when organized into a poem. Mayer, as Stephen Bann has written, “is not concerned with meaning: the letters which he uses are not so much legible as supremely *visible*. ... The significance of his work lies in the fact that he uses the printed letter quite simply as a material.” (Bann, 11)



FIG. 1

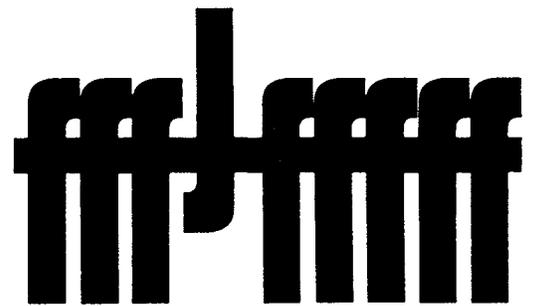


FIG. 2



FIG. 3

In contrast, let us consider a concrete poem by Ladislav Novák (fig. 4). It, too, is formed from a single sign, but as is generally the case in concrete poetry, the semantic potential of that sign is brought into play.

“individualista” is essentially a visual pun. Its humor results from the complex of meanings at work in the poem, and which (as is often true of concrete poetry) convey a relatively obvious, essentially didactic message – in this case: “Don’t conform.” Such semantic play is entirely lacking in Mayer’s poems as they do not pretend to meaning. They are strictly visual, semantically transparent works – ideograms unencumbered by ideas – and they operate in the free field of graphic form and color. They are minimalistic, even excessively so, whereas most visual poetry tends toward a richer typographic palate comprising multiple letter and alphabetic forms, often in combination with basic geometric shapes.

For example, “e – o – ö” by Ernst Jandl (fig. 5) is characterized by a structural tension created by the juxtaposition of the roundness of those three letters and the conflicting triangular and square shapes they combine to form. Furthermore, the two-dimensional poem cleverly suggests visual depth and translucence through strictly typographical means: the square appears to be set in front of the triangle, the crossbar of the *e* creating a darker color than that of the *o* with its open counter. The square, as if transparent, lets the darker color of the triangle show through, so to speak, giving a median color created by the accented *ö*. The resulting gradation of typographic color evokes the parallel phonetic gradation of those letters, *ö* being roughly equivalent to *o* and *e* pronounced together, as demonstrated in the homophonous ligature *œ*.

The visual poetry of John Furnival is more elaborate still as it combines a broad range of letter forms into a more intricate whole. As a result of overprinting, many of the letter shapes are obscured, thus limiting our “reading” of the poem to the recognition of its constituent elements, and the way in which they are combined to create the composition. In Furnival’s work, there is frequently an underlying geometric structure which is created by repeating and displacing groups of letters around a central axis, producing an intricate pattern reminiscent of Islamic art, with its tendency to geometric abstraction (fig. 6).

## individualista



FIG. 4

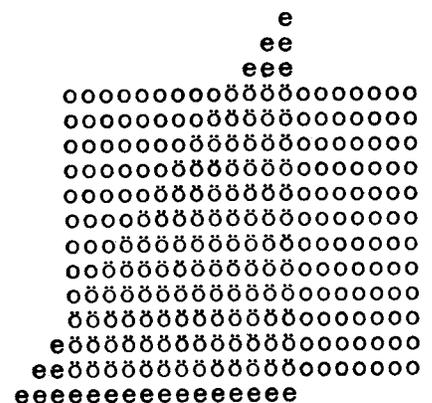


FIG. 5

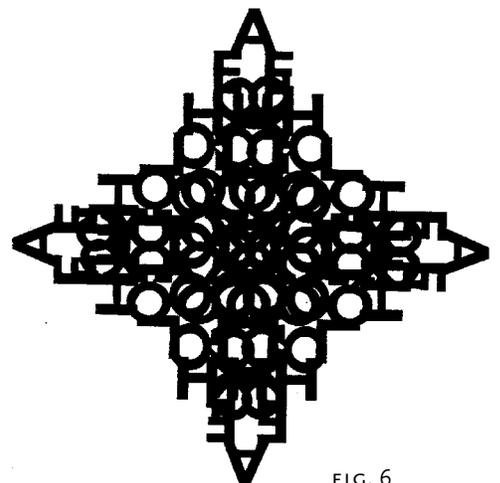


FIG. 6





The “annulment of the semantic message,” I have argued, constitutes the very specificity of visual poetry, though some might complain that it also represents its major flaw, as one might justifiably ask: is this really poetry at all? Can we accept a poem wholly devoid of semantic “content”? A writing that refutes interpretation? The answer, of course, is yes. There is a long tradition of semantically obscured or transparent poetry. One thinks of folk poetry and nursery rhymes, with their frequently “meaningless” turns and refrains, the French *fatrasie* of the Middle Ages, the “nonsense” poetry of 19<sup>th</sup> century writers like Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, not to mention the “sound” poetry of such luminaries of the historical avant-garde as Ball, Huelsenbeck, Khlebnikov, and Kruchenykh, to name just a few. Nor should we forget that visual poetry, as defined here, is a product of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was practiced by a number of poets, among them Marinetti, Pietri, Schwitters and Werkman.

As Paul de Vree has written: “[Visual poets] still adhere to the notion of poetry because *through the text* – however rudimentary, reduced or truncated – they are confronted with an *optical process*. The text remains primary.” (*klankteksten*, p. 9). I would add that poetry, whose medium is language, begs an exploration of all aspects of that medium, and should in no way be limited or bound to that part which bears meaning. It seems self-evident that poets would investigate and exploit the potential of written language in their work, as it is *in and through writing* that poetry is generally conveyed and, in a broader sense, language eternalized. And to quote Schwitters again: “Eternal lasts longest.”

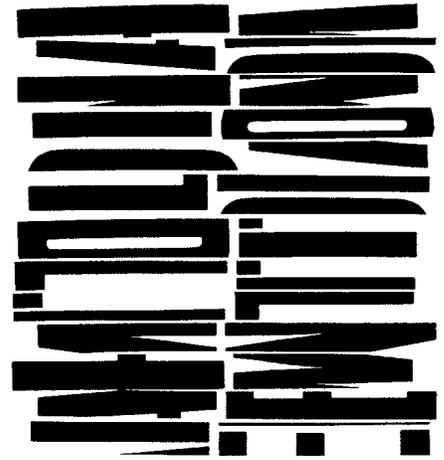


FIG. 15

## NOTES

- 1 Rare but not unknown: Vasilisk Gnedov's 1913 collection *СМЕРТЬ ИСКУССТВУ* ["Death to Art"] includes two one-letter poems, which may well be the first examples of this minimalist genre. In the early 1920s Schwitters himself wrote at least two one-letter poems, "das w-gedicht" ["the w-poem"] and "das i-gedicht" ["the i-poem"]. In neither case can these texts be considered visual poetry as defined here, however, since Gnedov's poems play on the meanings of the letters in question and Schwitters' on their sound (he would recite them in his public performances).
- 2 *alphabet* by Hansjörg Mayer was reprinted in 2002 by Seeing Eye Books.
- 3 A number of the visual poems from *Capitolo zero* were recycled by Sandri in her *Clessidra: il ritmo delle tracce* ["Hourglass: The Rhythm of Traces"] from 1994, where they were paired with verbal texts written in Italian. This work was published in a facsimile English edition in 1998 by Seeing Eye Books.
- 4 From "A Possible Way of Interpreting Some Zeroglyphics," Niccolai's afterword in Adriano Spatola's *Zeroglyphics* (Los Angeles and Fairfax: Red Hill Press, 1977), translated by Niccolai and Paul Vangelisti. (Unpaginated) Seeing Eye Books will reprint this collection in 2006.

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