



BEYOND WORDS

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EXPERIMENTAL POETRY AND THE AVANT-GARDE





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## BEYOND WORDS



Words are at the heart and soul of poetry. Whether summoned in hours of deep contemplation, snatched from momentary flashes of inspiration, or allowed to tumble out freely in the absence of conscious intervention, words combine to give a poem shape and substance: in the mind, the voice, on the page. From traditional lines of alexandrine verse to the latest experimental forms, they remain the essential element, carriers of sense, sound, cadence, meaning. So what is poetry *beyond* words?

The works in this exhibition challenge us to ask that question. How? Not necessarily by leaving words behind, though some of them certainly do this too. Lettrist *hypergraphies* blast the written word to bits. Not even vowels and consonants are safe in Gil Wolman's *mégapneumes*, or the *cri-rythmes* of François Dufrière, or the recording sessions of Henri Chopin. But in most cases words abound, giving shape and substance to nearly all the compositions of experimental poetry here on display. Just as words have always done in poetry? Not quite. Even when they seem to make up the entire poem, words are by no means the only (or often even the primary) compositional element. Typography, layout, color (of ink or paint), even the material supports on which these words appear (paper, canvas, wood, iron, magnetic tape, to name a few) all come into play. But don't such elements *belong* to words? Aren't they simply part of them, an incidental part at that, subordinate but necessary for words to take concrete physical form and hence be read or heard? Well, no. Typography, layout, ink, material supports may be necessary for words to appear

So I judge a poem's importance, if it is obviously as well conceived as possible, if it is also the most perfect, but above all if it was capable of joining together man and poet, ... of becoming *flesh and blood, movement and gesture, word and speech*, if it knew beauty and started to sing, knew all the possibilities and contained them all (all that which in the end we call spirit) in order to be and remain, departed from out of chaos, *the last writing*. Only then is it a poem ...

Henri Chopin, 1960

on a page, but they can also be deployed for other purposes, even at cross purposes, striking out at words, challenging their sense, altering or entirely subverting their meaning. By taking them up as compositional elements in their own right, experimental poets and artists of the avant-garde ask us to explore possibilities for creative expression in the purely visual, aural, tactile qualities of physical media. They ask us to look beyond words.

The range and diversity of experimental poetry is breathtaking. For more than a century now, the drive to uncover expressive potential in the nonverbal, physical side of the poetic medium has swept across continents and oceans, from Europe to America, Brazil to Japan, giving rise to new movements, forms, and genres along the way. Much as Cubists and Post-Impressionists set the stage for a revolution in modern art by exploring the flatness of the canvas and the physical qualities of paint, experiments with the raw material of printing, handwriting, and (later) voice and sound recording opened the door to a new understanding of poetry by altering perceptions of the nature and properties of language and its media. In fact, the two revolutions were deeply intertwined. Collage, montage, juxtaposition, superimposition, the inclusion of sculptural and performative aspects, found material, film, video, and sound, the predilection for mixed media in general are all common to contemporary art and experimental poetry today. So much so that the line between them, blurry from the start, seems increasingly difficult to draw. In both cases, ripples sent out by explosions at the turn of the

twentieth century continue to widen. There's no telling when or where they will end.

*Beyond Words* explores just a small part of this vast universe. Giving little more than a brief nod to the revolutionary work and significance of the historical avant-garde, the exhibition focuses almost exclusively on postwar Continental Europe. Even here, vital contributions from Eastern Europe are largely absent, despite the intimate ties that linked experimental poets on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Connections to British, American, and Japanese allies are likewise lost. Most conspicuous of all, the Brazilian concrete poets make only a cameo appearance, and primarily in the role of foils, their massive and global impact on experimental poetry and the postwar avant-garde notwithstanding. Such omissions are glaring. Without collaboration of like-minded artists around the world, the creative expanse of visual and sound poetry within postwar Europe itself is hardly imaginable. A glance at exhibition programs or the pages of avant-garde reviews such as *Cinquième Saison*, *Ou, De Tafelronde*, and *Lotta Poetica* suffices to see the importance Europeans placed on maintaining these global networks at the time. The choice to focus on works from the Continent – and on France, Belgium, and Italy in particular – obscures much that was essential to their composition and meaning. But it also leaves room to explore at least some intricacies of artists and movements that by and large still remain unfamiliar even to connoisseurs of postwar experimental poetry. The works of Isidore Isou, Maurice Lemaître, Gil Wolman, and François Dufrêne provide

opportunity to consider the defining role of Lettrism and its various offshoots, relegated to the margins of many existing narratives, in shaping battles over visual and sound poetry in the 1950s and '60s. The crucial alliances of Paul de Vree, first with Henri Chopin and later with Sarenco, emerge from the shadows to reveal the centrality of Belgium in the '60s and '70s. Alongside Sarenco, Lamberto Pignotti, Luciano Caruso, and Ugo Carrega offer a glimpse into the complex, obscure, yet densely populated universe that is Italian *poesia visiva*. Although a small episode in a much larger story, the span of visual and sound poetry in postwar Europe easily stretches the bounds of a single exhibition.

Bristling with color and texture, sight, sound, and passionate fury, experimental poetry reached a particular, heightened intensity in the decades immediately following the Second World War. Technological change played a part in driving this amplification. The widespread availability of microphones and reel-to-reel tape recorders allowed sound poets to explore dimensions of the voice that had never been heard before, teasing out physical properties of breath and utterance beneath the articulation of words in order to manipulate, splice, overlay, compose with them. If the standard typewriter remained a favorite of visual poets, new processes of silkscreen, offset, and stencil printing, and above all the so-called "Mimeo Revolution" in photoduplication vastly extended the repertoire and reach of their experiments. But technology only goes so far. Behind the impassioned deployment of these new media lay a desire to challenge the unthinking use of words

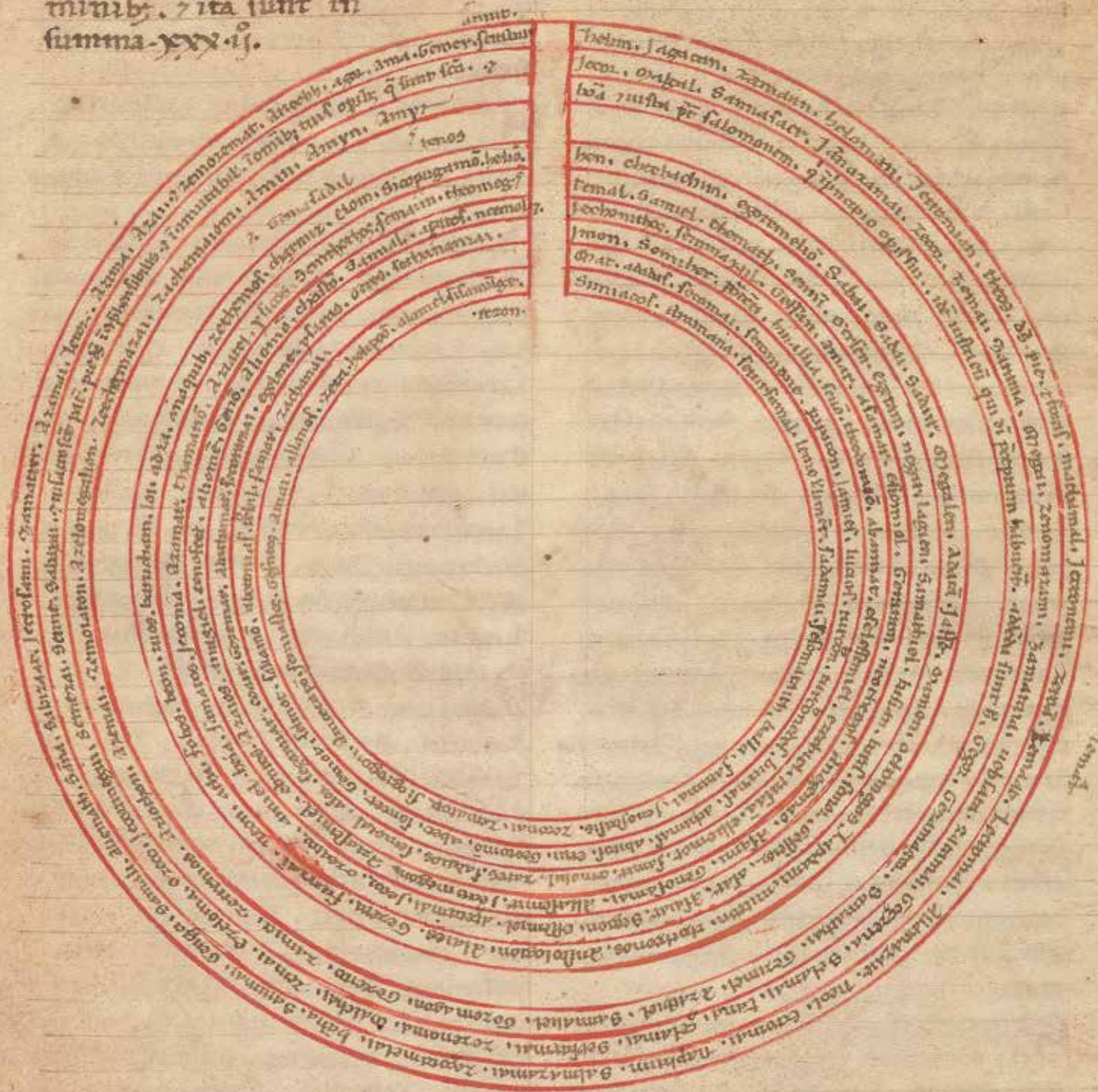
as reliable purveyors of truth, especially when they fell into the hands of a monstrous regime. The unspeakable trauma of the Second World War resounds in early Lettrist poetry, in the "transhuman" compositions of Altagor, and most persistently through the oeuvre of Henri Chopin, who first learned to savor the raw sounds of the human voice on an infamous "death march" from Nazi concentration camps, surrounded by fellow survivors from Eastern Europe speaking in tongues he could not understand. "After the war we witness the death of language as it was known," Chopin wrote of the birth of postwar sound poetry: "the Word-Accomplice-of-the-Old-World was besieged and broken." Assaults on the "language of power" only grew more urgent and strident in the works of younger poets like Jean-François Bory. Dismayed by Cold War propaganda, the increasingly sophisticated manipulation of text and image by mass media, the mindless conformity and new wars they seemed to dictate, experimental poets took their anger into the streets. Spelled out in letters the size of human bodies, wrapped in surgical bandages and splattered with red paint, the word 'VIETNAM' said it all in Alain Arias-Misson's first "public poem," displayed for the benefit of Christmas shoppers on a busy Brussels square. "*Poesia visiva* is 'a Trojan horse,'" Eugenio Miccini declared, explaining the strategy of inverting the "iconography of mass media" in collaged poems: "and it wages war like a guerilla."

The experimental poetry of postwar Europe not only asks, but demands we take a closer look at words, pry into them, beneath them, behind, above, and around them, in or-

der to see what they are made of. Only then can we begin to grasp their meaning and explore possibilities that (also) lie beyond them. Drawn from rich archival holdings at Beinecke Library, the works on display tell only part of the story. As we continue to grapple with text, image, and sound in another age of new media and technological revolutions, it seems well worth delving deeper into this past, much as the postwar avant-garde looked to Futurism, Dada, and Constructivism in confronting the challenges of their own day. *Beyond Words* is an open invitation. Time to start digging in.



timoris. Vna in explicabilis ho  
minibz. 7 ita sunt in  
summa xxx. iij.



usböwötääääUu pögiff  
fümmsböwötääääUu pögiff  
fümmes bö wö tää zää Uu,  
pögiff,  
kwiiee  
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kwiiee.

# IN PRINCIPIO ERAT

Dedesnn nn rrrrrr, (E) 2  
Ii Ee,  
mpiff tillff toooo;  
Dedesnn nn rrrrrr  
desnn nn rrrrrr  
nn nn rrrrrr  
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Iiiii  
Eeeee  
m  
mpe  
mpff  
mpiffte  
mpiff tilll  
mpiff tillff  
mpiff tillff toooo,  
desnn nn rrrrrr, Ii Ee, mpiff tillff toooo,  
nn nn rrrrrr, Ii Ee, mpiff tillff toooo, tillll  
rrrrr, Ii Ee, mpiff tillff toooo, tillll, Jüü-K



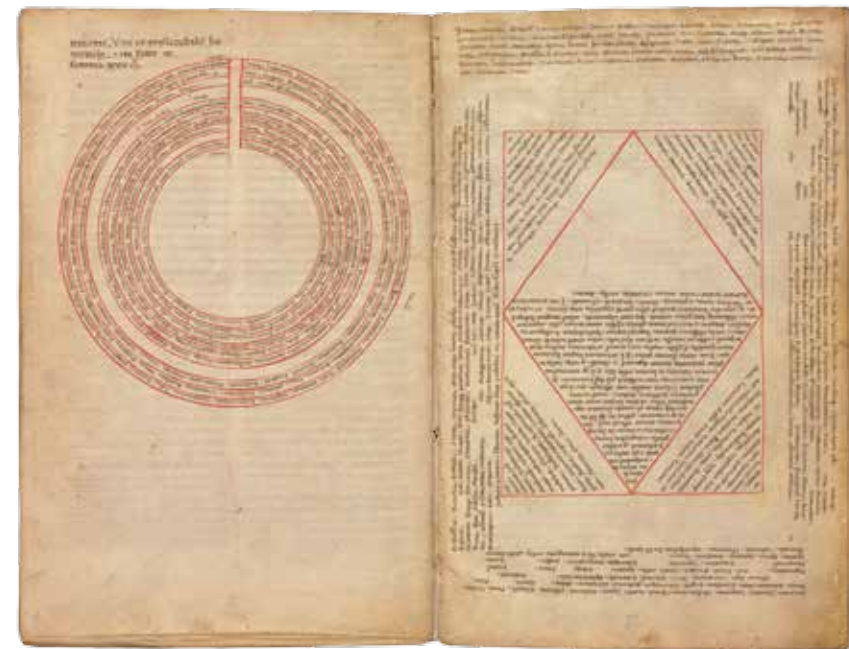
# IN PRINCIPIO ERAT

Words lead back to their origin, which is the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, so gifted with infinity that they finally consecrate Language.

Stéphane Mallarmé, 1897

In the Beginning was the Word, so it is written, but the drive to push beyond it, to seek beauty and truth in abstract configurations, permutations, incantations of unfamiliar sounds seems to be almost as old as writing itself. Dating from the fourth century B.C.E., Greek *technopaignia*, or “games of skill,” are among the earliest survivals of written poetry that drew significance not only from words, but also from their physical arrangement in patterns and talismanic forms. As prayers and magical incanta-

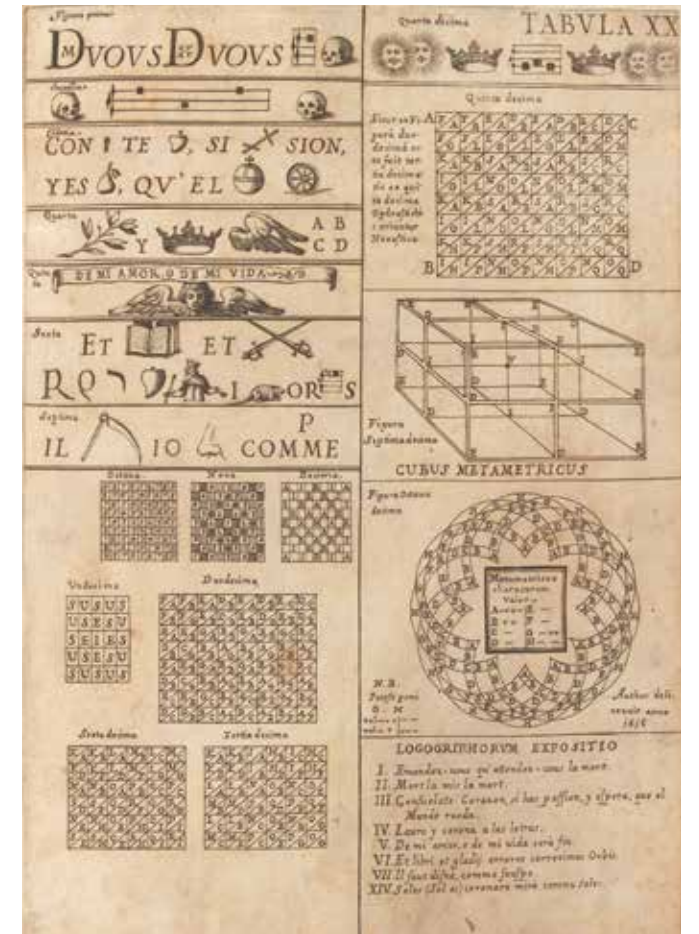
Apollonius (Tyranensis?), *Ars Notoria, Sive Flores Aurei* (France, or Northern Italy, c. 1225).



tions, they likely point back to earlier traditions and were in turn passed on by medieval scribes who painfully copied them (and no doubt added embellishments of their own) over a millennium later. Beautifully inscribed in red and black inks, the concentric circles and elaborate arrangement of text in and around a tilted square in this thirteenth-century manuscript evince a fascination for ancient forms of *ars notoria*, the direct invocation of esoteric knowledge, avidly pursued by scholars at late medieval universities and renaissance academies. The “words” themselves consist largely of strange-sounding names of deities, transcribed into Latin from Arabic translations of the original Greek text, commonly ascribed to the first-century Neopythagorean philosopher, magician, and master in the art of making talismans, Apollonius of Tyana. Inspired by examples from antiquity, poets of the Renaissance and Baroque took great delight in composing with shapes and letters, producing a stunning array of labyrinths, mazes, acrostics, mesostics, lipograms, telestics, palindromes, rebuses, proteus poems, and other styles that were all the rage across Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The sober tastes of neoclassicism and Enlightenment reason eventually spelled the end of this extravagant *poesia artificiosa*, but not before the Cistercian monk Juan Caramuel de Lobkowitz compiled its se-

crets in his magisterial *Primus calamus ob oculus ponens metametricam* of 1663.

Pursued with such giddy abandon by Renaissance and Baroque poets (as Enlightenment critics sourly proclaimed), experiments with the visual, non-verbal aspects of writing fell out of favor in the Age of Reason and did not resume in earnest until the turn of the twentieth century. The renewed fascination with shapes, sizes, configurations of words and letters on the printed page seemed to spring up fully formed, almost out of nowhere. First published in the literary review *Cosmopolis* in 1897, Stéphane Mallarmé’s *A Roll of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance* stands alone at the dawn of modern visual poetry, brilliant, haunting, serene, revolutionary, a monument to the Symbolist conjuring of Language unrivaled in its impact on avant-garde experiments with typography and layout for generations to come. “The ‘blanks’ in fact assume importance, strike first, versification demanded it, as silence all around,” Mallarmé explained. With only “a third of the leaf” left for words, font size, placement, and the sheer presence of the material support played a central role in achieving poetic effect across tumbling lines of fragmented verse. “The paper intervenes each time as image, of itself, ends or resumes, accepting the succession of the others.” The effect of this “*distance copiée*, which mentally separates groups of words or words among themselves,” was to “accelerate and sometimes to slow the movement, the scansion, the intimation even, in accordance with a simultaneous vision of the Page: this latter taken as a unit, as Verse or the perfect line is elsewhere.” Unsatisfied with initial results, Mallarmé worked



Juan Caramuel Lobkowitz, *Primus calamus ob oculus ponens metametricam* (Rome, 1663).



Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard: poème* (Paris, 1914).



Marcel Broodthaers, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard: image* (Antwerp, 1969).

Belgian experimental poet Marcel Broodthaers conveys the profound and lasting impact of Mallarmé's *Coup de dés*, translating it from "poem" into pure abstract "image" in this striking reimagining of 1969. Words disappear entirely in an otherwise painstaking recreation of the Gallimard edition, leaving only visual registers of size, shape, and placement in geometric blocks of canceled text. Translucent paper allows not just a single spread, but the entire succession of layouts to shimmer forth in a vision Mallarmé himself could scarcely have imagined. A fitting tribute, in Broodthaers's eyes, to the Symbolist poet he believed had "unwittingly invented modern space."

out meticulous instructions for layouts of a large paper edition but died before the project could be realized. It would take another seventeen years for the poet's "simultaneous vision" to achieve full measure on the magnificent two-page spreads of the 1914 Gallimard edition.

In the beginning was Mallarmé. But new experiments with typography and layout were quick to follow, pushing visual poetry in ever more adventurous and radical directions. Stunned by the dynamic fracturing of the pictorial plane in Cubist paintings, avant-garde poet Guillaume Apollinaire strew constellations of language clusters across the page to construct his *calligrammes*, an early attempt at non-linear writing and simultaneity that likewise drew inspiration from the brash concoctions of text and image in modern advertising: "You read the handbills catalogs posters singing at the top of their lungs/There's this morning's poetry for you, and for prose there are the newspapers." Such flights of fancy took Apollinaire far from the serene world of Mallarmé, who condemned newspapers as an "improper use of printing" good only for use as "packing paper." But the Italian Futurists went even further. Demanding the "destruction of syntax," F. T. Marinetti launched a "typographic revolution" aimed at freeing words from the straightjacket of sense-making and poetic convention altogether. While Apollinaire's *calligrammes* conceal a prescribed sequence and order, Futurist "Words-in-Freedom" defy any single approach, challenging the reader to find his or her own way through a "chaos" of verbal and visual signs held together only by onomatopoeia and intuitive "analogies" formed from the adjacencies of discordant elements." I oppose

••• IN PRINCIPIO ERAT •••



*Parole, consonanti, vocali, numeri in libertà* (Milan, 1915).

Not just words, but "CONSONANTS VOWELS NUMBERS IN FREEDOM," the banner of this Futurist manifesto proclaims. With its profusion of mathematical symbols, fractured and distorted words, letters repeated in strings or standing alone like mountain peaks, Marinetti's 1915 "Montagnes + vallées + routes + Joffré" takes a decisive step onto the (battle)field of avant-garde poetry beyond words.



the decorative, precious aesthetic of Mallarmé and his search for the rare word, the one indispensable, elegant, suggestive, exquisite adjective,” Marinetti fumed. “Moreover, I combat Mallarmé’s static ideal with this typographic revolution, which allows me to impress on words (already free, dynamic, and torpedo-like) every velocity of the stars, the clouds, airplanes, trains, waves, explosives, globules of seafoam, molecules, and atoms.”

There was no turning back. Once unleashed, the creative fury of avant-garde experimentation raged swiftly across Europe, tearing conventional understandings of poetry apart in explosion after explosion of radical innovation. By the time Marinetti visited Saint Petersburg in January 1914, he was greeted with jeers from “Cubo-Futurist” poets, who insisted Russian experiments with *zaum*, or “beyondsense” language, had already surpassed anything “Words-in-Freedom” had to offer. “We alone are the *face* of our Time. Through us the horn of time blows in the art of the world,” declared David Burlinuk, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Velimir Khlebnikov in their 1912 manifesto – defiantly wrapped in burlap – *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*. With the outbreak of the First World War, assaults on conventional language assumed a new urgency, especially for the poets who launched Dada on stage at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1916. Driven on by the gruesome “sense” of jingoistic nationalism and the carnage it was producing, Hugo Ball’s absurdist sound poetry, Tristan Tzara’s mad calls for the right “to piss in different colors,” and other outrageous acts of Dada performance expressed a contempt for the power

of the word experimental poets would feel all the more keenly after the atrocities of the Second World War. “This age has not succeeded in winning our respect. What could be respectable and impressive about it?” Ball demanded in 1916, as the battles of Verdun and the Somme ground on. “Its cannons? Our big drum drowns them out. Its idealism? That has long been a laughing stock, in its popular and its academic edition. The grandiose slaughters and cannibalistic exploits? Our spontaneous foolishness and enthusiasm for illusion will destroy them.”

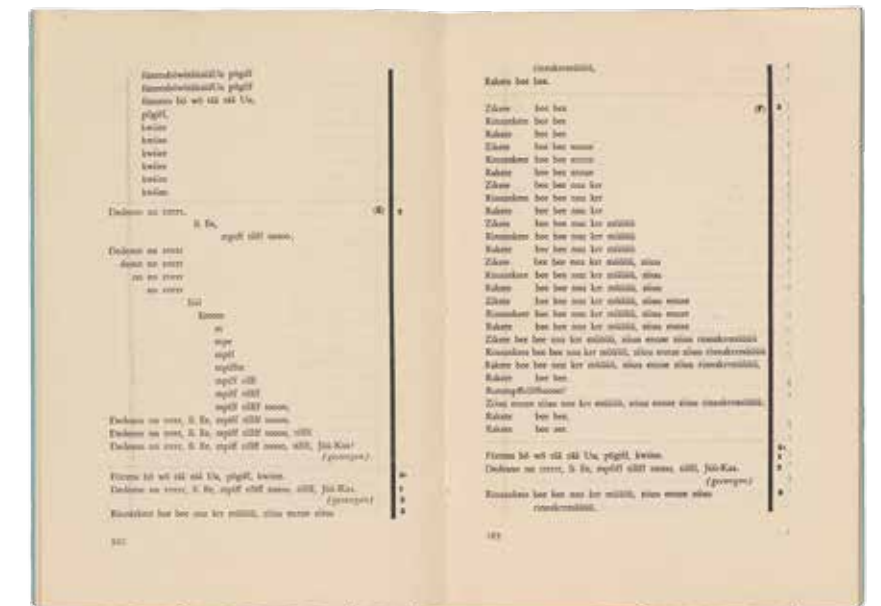
Experiments with visual and sound poetry continued to evolve in the 1920s and ‘30s, unfolding in a landscape far too vast to explore here. As Mayakovsky, Kruchenykh, and others channeled the explosive wave of Russian Futurism into the early Soviet avant-garde, forging alliances with Constructivist artists and designers like El Lissitzky, *zaum* also traveled west with the Georgian poet and master print-maker Iliazd, who joined in the creative fervor of Dada and Surrealism in Paris after fleeing Tblisi in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. Ripples, cross-currents, and swirling convergences fed a torrent of new experimental poetry, filling the pages of avant-garde journals with masterpieces of high modernist innovation, many of which later found a place in Iliazd’s epoch-making 1949 compendium, *Poetry of Unknown Words*. Doubtless one of the most beautiful artist books of the twentieth century, *Poésie de mots inconnus* pairs original works by Picasso, Braque, Chagall, Matisse, Léger, Miró, Giacometti, and others alongside the “unknown words” of Ball and Tzara, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, Michel Seuphor, Pierre Albert-Birot, Camille Bryen, Raoul Hausmann, Kurt Schwitters

– in all twenty-two visual and sound poets, including of course Iliazd himself. Set out with typographic genius on page after exquisitely crafted page, the work is a masterpiece in its own right, an irrefutable testament to the creative achievements of what is now called the “historical avant-garde.”

But it was only another beginning. Before moving on to the radical departures of the postwar avant-garde, it is well worth pausing to dwell over one last landmark of the modernist era: the *Ursonate* of Kurt Schwitters. As Mallarmé’s *Coup de dés* towers at the dawn of modern visual poetry, the *Ursonate* has assumed nearly mythical status in origin stories of contemporary sound poetry. Emerging from over a decade of experiment, recital, and refinement, the poem lives and breathes the spirit of creative intermingling of the 1920s, drawing as deeply on its crosscurrents as any work of the age. The “poster poems” of Raoul Hausmann, a central figure in Berlin Dada, gave Schwitters the initial nudge, but Russian Futurism and *zaum* also played a hand, as did the artist’s close collaboration with the Constructivist El Lissitzky in the crucial years of the poem’s composition. And it is surely no accident that Schwitters sent a personally inscribed copy to the founder of Italian Futurism, F.T. Marinetti. Composed almost entirely of pure vocal acoustics, or “primal sounds,” the *Ursonate* relies on typogra-

phy and layout to indicate timbre, cadence, and melody – like Mallarmé, Schwitters viewed the results of his experiment as a musical score – while strings of letters denoted the sounds themselves. “Not words, but letters are originally the material of poetry, Schwitters wrote, explaining the concept of “consistent poetry” behind the *Ursonate* in 1924. “Letters do not have ideas. Letters have no sound, they only give possibilities to be interpreted into sound by the one who performs.”

Kurt Schwitters, *Ursonate* (Hannover, 1932).







LETTRIST DETONATIONS



# LETTRIST DETONATIONS

To vanquish, Lettrism must be PURIFICATION, VENGEANCE, TERROR.

Soon the first fires will engulf the bordels of Paris to make more room for Lettrism.

I promise you this!

MY LIFE must be a great ACTION.

Gabriel Pomerand, 1946

Lettrism, the first avant-garde movement of the postwar era, arrived in Paris in the suitcase of a young Rumanian exile, Isidore Isou, who had picked his way across war-torn Europe to throw a bomb in the lap of the literary establishment in 1945. "It is not a matter of: destroying words for more words, nor of: forging notions to clarify their nuances, nor of: mixing terms to make them hold more meanings," Isou insisted, but of "unfolding before dazzled spectators marvels realized in letters (debris of destructions)." Conceived in the darkest hours of the Nazi conquest of Europe, Lettrism spoke the language of war, occupation, trauma, holocaust. "The Word ... Assassinates sensibilities. Indifferently uniforms torturing inspiration. Twists tensions," one reads in the first manifesto of Lettrism, dated 1942: "The word is the first stereotype." Once in Paris, Isou set out to "vanquish the City," joining forces with the young vagabond poet Gabriel Pomerand to put Lettrism on stage in the jazz cellars of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, while at the same time lobbying Jean Paulhan, the influential editor of the *Nouvelle Revue française*, to publish his *Introduction to a New Poetry and a New Music* with Gallimard. Proclaiming himself leader of the first movement to unleash the explosive force of pure sound and naked letters, Isou focused his attack not only on conventional poetry, but also – and most vehemently – on the poets of Dada and Surrealism, whom he accused of having betrayed the historic mission of the avant-garde by stopping their assault on language at the level of words. "Dada is dead!" Isou declared, disrupting a lecture by Michel Leiris at the premier of Tzara's latest play, *The Fight*, in 1946. "We know all that, enough of all that old stuff!" his rowdy band

**GUERINGUE! himler, guimièrè, mèringue  
jimièrè, jèringue.**

**HASS!**

**lebanne – letrain; le train lebanne**

**le vanne – leganne – lemains lélan**

**tfff-i tfff-i tfff-i tfff-i**

**tfff-i tfffii tfff-i tfff-i**

**B BB**

**Auschwitz – schwitz – schwitz**

**Auschwitz – schwitz – schwitz**

**Buchenwald!**

**Bouhwald!**

**ADONOOOI! ADONOI!**

**Belsen – Bergen**

**BELSEN – BERGEN!**

**MATHAUSEN!**

**mathausenne:**

**MOGHILOW!**

**MOGHILOOW!**

**Galgal – Raiwensguergue**

**Ranne – Wilde Waibensguergue**

**WOI zennenne FANNY moïsché rachelle**

**OI! CHHEMA ISRAELLE!**

**élohénou lad!**

**élohénou**

**EHAD!**

**M9μ**

Excerpt from Isidore Isou, "Cris pour 5.000.000 juifs égorgés," 1947.

of acolytes chimed in. "We want to hear about something new, let's hear about Lettrism!" When Iliazd held a conference to dispute Isou's claims a few months later, a Lettrist "militant" attacked one of the speakers, wounding him with a chair. The injured party was none other than Camille Bryen, duly honored with a page in Iliazd's ultimate rebuttal, *Poésie de mots inconnus*, which was also a call to arms: "This book was made by Iliazd to illustrate the cause of his companions." The battles over experimental poetry in postwar Europe had begun.

Screamed, shouted, whispered, hissed, Lettrist sound poetry thrived in the intoxicating climate of jazz clubs like the *Tabou*, where Pomerand hurled staccato lines at crowds of dazed revelers, standing on a table in their midst: "Ta ra ta ta + koum bal koum bal + kim piki ta ra ta ta ..." If Isou shocked Parisians with somber poems composed from names of infamous war criminals and death camps – and the "cries" of "butchered Jews" – he also swayed to the rhythm and beat of jazz in more "joyous poems" like "Swing" and "Jungle." Others soon joined in. Just sixteen years old, François Dufrené began composing Lettrist poems in 1947. Three years later, Maurice Lemaitre joined the fold, publish-

ing early compilations in his new review *Ur*, as did Jean-Louis Brau, Serge Berna, Gil Wolman, and other rebellious youth, who quickly found a voice all their own. "Isou was an end. In the beginning was Wolman," the latter wrote in the first issue of *Ur*, poking fun at the exaggerated claims of Lettrism's founder: Experimenting with microphones in live performance, Wolman had in fact pushed fur-

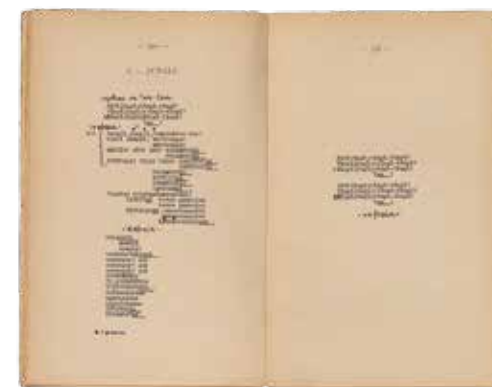
ther, tearing letters apart

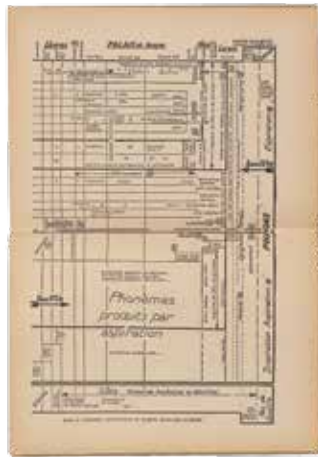
to reveal qualities of the voice and sounds of the human body concealed inside. "From every letter there emanates a mass of vibrations that remain inaudible." Detached from consonants and given structure as an "en soi" independent of vowels, *breath* was the medium of Wolman's *mégapneumie*, a new form of wrenching, guttural sound poetry that seemed to point beyond Lettrism from the start. "Isou did not destroy the word for the letter but the concept, which naturally led him to *take back* the letter and create words,"



*Au Tabou: 4 Recitals Lettristes* (Paris, 1950).

Isidore Isou, "Jungle," in *Introduction à une nouvelle Poésie et à une nouvelle musique* (Paris, 1947).





Maurice Lemaître, *Bilan lettriste* (Paris, 1955). Lettrist experiments with the sounds of the body quickly ran up against the limits of the alphabet as a tool for scripting a poetry beyond words (Kurt Schwitters had already made the same discovery when composing the *Ursonate*). Published in Maurice Lemaître's 1952 *System of Notation for Lettries*, a phonetic chart lays the groundwork for a whole scheme of complementary signs and symbols, arranging elements of vocal acoustics according to the anatomical part responsible for their production – lips, palate and tongue, nose, larynx, lungs (and whether either inhalation or exhalation was involved).

Wolman mused, working out the implications of his own discovery in an early fragment. “*Mégapneumie* takes possession of each of the signs of letters and commences the notation of all human sounds.”

Lettrism, however, was about more than just sound. While the wild nights of improvisation at the *Tabou* and other venues drove some to explore pure bodily acoustics devoid of visual signs – Dufrière abandoned writing (and Lettrism) altogether to pursue his *cri-rythmes* through live performance and sound recording – Isou, Pomerand, and Lemaître quickly turned to painting, sculpture, photography, and cinema as means to pry new creative potential out of the graphic, or “ocular,” dimensions of their medium. Pouring letters, signs, and symbols over

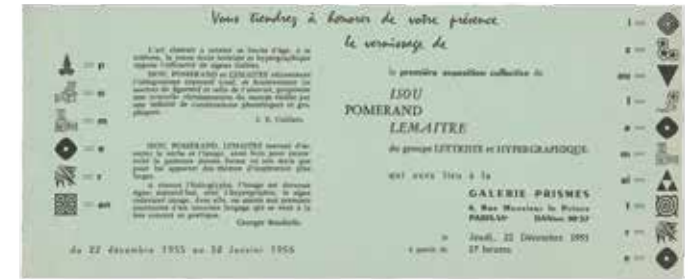
the surfaces of canvas, walls, photographs, even raw film footage, sculpting them into material objects, the Lettrists strove to create an entirely new form of art from the seemingly endless potential they had discovered here. “Starting with painting, Isou looks toward the transformation of the *art of the tableau* and opens the path of discovery as far as the coincidence of the *plastic object* with the *orthographic element*,” the founder of Lettrism enthused: “Any form at all can become a *letter*. An enormous universe of writing, in which things mutate into personal signs, unveils itself to the lovers of construction.” Still, sound continued to play a role in early Lettrist experiments with the visual and tactile properties of “letter/objects.” Coinciding with attempts to invent a system of notation for sound poetry, Lettrist painting and sculpture seemed in many ways to grow out of them, extending their reach to include rebuses, “hieroglyphs,” and other visual elements that served as phonetic signs. The initial result, as Wolman rightly noted, was a return to “the word” very much at odds with the original explosive force of Lettrist detonations. Eye-catching works such as Isou’s *Journals of the Gods*, one of three “metagraphic novels” published in 1950, shattered the conventions of writing only to replace them with a

Maurice Lemaître, photo lettriste, in *Ur* no. 3 (1953).



fresh profusion of “personal signs” that, once sounded out in a slow (and as many found, tedious) process of decipherment, led straight back to the established syntax, grammar, and vocabulary of ordinary French. It was only with Lemaître’s inauguration of *hypergraphies* at the Galerie Prismes in 1955 that Lettrism left sound puzzles and rebuses behind to explore the pure visuality of signs.

True to its combative origins, Lettrism sparked rife contention and battles that quickly fractured the movement into rival factions in the early 1950s. While Dufrière left with others to launch *Le Soulèvement de la Jeunesse*, or “Uprising of Youth,” Wolman, Berna, and Brau formed a renegade group with Guy Debord, founding the Lettrist International in 1952. Debord, who in turn went on to lead the Situationists in a radical assault on postwar society and culture, had joined Isou’s movement only a year earlier, but the impact of his brief encounter with Lettrism was decisive. A barrier to many at the time and later, the very stridency of Isou’s anti-establishment claims, his attacks on the historic “betrayals” of Dada and Surrealism, his insistence on the explosive potential of Lettrism as a revolutionary force made a strong impression on Debord. “After an intense five-hour discussion in a bar in the Quarter, I had to admit Isou is a god,” the young poet and self-described “terrorist” informed Marc,O, a central figure in Lettrist cinema, upon arriving in Paris in 1951. It would not be long before he was accusing Isou of having betrayed the cause. But first Debord learned much from Lettrist technique, particularly the *bouleversement* (“overturning,” “perturbation”) of found images, scavenged from mass



La première exposition collective ... du groupe lettriste et hypergraphique (Paris, 1955).

culture and juxtaposed with the subversive messages of a “discrepant” sound track, employed to scandalizing effect in his first experimental film, *Screams for Sade*. Disagreements over Lettrist cinema – Isou derided the film as “poorly made” – helped precipitate the break not long after the premier, a moment that continued to occupy Debord for years and appears among the “load-bearing structures” of *Mémoires*, a masterpiece in the art of *détournement* composed with the Danish painter and fellow Situationist Asger Jorn in 1959. Separating “extremists from those who no longer stand close to the edge,” the Lettrist International became a platform for the elaboration of key concepts and strategies of the Situationist critique – and also for fighting Isou on his own turf. “Nothing can bind us momentarily, if not the revolutionary utility of *provocation*,” Debord exclaimed in an invitation to the Lettrist International’s own exhibition of *métagraphies* at the Galerie du Passage in 1954: “what’s in play is the seizure of power.”



Galleries in fact became another battleground, as Lettrism and its controversies spilled over into the world of art. Based out of the Galerie Prismes, where Lemaître launched the *groupe lettriste et hypergraphique* in 1955, Robert Estivals played an important part, steering early convergences between the struggles of experimental poetry and avant-garde art into yet another rival faction, the Ultra-Lettrists. Estivals initially promoted the turn to purely visual explorations of the sign, devoid of linguistic signification, and helped Lemaître organize the exhibition of *hypergraphies*, which also featured work by Isou and Pomerand. But by 1958 he had enough. Denouncing Isou's "egomaniacal" tendencies, Estivals turned to the prodigal Lettrist François Dufrêne, who had long since left the movement to pursue his *cri-rythmes*, and

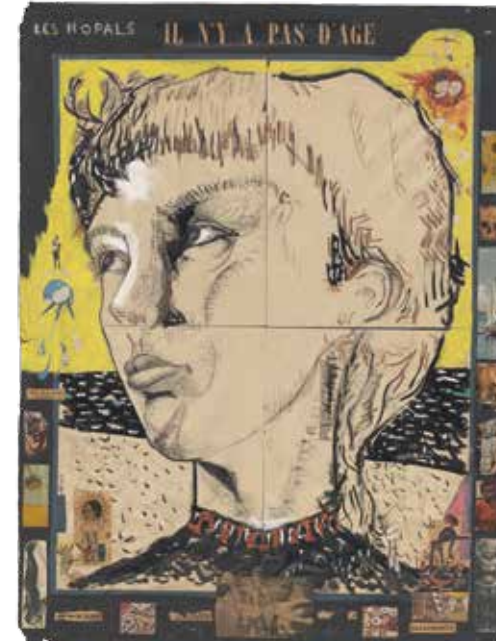
Guy Debord and Asger Jom, *Mémoires* (Copenhagen, 1958).



a complete "outsider," Jacques Villeglé, to announce the formation of Ultra-Lettrism in the second issue of his review *Grâmmes*. The label itself was suggested by *décollage* artist Raymond Hains, whose work with shredded letters had been inspired by early Lettrist performance. Along with Dufrêne and Villeglé, Hains took to the streets of Paris in the early 1950s, seizing on the spontaneous jumble of texts, colors, and forms that surfaced in torn layers of advertising posters as a new visual art. "The gestural savagery of a multitude is individualized to become the most remarkable manifestation of 'art made by all and not by one,'" Villeglé exclaimed. Emerging not from individual acts of creative genius, but from modern mass culture and society at large, the lacerated posters of the *affichistes* posed a direct challenge to Isou's cult of originality, or so it seemed to Estivals, who blamed the Lettrist leader for having stunted the movement's growth with his overblown style and childish need for fawning acolytes. Ultra-Lettrism would revive that potential by channeling it in a truly revolutionary – and collectivist – direction. The alliance did not last long. Villeglé and Dufrêne soon left to join Hains, who had



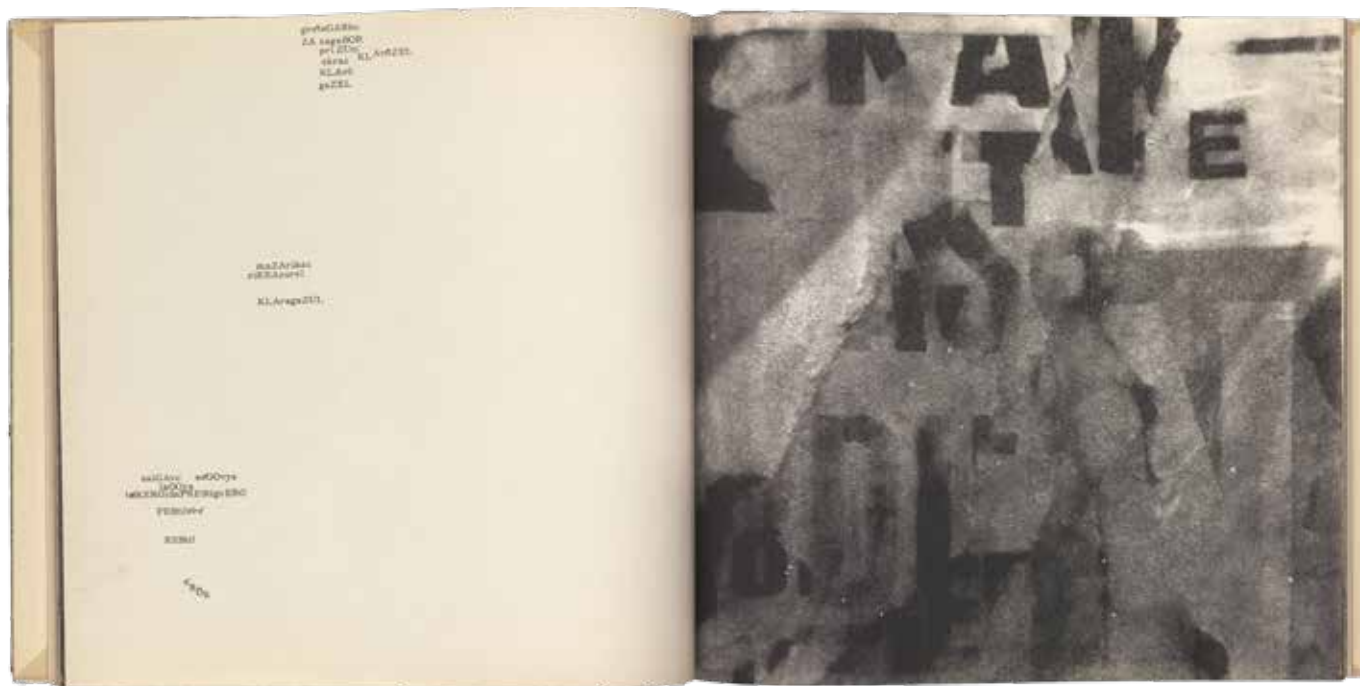
Avant la guerre: 66 métagraphies influentielles (Paris, 1954).



Isou's art of *métagraphie* continued to occupy Situationist circles long after the break with Lettrism. Composed by Ivan Chtcheglov, the inventor of psychogeography, in 1963, this metagraphic portrait depicts Michèle Bernstein, one of the central figures in both Lettrist and Situationist Internationals (and Debord's wife at the time). The Situationist leader himself labored over similar pieces. Photographs of Debord and Isou still face off in one of Debord's collaged *métagraphies*, worked out over several years between 1957 and 1962.

refused to join the movement and accused Estivals of having usurped the term 'Ultra-Lettrism.' Taking the name with them, the trio exhibited their work in a collective show at the first Paris Biennale in 1959 before going on to make art history alongside Yves Klein, Jean Tinguely, Daniel Spoerri, and other avant-garde artists as signatories of Pierre Restany's founding manifesto of *Nouveau Réalisme* in 1960. Left behind with *Grâmmes*, Estivals launched an increasingly acerbic assault on the egoistical caprice of both the Ultra-Lettrists and the Situationists. Only "socialist art" could express the collectivist, anti-individualist spirit of the postwar era, Estivals insisted, and he devoted the final issues of *Grâmmes* to promoting another new movement, "Signism," as the ultimate inheritor of Lettrism's radical promise.

After nearly a decade of schisms and conflict, however, Lettrism itself was still very much alive. Staging a series of exhibitions and recitals, circulating original artwork in luxury portfolios and a second, limited-edition run of *Ur*, Isou and Lemaître reasserted the position of the mainstream movement just as battles over experimental poetry and the avant-garde were entering a crucial new phase, not only in Paris but across Europe, in the early 1960s. Much of this renewed energy came with the recruitment of a new generation of Lettrist poets and artists – Jacques Spacagna, Roberto Altman, Roland Sabatier, Alain Satier, and others. But it undoubtedly also owed much to the unexpected return of two renegades, Brau and Wolman, who rejoined Isou and Lemaître at the beginning of the decade, attending regular meetings of the Lettrist leadership and taking part in group shows and concerts. Dufrêne also played a role,



François Dufrêne, *Tombeau de Pierre Larousse*, lithographs by Wolf Vostell Wuppertal: Verlag der Kalender, 1961. Composed between 1954 and 1958, François Dufrêne's epochal *Tomb of Pierre Larousse* first appeared in *Grâmmes*, alongside one of Villeglé's lacerated posters and Estival's polemics against Isou. Powerful, playful, and profound, *TPL* announces the death of language, digging a grave for "that cop" Larousse – scion of French dictionaries, "the police of words" – as it mows down names and catchphrases scavenged from the headlines in alphabetical order. Even so, the return to writing seemed a "false route" to Dufrêne, who had abandoned all forms of notation to work with pure sound in composing his *cri-rythmes* and viewed the poem as a "regression" into mere aesthetic

play. Still, *TPL* was serious business, presenting disfigured words in strict patterns based on musical and phonetic principles, so much so that the poet himself expressed chagrin to discover it followed several basic "laws" Isou had set out in the *Introduction to a New Poetry and a New Music*. "Do there exist other 'lettric' works at the present hour as important in their dimensions and as dense as the *Tomb of Pierre Larousse*?" Dufrêne asked at the end of his long preface in *Grâmmes*. "To my knowledge, no." Published three years later, in 1961, this fine-press edition juxtaposes Dufrêne's meticulously sculpted layouts – reminiscent of Mallarmé's *Coup de dés* – with lithographs of lacerated posters by Fluxus artist Wolf Vostell in what is doubtless one of the most beautiful pieces here on display.

initiating the tense reconciliation by bringing the rival factions back together for a show on experimental art he organized at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris in 1960. The following year, while Estivals's Signism exhibition went nowhere, Isou, Lemaître, Brau, and Wolman celebrated the fifteen anniversary of Lettrism – now dubbed "The School of the Sign 1946" – with a collective show of paintings at the Galerie Weill and a recital of Lettrist poetry at the Museum of Modern Art in which Wolman performed his *mégapneumes* for the first time since the rowdy happenings at the *Tabou* more than a decade earlier. The renewed encounter with Lettrism was particularly important for Wolman, who had abandoned sound poetry and turned to the visual arts. Expelled by Debord just months before the founding of the Situationist International in 1957, Wolman focused on painting, at first in an "informal" style influenced by Jorn and the Cobra group. But after returning to the Lettrist fold, he again began experimenting with the visual aspects of language, integrating obscured graffiti-like writing and fumetti into his paintings before inventing the practice of "Scotch Art," which involved the transfer of found texts from mass media onto canvas or wood using adhesive tape. A brilliant blend of *métagraphie* and *détournement* with obvious affinities to the lacerated posters of the Ultra-Lettrist *affichistes*, the result was no doubt the high point of Wolman's artistic career and some of the most striking materially-based visual poetry produced in postwar Europe.

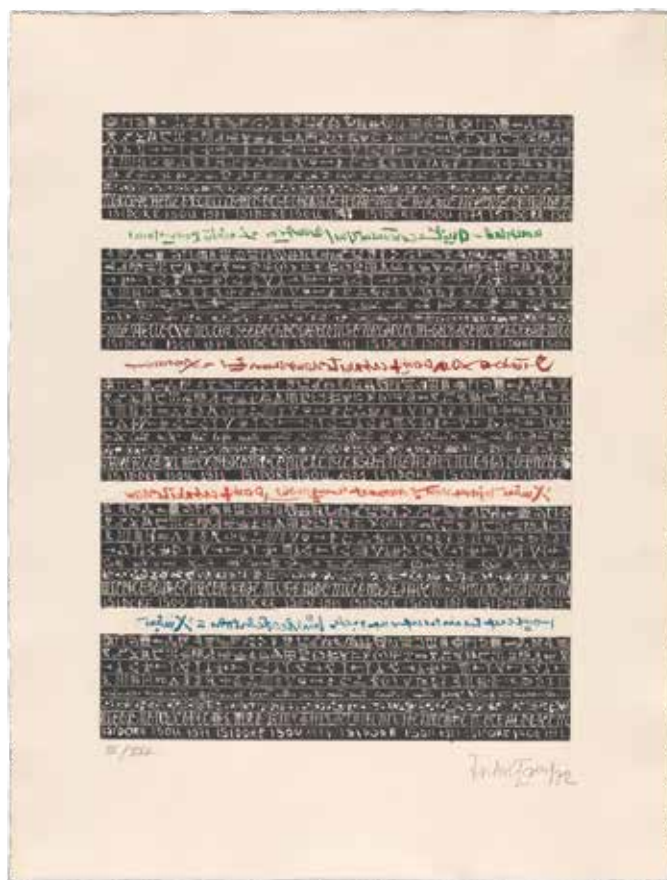
The year 1963 was a pivotal moment for experimental poetry and the postwar avant-garde, one to which we will return again

and again in subsequent pages. While concrete poetry marked its tenth anniversary amid mounting political criticism and a radical regrouping of younger poets across Europe, while *poesia visiva* came to life with the founding of Italy's *Gruppo Settanta*, while Henri Chopin and Paul de Vree forged their alliance to put sound poetry on the map in Belgium and France, Isou and Lemaître pushed the revived Lettrist movement front and center in battles over *Nouveau Réalisme*, informal art, and the place of poetry in the Parisian art world. Perhaps at the height of his influence, Isou worked with gallerist Valerie Schmidt to host a landmark 1963 exhibition, *The Letter and the Sign in Contemporary Painting*, which pointedly situated the Lettrists vis-à-vis an

Gil Wolman, *Untitled*. Newsprint collage on canvas, "art scotch" (c. 1965).







Isidore Isou, etching and aquatint, in *Les hypergraphies: 13 peintres lettristes* (Paris, 1974).

impressive array of avant-garde artists, including (to name but a few) Cobra painter Pierre Alechinsky; Armand and his fellow *nouveau réalistes* Dufrené, Hains, and Villeglé; Fluxus artists Robert Filliou and Jean-Jacques Lebel; Antonio Tàpies, Jasper Johns, and Cy Twombly. In conjunction with the exhibition, Brau and Wolman launched a new review, *A*, the first Lettrist journal to feature original artwork, while Lemaître began publishing the new luxury edition of *Ur*, also in 1963. The results seemed encouraging. Curated by prominent art critic Michel Tapié, a major group exhibition at the Galerie Stadler featured the Lettrists the following year, joined once again by Dufrené, who showed his *dessous d'affiches* (versos of lacerated posters), and 1964 also saw the publication of special issues entirely devoted to covering the movement in *Bizarre* and *La Revue musicale*. But the writing was on the wall. Breaking away from Isou and Lemaître, Brau and Wolman had already launched the short-lived Second Lettrist International at the end of 1963, and a Lettrist recital at the Odéon Theater the following February ended with a decisive rupture, as Wolman refused to join the group in the traditional "Lettrist choruses" after giving a final public performance of his *mégapneumes*. "Isidore's theories were revolutionary fifteen years ago. Today they are totally outmoded ... appallingly old-fashioned," Wolman told the assembled press afterwards: "the new spirit must be imposed."

The words were harsh, but not entirely unwarranted. Times had changed. While some Lettrists sought to tap into the revolutionary currents swelling toward the uprisings of May 1968, a new generation of experimental poets was already leading

the charge – thanks, in part at least, to the detonations Isou and his followers unleashed on Paris in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Once a sign of vitality, internal strife and contention gradually consumed Lettrism, its battles winding down into obscure family squabbles that increasingly isolated the movement from the broader world, while the acrimony generated by strident anti-establishment polemics only served to obscure its legacy still further, as wounded cultural institutions chose to exclude its fiery archives from the historical record. But it would be a mistake to ignore Lettrism. For all the overblown claims, infighting, missteps, and scandals, the first avant-garde movement of the postwar era shaped the landscapes of experimental poetry in fundamental ways. The recitals at the *Tabou* may not have been the first to go beyond words to letters – even Isou acknowledged the historic precedence of Schwitters's *Ursonate* – but they marked a significant departure all the same. Without them, the crucial early experiments with microphones and sound recording that produced Wolman's *mégapneumes* and the *cri-rythmes* of Dufrené would have been unthinkable, yet both continued to inform the work of postwar sound poets long after they had left Lettrism behind for good. The same is true for developments in visual poetry. Hains's experiments with lacerated posters, soon a staple of *Nouveau Réalisme*, grew out of early exposure to Lettrism, but Isou's *métagraphie* and Lemaître's *hypergraphie* also played a role in avant-garde experimentation with the visual aspects of language. *Détournement*, a key strategy for visual poets and artists for decades to come, owed much to its origins in Lettrist



*La Lettre et Le signe dans la peinture contemporaine* (Paris, 1963).

cinema and the practices of *bouleversement*. Inflected through strife, concealed beneath conflict, the Lettrists' impact on art and poetry of the postwar era remains poorly understood. It is time at last to bring Lettrism itself back into the fold.



FLESH, BLOOD, AND WAVES



# FLESH, BLOOD, AND WAVES

Sound poetry traces its origins far back in time, well before its classic iteration in the modernist *Ursonate* of Kurt Schwitters. *In principio erat*. But it emerged transformed by the experience of the Second World War. This was certainly true of Lettrism, and of Isou in particular, with his long list of atrocities committed by the Word – “the first stereoptype” – drawn up under the shadow of holocaust in Rumania in 1942. But it was also true of sound poets outside the Lettrist fold like Altagor, who conceived *métapoésie* as an antidote to “utilitarian language” while seeking shelter from war and ruin on the banks of the Mosel in 1943. “Do you believe these sensations, which emanate directly from the living, are without value? Nothing is more profound than this direct language of interior dynamism, organized according to the laws of phonetics with an eye to the maximum expression.” The trauma of war, fascism, holocaust resonates deeply in the poetry of Henri Chopin. Deported to a Nazi concentration camp outside the Czech city of Olomouc as a French Jew and resistance fighter in 1943, Chopin spent the last years of the war in and out of forced labor camps and prison in Germany before fleeing into the arms of the advancing Soviet army and finally joining a “death march” with survivors from across Eastern Europe struggling to find refuge in Lithuania. Repatriated from a Russian port at Murmansk in June 1945, the poet returned to Paris to learn both his brothers had been killed in the resistance and that he himself had been presumed dead. With the beginning of the Cold War, Chopin again fell into the hands of the military, serving first in Innsbruck, then in French Indo-China between 1948 and 1952. A year after his

But how can this be compared to an audio poem, which is the polyphonic use of bodily noise? Where there was once a work of art like the *Ursonate*, today there is the enunciation of a body that transforms the human body into harmony. Where once literacy was in full force, there is now the unnamed transmission of physical sounds ... Where once there was the end of a language and of words, today there is the commencement of physical particles that announce themselves through the use of waves.

Henri Chopin, 1967

release, he met Altagor. All of these experiences inform the passionate intensity of Chopin’s sound poetry, his visceral insistence on giving voice and agency to the “flesh and blood” of human bodies, his profound mistrust of “the Word-Accomplice-of-the-Old-World,” behind which he perpetually glimpsed the looming menace of dictators, ideologies, relentless “totalitarian” control. “Literacy [*l’alphabetisme*], master of our civilizations, our didacticisms, our dialectics, our métiers, our measures, our ... Yes, above all – our submission to the Law.”

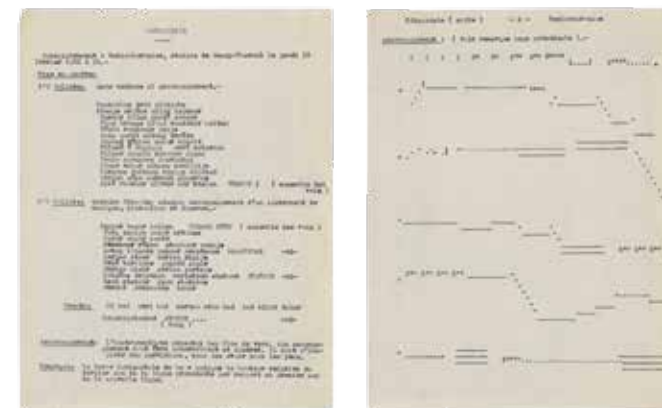
Chopin’s encounter with Altagor was significant. Channeling the trauma of war into *métapoésie*, compositions of “pure vocal/auditive sensations,” the provincial sound poet from a tiny village near Lorraine expressed a potent critique of language and culture seasoned by another element that would be decisive for Chopin: belief in the transformative potential of technology, as long as it was made to serve humanity and not the other way around. Societies “half poisoned by an illusory culture, refractory to their own liberation,” could only “hope that science itself and its technologies will allow them to leave the age of the symbol and the stubborn stage of utilitarian life behind for productions of a freely sovereign art, for a universal music of sound, dynamic or plastic.” The technologies in question were microphones, sound studios, radio, and direct voice recording on magnetic tape – “catcher of the most secret waves,” as Chopin later enthused – all eagerly employed by Altagor, who began preserving “permanent electronic auditions” as early as 1946. By the time Chopin met him, Altagor had been recording and transmitting *métapoésies* over the airwaves

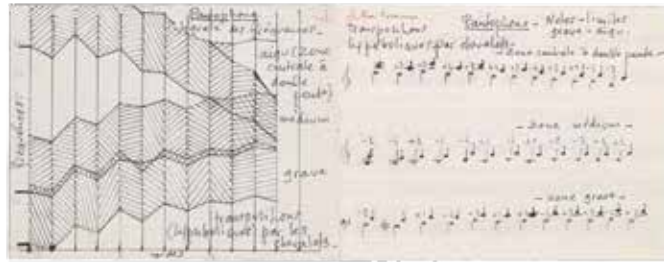
at Radio Lorraine for years, work he continued after settling in Paris, where he collaborated with the sound engineer, broadcaster, composer, and pioneer of experimental electronic music Pierre Schaeffer on various projects, including the 1956 debut of his *Symphonie métapoésique* on Radiodiffusion Française. While he resisted the technological breakthroughs in post-production manipulation central to the work of Schaeffer and Chopin, Altagor shared their fascination with the interplay of superimposed sounds, composing complex scores for multiple voices and instrumental accompaniment and carefully charting the interaction of frequencies in recordings of live performance. The technical expertise gained from studio production certainly benefited Chopin, whose early sound poems were broadcast on radio by Altagor’s wife, Maguy Lovano. Working with Lovano

in 1961, Chopin hosted his first radio series, a program on music and literature, abruptly cut short when the poet arranged for Kafka’s *Penal Colony* to be read on the air in a feature dedicated to “Tyrants and Dictators.” But from there he went on to broadcast a long series of sound performances as a producer for Radio Lausanne in the 1960s.

All but forgotten today, Altagor played a vital part in the battles over experimental poetry in Paris. Giving scores of live performances, broadcasting on radio, publishing tracts, partnering with record clubs to distribute his work on vinyl, he vigorously contested Lettrist claims to precedence and primacy in open debates and a lengthy theoretical treatise, *Arguments for an Absolute Discourse*, which he lobbied Paulhan (unsuccessfully) to publish as a counterpoint to Isou’s *Introduction to a New Poetry and a New Music* with Gallimard in the 1950s. Altagor also joined forces with Estivals, whom he met along with Dufrêne during Lemaître’s *hypergraphie* show at the Galerie Prismes, organizing a public confrontation with Isou in 1958, the year of Ultra-Lettrism, while Estivals featured his work in *Grâmmes* and the first exhibition of Signism three years later. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Altagor continued to experiment and refine, devising elaborate systems of notation in complex scores that might easily qualify as some of the earliest and most striking examples of typewriter poetry, recording the behavior of sound frequencies on color-coded diagrams, inventing musical instruments such as the pantophone, designed to interact precisely with timbres of wordless voices in his *métapoésies*. Recognition has been slow in coming.

Altagor, typescript score of a *métapoésie* (February, 1951).





Altagor, notes on musical instruments (n.d.).

Aside from a brief moment of notoriety in the 1970s – Cramps Records included his work in its anthology of sound poetry – Altagor has lapsed into obscurity. Yet his compositions remained “the most significant of phonetic poetry” for Dufrière, certainly one of the leading figures in postwar sound poetry, while Chopin acknowledged both the precedence and the importance of Altagor’s contributions on more than one occasion. “This is probably the only phonetic poet who mounted an invented language of imaginary syllables and phonemes, which he knew to record, served up by a voice in unheard-of timbres.”

Sound poetry was a revelation for Chopin, an apocalypse in every sense, and so it remains for those who confront his works today. Shocking, bewildering, alienating, surprising, filled with uncanny rhythms and distortions tugging and jostling among the ghosts of words, awkward noises of the body that startle, embarrass, and yes, at times make us laugh. A rude awakening, perhaps, but necessary and liberating, at least for Chopin, who believed it announced the dawn of an entirely new epoch,

strange and frightening to those still living in the shattered past, but no less so than the present would seem to inhabitants of the distant future: “an ancient land, of old customs, worn-out words, myths that feed the comic strips.” With the collapse of tradition, poets were free to discover a language unconstrained by “convention, literacy, grammar, rules, obedience,” a language grounded in the reality of living human bodies, and technology would show the way. “Magnetic tape ... carries enunciated means of the voice and sounds we could not hope to discover by other means, as long as we remained on the surface of sound and of the body.” Just as important, sound recording completely eliminated the need for letters, signs, and symbols: “our new alphabet is called electricity, and everything it absorbs and emits.” Free from the “grafted skeleton” of written language, poetry could ebb and flow without restraint, born by the dynamic rhythms of the new analog media. “The art of our times is found in movement, in light, in sound, in short, in everything that comes to life from the waves gathered by motors, by apparatus for capturing waves like microphones, like television, which must gather the images made for it, of course, but also by it, like the disk, for which we have found an art of sound that did not exist before 1955.”

Born at the crossroads of technology and the human body – flesh, blood, and waves – Chopin’s poetry drove postwar experimentation to radical extremes, quickly surpassing the early work of Altagor and even Dufrière and Wolman, whose *méga-pneumie* he viewed as a historical “turning point” in the poetic discovery of corporeal sound beyond words and letters.

Chopin purchased his first microphone in 1955, well after others had begun exploring the possibilities it revealed, but he seemed determined to make up for lost time from the start. Composing sound poems as early as 1956, Chopin initially confined his experiments to words, often repeated to the point of abstraction, yet clearly echoing the trauma of his wartime experiences in marching cadences: “I work, I work, I work ... I make them work.” Refusing to linger on “the surface” of language and the body, however, the poet avidly followed the advances in microphone technology, acquiring miniaturized devices that could be inserted into the throat, lungs, nasal passages, and even the stomach to recover an endless stream of unknown “voices” from the depths of the human body. “Inside you have an echo with the liquid way in the mouth, with breathing, with a strong sound from the tongue, you have respiration with the body,” Chopin explained. “Altogether it’s like a factory for sound. It was a great surprise for me. The body is like a factory that never stops. The body ignores silence.” Once captured on magnetic tape, human sounds – whether articulated or recovered from deep within – became raw material for a series of manipulations and “montage” on several tracts, as Chopin introduced echoes, reverberations, changes in speed and intensity, before cutting and splicing the pieces back together for replay on reel-to-reel machines. Even so, the composition was not finished, in some senses it never was, since Chopin’s poems relied on live performance for the ultimate effect. Taking charge of playback on stage, the poet ceaselessly improvised, speeding up, slowing down, stopping, reversing the tape, all the while em-

ploying his body as an instrument, using gestures and facial expressions to direct adjustments of sound and lighting levels by a team of attending technicians. An interactive “total spectacle,”

Henri Chopin with his tape recorder.





Chopin's performances finally relied on the audience, which became part of the "ensemble of a real stage to see and feel, utilizing the view of the spectator; but here too with domination of the author (the authors, I should say), utilizing the affective powers of the spectator/listener."

As he developed and refined his techniques in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Chopin assumed a central role in shaping the emergent convergence of experimental poetry and avant-garde art, in which Lettrism and its various offshoots were also deeply involved. Taking over as chief editor after just three issues, Chopin quickly transformed *Cinquième Saison* into a leading review in the field, "a place for encounters without concern for

races or boundaries," which brought together poets, musicians, painters, and sculptors to develop new cross-disciplinary forms of expression grounded in the concrete, physical aspects of artistic media. "But after discovering the disk, it is necessary to promote a creation for this round, inert surface, susceptible to words and sounds," Chopin wrote, announcing his plan to issue sound recordings with each number of *Cinquième Saison* in 1961. "It is necessary

Henri Chopin, "La Pêche," *De Tafelrunde* 8, no. 4 (1963).



to take into account its phonetic powers, and also the 'place' it represents. What is indispensable, then, in a piece written for the disk, is to discover and know how to supplement the text properly speaking with an entire value suggestive of place, which the word will provoke in naming itself, and not drift off into space." More than a publication, *Cinquième Saison* and its successor, *OU*, became a "place" themselves, a dynamic experi-

mental forum for elaborating such possibilities in dialogue with others, while the disks, usually issued in runs between 500 and 1000, gradually collected the results to form a mobile library of cutting-edge sound poetry, including Wolman's *mégapneumes*, the *cri-rhythmes* of Dufrière, "lettries" by Jacques Spacagna, the multi-layered *Scores* of Bernard Heidsieck, and more, alongside some of Chopin's most important compositions of the 1960s. Visual poets also found ample space here – Ilse and Pierre Garnier, Julien Blaine, Jean-François Bory, Paul de Vree, to name a few – as did painters such as Paul Armand Gette and Gianni Bertini, both of whom designed covers for the review. Even kinetic sculpture came into play. "These materials, which I could think of *a priori* as abstract, are concrete," Chopin wrote, laying out his common ground with the sculptor Willy Anthoons in the same issue of *Cinquième Saison* that announced the forthcoming plan for disks. "They are composed with air, wind, breath, shadows, light, games: glitter, or masses, or volumes of force; steps, marches, dances, movements, and sometimes fixities; harmonies, a sort of crystallization of forms that will be present. The ensemble, and each expression, are concrete, as much so as the air that is indispensable for my respiration."

Publisher, editor, facilitator, and practitioner of the new art of experimental poetry, Chopin also made sure it found a place in the galleries, staking his claim alongside Lettrists, Ultra-Lettrists, and others in the turf battles of the

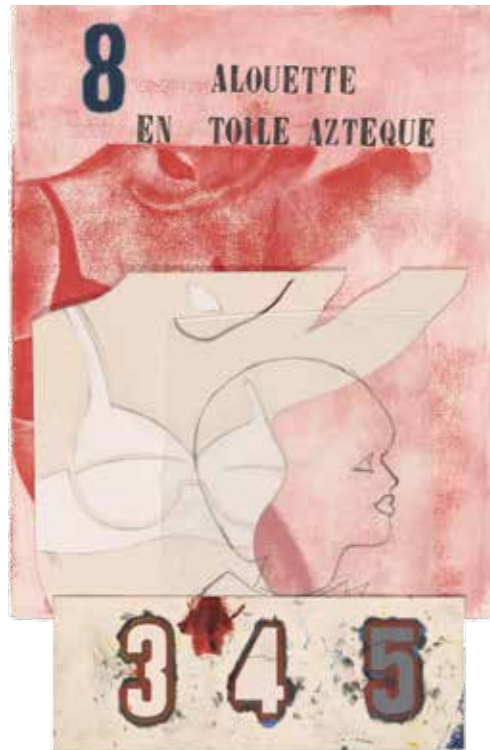
early 1960s. Shortly after taking control of *Cinquième Saison*, he began organizing the first in a series of exhibitions, alternately titled "Objective Poetry" and "Poem / Objects." Co-curated with the poet and performance artist Jean-Jacques Lévêque and the art critic Gérard Guillot, the exhibition opened at the Parisian gallery Art de France in late 1961, followed almost immediately by a second show at the Galerie de la Jeune Parque in Lyon, Lévêque's home base, in January 1962, before making the rounds in a tour across Europe over the next several years. Locked away in boudoirs for contemplation in hours of leisure, poetry could not hope to survive, Chopin declared in his preface to the catalog. It had to engage with the bustle and noise of contemporary society like other living arts.

Jean-Jacques Lévêque and Gianni Bertini, *Stèle pour Adam de la Halle* (Anduze, 1962). Gianni Bertini and Jean-Jacques Lévêque portrayed side by side as two "shipwrecks in their 1962 artist book, *Stèle pour Adam de la Halle*.



*Cinquième Saison* no. 3 (December 1958).





Jean-Claence Lambert and Gianni Bertini, *Les folies françaises d'après 'Elle.'* Paris, 1966.

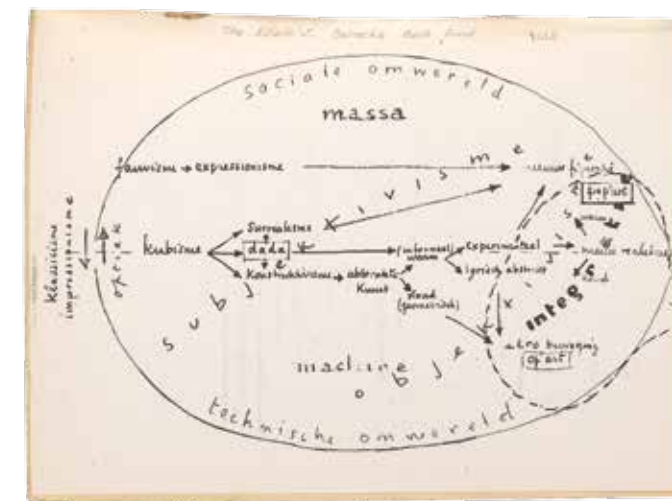
Perhaps the ultimate achievement in “Mec Art,” *Folies françaises d'après 'Elle'* juxtaposes Bertini's manipulated images, drawn from lingerie ads in the French fashion magazine, with biting lines of verse by Jean-Claence Lambert.

“From now on there are but two ways open for poetry, this one, and the stage ... the one plastic, for discovery of lands and skies in full movement, the other phonetic, for the amplitude of human expression. Poetry doesn't talk any more, it *does*.” Situating the work of Chopin and Lévêque in relation to avant-garde painting and sculpture, the exhibition marked an important moment in the evolution of Chopin's conception of sound poetry as performative action, and it also set the stage for future collaboration with many of the artists featured, including Gette and above all Bertini, who soon became one of the poet's closest friends and allies. A protégé of Restany, the founder of *Nouveau Réalisme*, Bertini had been working with Lévêque and another experimental poet, Jean-Clarence Lambert, designing artist books and sets for provocative action pieces as he developed his own distinctive style in the late 1950s. Dubbed “Bertinization” by Restany, the underlying technique involved manipulation of clichéd images from mass media, reduced and “concentrated” by the successive use of photographic screen printing and stencils to produce a kind of European pop art, contemporary with Warhol, but inflected through a mocking critique of postwar consumer culture. Bertini's art and Chopin's poetry seemed almost inseparable after the exhibition, as the two collaborated on numerous schemes and projects, including an “Action Poetry” program at the Paris Biennale, where Chopin's intensely experimental film *Energy of Sleep* debuted in 1965.

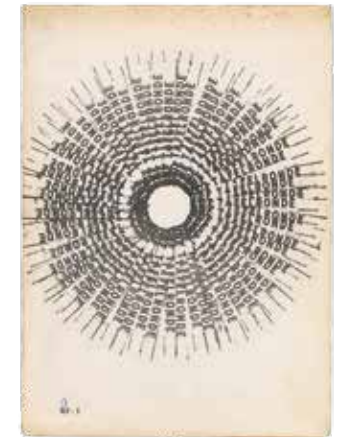
Chopin was determined to put experimental poetry on the map. Appalled by the lack of public awareness, even of the his-

torical avant-garde, he worked with Lovano and the Belgian painter Michel Seuphor to compile a set of “synoptic tables” that charted “the birth of the new art” in two categories: “the liquidation of temporal languages” and “the constructors of spaces.” First published in *Cinquième Saison* on the heels of the “Objective Poetry” exhibition, the tables were intended to provide a roadmap for research that would ultimately legitimate the postwar avant-garde by placing its experimental work in the context of historical developments that stretched back far into the nineteenth century, terrain that would be comfortably familiar; Chopin hoped, even to the most staid, conventional

Paul de Vree, “Integratie,” *De Tafelronde* 10, no. 1 (1964).



readers. Divided into destructive and constructive phases, the schema bore some similarity to Isou's view of the avant-garde – in fact Lemaître lent a hand in devising it, as did Altazor – but without his polemical disregard for previous movements. On the contrary, it was time for a new edition of Iliasz's *Poetry of Unknown Words*, Chopin noted in presenting the tables.



*De Tafelronde* 9, no. 1 (1963).

The historical avant-garde received lavish attention in subsequent issues, particularly Dada, and Chopin reached out to the aging veteran Raoul Hausmann, who became an important ally and remained so until his death in 1971. Chopin's efforts to link experimental poetry with the broader landscape of avant-garde art were soon joined by the Flemish poet Paul de Vree. Immediately grasping the significance of the synoptic tables, de Vree responded with enthusiasm, providing feedback and suggestions before publishing his own map of the postwar confluence of art and poetry, which he labeled “Integration.” Like Chopin, de Vree plotted the progression of historical movements over time, from left to right across a horizontal axis, but he also situated them within overlapping force fields defined by a series of vertical polarities – “social” and “technical environments,” “masses”





Paul de Vree, *Poesia visiva: een keuze* (Antwerp, 1979).

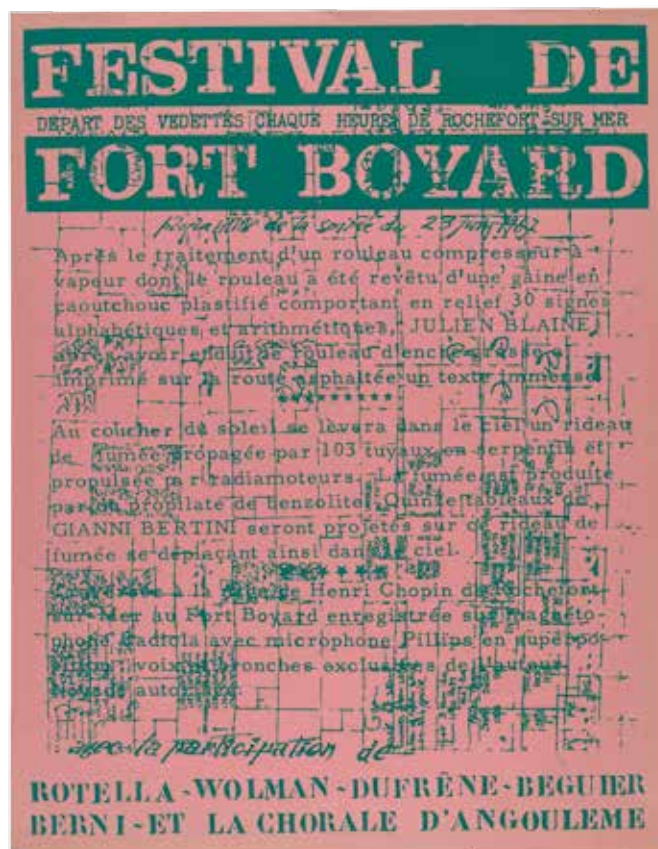
“All preaching is an assault on human liberty. Poetry as I conceive it is no longer the chambermaid of princes, prelates, politicians, parties, or even of the people. It is ultimately nothing but itself: a vocal phonetic phenomenon of psycho-physical origin objectively structured with the aid of words, sounds, and mechanical and graphic means (recording and writing). The purely visual verbal does not exist. It always evokes sound or noise from whence it comes and of which it is the sign. The poem is an emission of respiration either audible (performed) or silent (read), creatively modulated, provoked by the necessity to speak, not referring to anything other than the sensibility of being (present and planetary). This is what I understand by the objective intention of vocal sounds: a concerted communication of creative spontaneous vibrations. Phonetic poetry cannot exist without a reinvention of recital, that is, a sound system or the directing of sound. Everything depends on the new possibilities of mechanical expression to realize the transmission of the poem’s total sensitivity, itself at bottom part of the total kinetic spectacle Henri Chopin foresees with the inevitable utilization of wave-driven machines. The oeuvre of sound is the result of teamwork under the direction of the poet and the ideal reproduction is that realized on hi-fi disk. Here too the machine is indispensable. It goes without saying that the reciter (if it is not the poet) and the sound engineer (with regard to recordings) personally contribute to the originality of the realization. At the dawn of the electronic era, poetry can no longer be a *fabliau*.”

and “machines,” “hot” and “cold” – suffused by the tension between “subjectivism” and “objectivism,” which traverses both axes. Tracing movements from Cubism to Pop Art and *Nouveau Réalisme*, the diagram is an astonishing feat of conceptual mapping, and it captures much that was at stake in the battles of the postwar avant-garde.

The encounter with Chopin seemed to change everything for de Vree. Founding *De Tafelronde* in 1953, the Belgian poet had directed what remained a fairly traditional review of Flemish art and literature, showing little interest in international developments or even in straying beyond the journal’s tightly drawn linguistic frontiers. Until 1963. Within months of their exchange over the synoptic tables, de Vree opened the pages of *De Tafelronde* not only to Chopin, but to Heidsieck, Pierre Garnier, an entire generation of young French experimental poets, in fact, announcing the change in bold typography right on the cover: “New Tendencies: Phonetic Phonic Audio-Visual Open Poetry.” The metamorphosis was striking. Adapting the format to ever more adventurous forms of visual composition, de Vree left conventional text-based layouts behind, using colored paper, transparencies, photoduplication, and typography to present a kaleidoscope of postwar experimental poetry, intermingled with “homages” to the historical avant-garde. *De Tafelronde* devoted special issues to Hausmann, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, and Pierre Albert-Birot, often accompanied by Chopin’s reflections on their importance for contemporary visual and sound poetry. Indeed, Chopin published some of his most eloquent theoretical work in *De Tafel-*

*ronde*, while de Vree reciprocated with articles on “avant-garde poetry-painting” in *Cinquème Saison*. In striking pieces such as this disk-shaped manifesto on the wave-based era of sound poetry, the Belgian poet certainly followed Chopin’s lead, but as he grew more familiar with the terrain he gradually assumed an independent role. Moderating disputes that emerged between Chopin and Dufrière in the mid-1960s, de Vree made sure both sound poets had the chance to air their views (and grievances) in *De Tafelronde*, which became a true “round table” for experimental poets representing a wide range of movements, from German concrete poetry – Timm Ulrichs published an important manifesto on changing conceptions of the “concrete” here – to Italian *Poesia Visiva*, and many more besides. All of these currents left a powerful mark on de Vree’s own work, which continued to evolve in *De Tafelronde* and volumes of typewriter poetry and multi-media collage such as *Explosivieven* (1966) and *Zimprovaties* (1968). When he finally took *De Tafelronde* into alliance with the Italian poet Sarenco in *Lotta Poetica*, Chopin came along for the ride. But it was now de Vree who was driving the ship. For those looking for an introduction to the vast range of European experimental poetry in the 1960s and 1970s, there is no better place to start than *De Tafelronde*.

Meanwhile, Chopin was busy building networks of his own. “Staging” the imaginary Festival of Fort Boyard in 1967, he assembled an impressive array of visual and sound poets, painters, sculptors, composers, and film-makers for a brilliant piece of conceptual art that is no doubt one of the highlights of the current exhibition. *Affichistes* Dufrière, Hains, and Mimmo Rotella;



Festival de Fort Boyard. Poster by Gianni Bertini, variant print (1967).

Beat poet Brion Gysin; British and French visual poets Dom Sylvester Houedard, John Furnival, Gil Wolman, and Julien Blaine; experimental cineastes Serge Bégulier (who filmed Chopin's *Energy of Sleep*) and Kurt Kren; Greek composer Nikos Ignatiadis; even art critic Restany, founder of *Nouveau Réalisme*, all received top billing for "performances" – often outrageous and sometimes impossible – on a series of screen print posters, the festival's only concrete manifestation, made by Bertini in collaboration with many of the artists. With the uprisings in Paris, Chopin briefly joined the protests the following year and even produced a poster of his own: "I + I + I + I" was the only answer to a world of "prisons, killings, crimes, murders, police, militias," he declared, assailing the "historical ideological mask-ss" born by "all species of politicians," who agreed on just one thing: "to destroy us all." Fearing repercussions, Chopin moved to Essex in June 1968, where he remained in exile for nearly twenty years. Together with his wife Jean Radcliffe, the poet made their large Victorian estate Ingatestone into a studio, production center, and meeting place for the avant-garde. Relaunching *OU*, he also published a series of artist books, including works by Hausmann and Heidsieck and the *Electronic Revolution* by American Beat writer William S. Burroughs. Burroughs, who perfected the "cut-up" technique along with Gysin in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was a frequent guest at Ingatestone, arriving each time with two bottles of scotch, which he remained long enough to finish, and on one occasion with several grand pianos that were subsequently chopped to bits and buried on the grounds. Bringing all the threads together at Ingatestone, Chopin composed his mas-

terful survey of the movement, *International Sound Poetry*, here as well. Published in 1979, it was "a monument, a repertoire, a dictionary, a swarm of precious details, all if this is very useful" Heidsieck wrote Chopin upon receiving his copy, and so it remains today.

And then there was *The Last Novel of the World*. Beautiful, hilarious, gruesome, and ghastly all at once, Chopin's tale of the mass murderer and dictator ERnest summons the complex impulses, motivations, and innovative talent that drove the poet's career into a work that, appropriately, defies all attempts at classification. Interspersed with typewriter poems composed throughout the 1960s, the text itself breaks down into tumbling lines and rigid marching columns of sound poetry over and over again. And yet there is a narrative. Following ERnest's path from hapless farm hand to President of the World, Chopin guides us through a trail of bodies that pile up, at first one by one, then by the tens, hundreds, even thousands, as the killer/protagonist perfects his invention of mass terror – the nonsensical "kneecap stump" – winning love and acclaim all along the way. Parading by cheering throngs through the Arc de Triomphe down the Champs Élysées, ERnest is at last proclaimed dictator of the universe by the masses, who loudly smack their lips (like Dufrière, the author notes) in uproarious applause. Composed in 1963, the text obviously echoes Chopin's traumatic wartime experience, just as his earliest sound poems had done, and it concludes with the page after page of the same refrain: "I work, I work, I work ..." But the story gained an entirely new set of resonances after the uprisings of 1968, as de Vree, de Char-

moy, and others clearly recognized in their correspondence with Chopin. Accompanied by a disk recording of *Night Fishing*, one of his earliest sound poems, and screen prints of original artwork by Hausmann and Bertini, *The Last Novel of the World* finally appeared, exquisitely set on handmade paper by the Belgian printer Jo Verbrugghen, in 1970.



Henri Chopin, "vive la gb qui fait dodo," from the original typescript of *Le dernier roman du monde* (1966).





MIXING CONCRETE

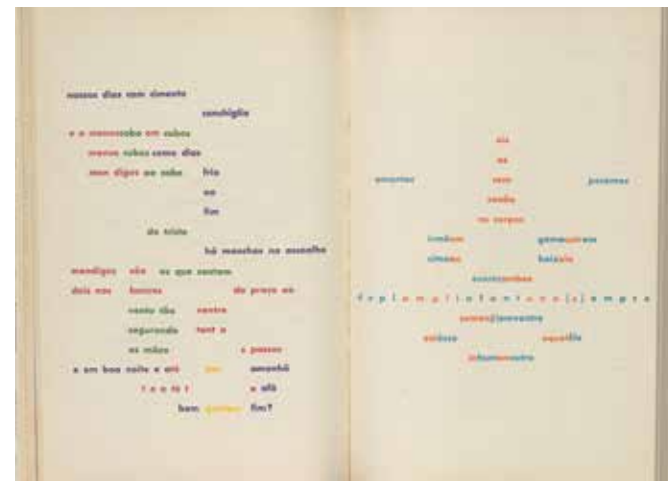


# MIXING CONCRETE

Concrete poetry (on the heels of Lettrism) ... certainly breathed some oxygen into poetry's veins, but, bound by its protagonists to a definition that was too narrow, it did not dare venture out into the arena, the street, thinking it could harmonize the world with "aesthetic signaling," and so remained hypocritical and malfessant in its soi-disant democratic development.  
Paul de Vree, 1972

Brazilians formulated similar sets of principles, strategies, and techniques in the first half of the decade, each side working independently of the other until they at last converged in Germany at the *Hochschule für Gestaltung*, the "New Bauhaus," where Pignatari met Gomringer together with Max Bill in 1955. The encounter was decisive. Bill, for whom Gomringer was now working in Ulm, had been promoting concrete art since the 1930s, not only in Europe, but also in Brazil, where his exhibition at the São Paulo Museum of Art helped inspire the country's architects and artists in a massive turn towards concretism in 1951. With its austere insistence on function, on geometry, on deriving

Augusto de Campos, "nossos dias com cimento" and "eis os amantes," *Noigandres* no. 5 (1962).

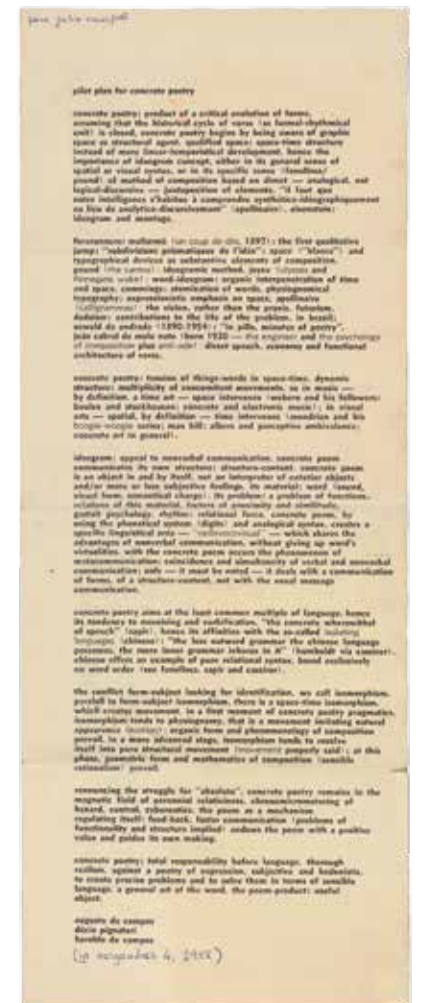


Sweeping across oceans and continents, concrete poetry poured vital new energy, impulses, and movement into Europe just as avant-garde experiments with the physical, nonverbal qualities of language and its media were about to burgeon out in an intense and prolific phase of expansion toward the end of the 1950s. Swedish poet Öyvind Fahlström had published the first "Manifesto for Concrete Poetry" in 1953, but the international movement formed around two other centers, the Brazilian Noigandres group and the Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer. Founded in São Paulo by Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari, the Brazilian group took its name from an indecipherable word in Ezra Pound's "Canto XX" – "Noigandres, eh, noigandres/Now what the DEFFIL can that mean!" Capturing the desire to explore nonverbal forms of poetic language that brought them together, the borrowed name also acknowledged the group's debt to Pound, whose early experiments with "ideograms" supplied an important precedent, as well as others in the historical avant-garde: Futurists, Dadaists, Apollinaire, and above all Mallarmé, "the first qualitative jump: 'subdivisions prismatiques de l'idée,' space ('blancs') and typographical devices as substantive elements of composition." Gomringer also looked to *Un Coup de dés* for inspiration in composing his *Constellations*, first published in 1953, the same year that Augusto de Campos began experimenting with typography and color to produce his *Poetamenos*, and a year after the founding of Noigandres. Exploring typographic configurations of words and letters on the page as a means to convey poetic meaning through structure rather than syntax, Gomringer and the

a universal, inherent language of expression from the material properties of media, Bill's conception of concrete art provided an articulate platform around which poets on both sides could rally. "Concrete poetry is founded on the contemporary scientific/technical worldview and will come into its own in the synthetic/rationalistic world of tomorrow," wrote Gomringer, prefacing an anthology he and Pignatari planned to publish in 1956, the year the movement was officially launched in Brazil. "Concrete poem is an object in and by itself, not an interpreter of exterior objects and/or more or less subjective feelings," Pignatari and the de Campos brothers proclaimed in the "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry," published two years later: "Its material [is the] word (sound, visual form, semantical charge). Its problem: a problem of functions-relations of this material."

By the early 1960s, concrete poetry was spreading across Europe like wildfire, transforming the landscapes of avant-garde experimentation as it blazed the trail for a new generation in centers from Lisbon to Vienna and beyond. Chopin's rhapsodic vision of air, breath, light, shadow, and the body itself as "concrete" materials certainly bespoke the influence of the movement, and he even labeled some of his first typewriter compositions "concrete poems." De Vree too applied the term alongside "Integration" in mapping out the postwar confluence of art and poetry early on. Using a typed matrix to transmute the line 'concrete poetry *crirhythme*' into 'filmaudio poetry filmprovo' from top to bottom across the cover of *De Tafelronde*, the Belgian poet employed one of the movement's favorite techniques to capture brilliantly the complex ways concrete poetry had blended with

Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari, Haroldo de Campos, "pilot plan for concrete poetry," from *Noigandres* no. 4 (1958).





other avant-garde movements in the mid-1960s, only to be transmogrified by them in turn. Concrete poetry was changing. "Language is no longer a code for thinking, a code for communicating, it is a material we animate," Pierre Garnier wrote, introducing *Spatialism and Concrete Poetry* in 1968. Having become "more and more bureaucratic," national languages had "lost all power of incantation; it's a matter of liberating the elements that are still alive in these languages (concrete, visual, objective poetry) and bringing them into the open by placing them in an active milieu." Garnier's rejection of "national languages," his desire to rework the salvageable "material" they contained, clearly echo the initial impulses of concrete poetry. But there are other factors in play, a profound distrust of bureaucratic channels of communication and efficiency, the demand for active engagement, a call for the release of spontaneous human passion, that seem remote from the cool functional rationalism and intellectual rigor, the "total responsibility before language," announced with such progressive optimism in the Pilot Plan. "It's also a matter, having abandoned robot-languages to their bureaucratic existence, of recovering sign-flashes, sun-cries, the enormous cosmic riches found in the vocal organs of man, which social language, over the course of centuries of activity, has eliminated." Such departures only grew more pronounced as an increasingly diverse range of groups and impulses gathered beneath the movement's massive umbrella, creating confusion and unrest. "I don't know why I am writing concrete poetry, or if I have ever done so," Jean-François Bory complained. "I am very much afraid that we've witnessed an ignoble recuperative operation

in these ... anthologies, into which everybody threw themselves because it suited them to do so at the time ... The curious thing is that if you ask each artist individually if he is 'concrete' he will reply no etc. etc. ... and ultimately who is concrete? So? ... So the word concrete, which clearly represents no concept at all, has, through the pressure of various authors, become part of history."

Expressing the frustrations of a young generation whose work had in large part been inspired by the arrival of concrete poetry, Bory immediately went on to acknowledge its transformative impact. "Clearly, the next artists will not write in a pre-concrete manner, just as it is impossible to write today as though surrealism never existed." But experimental poetry had to move on. "I think we must trust them to create, and to

Jean-François Bory, "Saga," *Approches* no. 3 (1968).

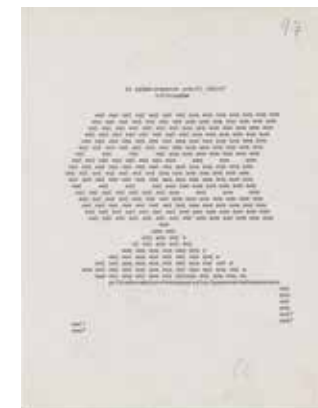


continue to create important things," the young poet asserted, speaking of his friends in the experimental avant-garde. "None of them consider their work finished, and none of them dream of being mummified." Bory's fear that concrete poetry had devolved into "an ignoble recuperative operation" reflected concerns not only about the movement's vitality and coherence, but also about its ability to resist the comforting allures of a "history" that seemed increasingly suspect in the eyes of his generation. Gomringer's belief that concrete poetry would "come into its own in the synthetic/rationalistic world of tomorrow" can hardly have been reassuring, any more than the Brazilians' zeal for "faster communication" and the "poem-product: useful object." Applying many of the same techniques, global networks of telecommunications and modern mass media had saturated postwar societies everywhere with a worldview neatly packaged in bundles of words, sounds, and images designed for immediate and unreflective consumption, the younger generation argued. How was concrete poetry any different? Claims that it dealt with "a communication of forms, of a structure-content, not with the usual message communication" sounded naïve by the mid-1960s. Pure aesthetic play, a *bête noire* for politically engaged artists since the days of the historical avant-garde, even worse. The Brazilian poets showed more concern for social issues than "the suave *maquettistes* of the Swiss school, fabricators of typographic objects and word-suitcases," and they even led the way with assaults on the power of mass media and commercial advertising in poems such as Pignatari's 1957 "beba coca cola" ("drink coca cola"), which transforms

the global brand name into 'cloaca' (sewer), and Augusto de Campos's 1964 "popcrete" collage "ôlho por ôlho," a pyramid of eyes sliced from seductive photos in magazines and capped off with a set of directions – warning, no left turn, right turn only – provided by symbols on traffic signs. Obvious in cases like this, the subversive function of concrete poetry was less apparent elsewhere. Reduced to a purely formal exercise, experiments with the global tools of the trade could easily lead into a kind of harmless aesthetic complacency, stifling creativity by restraining it in a "typographic concrete corset," or even unreflective complicity, a blind obedience to universal "laws" imposed by the media of a new worldwide communicative order. "Is concrete poetry idiotic?" Chopin asked readers in a typewriter-poem "referendum" on the subject, later published as part of the *Last Novel of the World*. Coming from the author, who observed that the mass-murdering dictator Ernest would have made a fine "concrete poet," the outcome was hardly in doubt.

Chopin's passionate distrust of the "totalitarian" potential lurking in language, a vital impulse behind postwar

Henri Chopin, "le poésie concret est-il idiot? référendum," from the original typescript of *Le dernier roman du monde* (1964).



experiments with a poetry beyond words since the Lettrists and Altagor, was a crucial ingredient in the blend of avant-garde currents that infused the movement with new life and vigor in the 1960s. The “spirit of this poetry was not born from the desire to amuse myself with letters, nor from the need to employ graphic, mechanical, and collagist means to achieve aesthetic effects,” de Vree wrote, looking back on the radical transformations of his own work and *De Tafelronde* a few years later: “The new means, which since Mallarmé, the Futurists, and the Dadaists have restored to poetry its freshness and its slapping force – I have applied them, above all since the revolutionary days of May 1968, to find, with some companions of spirit, a poetry that met the exigencies posed by communication as it relates to the frightening retreat that conscience undergoes in information manipulated by the authorities.” Deployed with force in

*Approches* no. 3 (1968).



play as a “funeral procession (the burial) – made official by the anthologies and most particularly by Stephen Bann – of concrete poetry.” Aside from the Brazilians and a few others, the poets who actually belonged to the movement were nothing but “systematic utilizers of a process without originality, where it is difficult to tell whose work is whose,” while another third of the show was devoted to epigones applying “an absolutely identical method.” Yet Blaine was himself a master of the art, producing works like “Exp(l)osion,” a brilliant example of “structure-content” included among Bertini’s screen prints in the portfolio of Chopin’s *Festival de Fort Boyard*, and “The Last Attempt of the Individual: *English Poem*,” a fold-out calendar that opened up to reveal an empty personal agenda in the avant-garde review *Approches*. Founded by Blaine and Bory in 1966, *Approches* gradually tapped the potent mix of concrete and visual poetry, pushing radical experimentation to shocking extremes in works like Jochen Gerz’s grizzly “Batman,” published in the final issue in 1969. Grafting the words ‘yes’ and ‘history’ onto closeups of a fleshless hand burned and maimed almost beyond recognition,



*Agentzia*, no. 1 (1968).

Gerz displayed in horrifying graphic detail the angry determination of a young generation of poets intent on using every means in their power to shock and stun contemporaries out of any possible sense of complacency.

Bory, who also worked with Blaine and Gerz in the radical experimental review and publishing venture *Agentzia*, articulated a more lyrical critique of language and its media, informed by the rise of semiotics and post-structural theory in the mid-1960s. Exploring the dynamic tension of emotion and intellect, visceral perception and conceptual interpretation, signifier and signified, Bory approached concrete and visual poetry as means to “impose a route than never stabilizes” on the sense-making functions of media in photography, film, the printed word, and above all the book, which became the site, subject, and focus of some his most creative experimentation. “The pages behind dead/The pages ahead not yet born,” the poet wrote, describing his vision of the medium and its coming transformation, which he sought to anticipate in works like *Soon*. “Every visual book prepares for this grandest explosion/It’s a matter of seeing the dispositive of an emotion here/placed inside our space .../the book finally considered as method, dream, watch, child of concrete forms/In reading the wait, doubt, concentration become living things under our hands/So the book coexistent with language/reading dispenses with incalculable instants:/the fraction of time in which/a concept surges forth, astonishes, annihilates itself. Incessant reading ...” Filled with images of books floating on the sea, words in the sand effaced by pounding waves, jumbled type falling

on late medieval figures in paintings from the age of Gutenberg, Bory’s 1970 *Post-Scriptum* announces the “apocalypse” of print media in the modern age, just as this gilded typewriter does, crusted with toy soldiers fighting among colossal letters, one in a series of multiples the artist produced in the 1970s. Yet Bory also favored more direct, confrontational strategies. Mixing life-sized letters with nude bodies in provocative of works of photomontage, publishing the profoundly unsettling images of “Batman,” he joined Gerz and Blaine in demanding an unblinking eye as one of the editors of *Agentzia*. Bristling with graphic images of war, seductive advertising, televisions, apparatus of bureaucratic communication, the review pulled no punches. *Agentzia* “accepts only reader-militants who are ready to assume responsibility for the blows their conscience suffers

Jean-François Bory, *La fin des mots* (1979).





in reading," the review proudly warned. Issued in the *Agentzia* book series, Jean-Claude Moineau's *Quick Read* is every bit as disturbing as Gerz's poem, albeit in different ways. Like many of Bory's experiments, *Quick Read* operates like a flip-book, rattling off a series of images that blend together, producing a nearly cinematic effect: schematic representations of soldiers, tanks, rifles interspliced with full frontal photos of a nude female model displayed on a standardized grid, each body part tagged with various nomenclatures, most of them signaling her as a target for some sort of military or sexual assault. Blurring together in this relentless barrage, the signs and symbols of global communications – euphemistic, hateful, enticing – finally join to expose the single underlying message of modern mass media, directed at unknowing participants in a consumer society at war.

Experimental poetry also took to the streets. Fiery manifestos, shocking images circulating in limited runs in experimental reviews, turf battles in the galleries, live interactive performances in public auditoriums no longer seemed enough for a young generation of radical poets, who vehemently demanded the avant-garde take a stand. "They reject all those who, under their coats, try to palm off reviews on glossy paper with dubious covers, who still contribute in their own homes, still participate in the same intellectual racket at the same book-signing parties, on the same 'TV shows,' and try to lure you onto their page by sticking you with a low-grade pox under the name revolutionary virus," the international group "Poetry Two Points" declared of its members in 1971. "They reject all those who have given themselves the mission: make 'the revolution'



Alain Arias-Misson, photographs and documentation from the public poem "Vietnam Superfiction" (Brussels, 1969).

without budging from their desk with, as background sound, the cries of the people in stereo version. We pass by without seeing them, these petty transparent ones." Listed among the group's members were Blaine, Gerz, Moineau, the Italian visual poets Adriano Spatola and Ketty La Rocca, and for Belgium Alain Arias-Misson. Although born in Brussels, Arias-Misson had grown up in the United States, attending Harvard before he fled the draft to settle in Spain in the mid-1960s. There and in neighboring Portugal he joined the concrete poets. Determined from the start to bring poetry out into the open, to give it a physical presence in everyday life, Arias-Misson took a decisive step into the arena with "Vietnam Superfiction," his first "public poem," staged in Brussels in 1967. "The word is domesticated and emasculated in our literary magazines and books. But outside it is big and bold and amazingly fresh," the poet exclaimed, describing his work in *De Tafelronde*. The poem consisted of a single word, 'Vietnam.' Stuffing newspapers into large plastic tubes, Arias-Misson fashioned a group of life-sized letters, wrapped them in surgical bandages, and finally splattered them with "bloodred" paint before marching them onto a major square in Brussels, where he taped them to the railing of a tram stop. The result was a revelation. "There was a crowd of people looking at the letters. A small boy spelled out the word to his mother – v-i-e-t-n-a-m Vietnam! Triumph, I felt. A middle-aged couple hurried by, and I heard the woman nodding in approval, it's good, it's good." Having disguised himself to avoid immediate arrest, Arias-Misson finally dared an approach, straightening one of the letters with his foot as he stopped to admire the poem.

"It was amazing how present the word was. Vietnam, a word everybody read a thousand times until it has disappeared, here it was, big as life. Vietnam was real, bloody real. The word was set in a festive atmosphere. The Bon Marché behind was decorated already for Christmas. People stood in front of the word, reading the letters, puzzling, commenting. This grotesque ugly word, a suffering word."

From Brussels, Arias-Misson went on to create a series of increasingly elaborate public poems in cities across Europe, many of them staged in Franco's Spain. "In Madrid" took a more dynamic approach. Parading his giant letters across the Spanish capital with the help of friends, the poet spelled out a stream of words as the group split apart and reassembled in various permutations, pausing at significant landmarks in a mobile kaleidoscope of pointed displays: 'arma' (weapon) in front of the Parliament; 'amar' (love) before the headquarters of Civic Guard; 'dada' outside the literary café El Gijón. "The city is a text," Arias-Misson explained; "fashion, traffic, the city may be analyzed as a systems of signs, which may then be seized on a linguistic model." Treating the streets, buildings, and monuments of Pamplona as a semiotic grid, "Punctuation Poem" drew a crowd of several thousand curious onlookers who followed along as life-size commas, question marks, parentheses, and other signs "set out a subversive political reading of the long 'sentence' running through the city," Arias-Misson remembered. "The organizer told me the secret police would draw their guns if I did not stop!" Confrontations with the police in fact became a staple feature of the public poem, which consisted not so much of the

letters and signs as the response they provoked, the disruption of everyday life in the city. "It constellates the realia of the street, people, what they say, vehicles, buildings, etc. The material word is only the trigger." Stretching a sheet of plastic across one city street, Arias-Misson waited patiently until frustrated drivers finally smashed through the "poem" with their cars, a technique he also employed to block the entrance of Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum at the opening of a major concrete poetry exhibition in 1970. "We also handed out man-size plastic S's to the public. You see them going under the sheet before we got it fixed," Arias-Misson reported in *De Tafelronde*, describing the response to "Plastic Poem," a collaborative piece he carried out with the Italian visual poet Ugo Carrega. "Although they did not have the courage, these first S's, to break through the material they did become really involved in it." By the time the two poets secured the banner, a "goodly crowd" had assembled outside in the pouring rain. "I harangued them as to the importance of poetry in a man's life and how they were not objects of poetry, far from it they assumed the subjective and objective faces of the poetic process itself, objective by virtue of their configuration, of the materials they were involved in, of how they could be read, and subjective by virtue of their consciousness, of their assumption of their own poetic mutation; why, I asked them, be subject to a poetry exhibition? be a poetry exhibition! At last they plunged through the taut membrane, were they, I thought, coming in or going out?"

Breaking through physical barriers, participants in Arias-Misson's poem were exhorted to take a forceful, conscious role

in shaping work that extended beyond exhibitions and museums. As active engagement with the social and political concerns of the day, poetry belonged to the life of cities, streets, people. Expressed with mounting urgency by radical poets and artists through creative innovation in many forms in the years around 1968, the same conviction underlies the complex and distinctive work of the East German artist Carlfriedrich Claus. Certainly no friend of the oppressive Communist regime, Claus remained committed to the revolutionary vision of Marx throughout his life. Tucked away in the small Saxon town of Annaberg, the poet kept his distance from the state, but he vehemently rejected the notion of "inner emigration," the escape into quiescent personal life many had chosen, first under the Nazis and later under Communist rule in the East. Instead, Claus threw himself into the precarious world of underground art, an active network of nonconformist poets and painters, whose work is featured in the catalog for another Beinecke exhibition, *Fun on the Titanic*. Banned from showing his work in exhibitions of official culture, he played a central role on the alternative circuit in East Germany, but he was also one of the few who succeeded in forming close ties with the West. The concrete poet Franz Mon became a lifelong friend, as did Arias-Misson, and Pierre and Ilse Garnier (who was born in Germany). Frequently published in *De Tafelronde* and other Western reviews and anthologies, Claus's work is strikingly beautiful, contemplative, often dreamlike and serene. But like other more shocking and aggressive forms of experimental poetry, it also seeks to rouse viewers to revolutionary consciousness, a visceral awareness of the poten-

tial for radical transformation of the world slumbering within each of them. Drawing inspiration from the Marxist philosopher and "concrete utopian" Ernst Bloch, Claus takes the materiality of language and its media as a means to invoke a kind of productive dialogue between conscious and subconscious, mind and body, physical markings on the page and emotional states, as passionately inscribed lines and fragments of text merge into indistinct shapes and patterns, the words themselves barely legible as the handwriting on both sides of translucent sheets interfere. It is in this in-between state of the "not-yet-conscious" that forgotten yearnings for a better future take shape and converge in material form, in the world of the present, with the physical capacity to transform them into a reality, as Bloch wrote in *The Principle of Hope*. Often displayed in glass to show both sides at once, Claus's poetry offers a window onto other worlds through the "material semiotics" of the now.



Carlfriedrich Claus, untitled lithograph, from *Carlfriedrich Claus*, Alain Arias-Misson, Klaus Sobolewski (Munich, 1991).



# VIAGGIO TRA LE NUVOLE

## gli DEI

POESIA VISIVA

# ALLA RICERCA DI SE STESSI

# ARMIES CONTRA DIRETS HUMANS

## VIETNAM

## UNA ESCLUSIVA DI GRAZIA

DOPO





## POESIA VISIVA

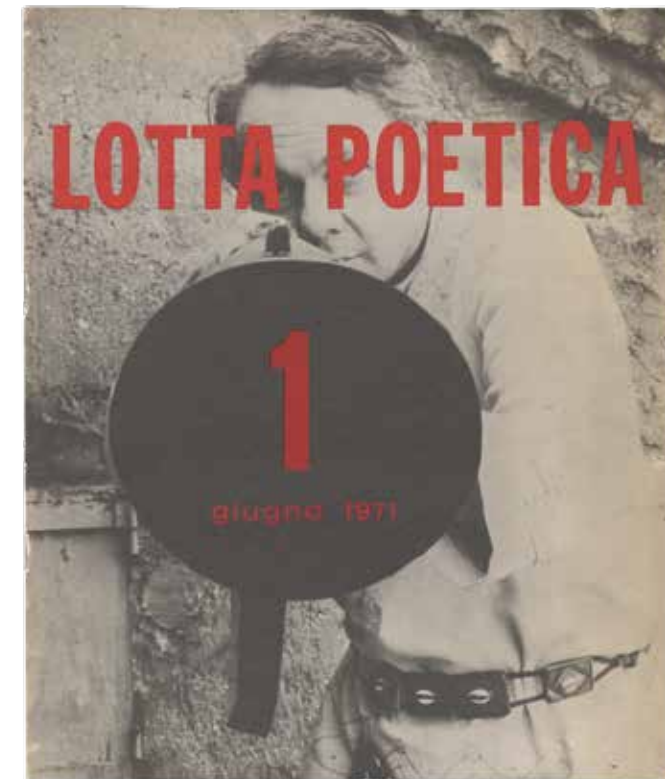
*Poesia visiva* is “a Trojan horse,” and it wages war like a guerilla.  
Eugenio Miccini, 1971

“But does there exist a revolutionary essence of the avant-garde?” Posed on the cover of Bory’s latest review, *L’Humidité*, the question appears next to photographs of four experimental poets, each of them bearing a hunting rifle – Arias-Misson, de Vree, the Dutch artist Herman Damen, and, in lead-off position, Sarenco – the caption underneath: “Italy, Summer 72.” At long last, the smoldering fuse of Italian *poesia visiva* seemed to have ignited, setting off an explosion of radical new energy that infused the movement as it captured the attention of politically engaged poets and artists everywhere. Proclaiming 1972 “The Year of *Poesia Visiva*,” Sarenco and de Vree led the charge in the new review *Lotta Poetica*, “Poetic Struggle,” which featured Bertini pointing the barrel of an absurdly outsized shotgun right in the face of its readers on the cover. “A poetry of the visual enters the scene as a means of active transformation of society, either at the level of language and paralinguistic media, or at the level of support for the world class struggle (the exploited against the exploiting),” Sarenco and de Vree declared in the lead editorial, followed by rousing testimony from Eugenio Miccini, Michele Perfetti, Franco Vaccari, and Emilio Isgrò, all prominent artists of *poesia visiva*. “It is at this point that the mechanism of the literary revolt springs into action; it is at this point that the poet . . . places himself at the conscious head of the revolution in the closed world of the arts, slave to words, victim of the division of work,” Isgrò avowed; “he is the first among the artists to take conscience of this situation: he will refuse the word and the division of work, revenging himself [sic] the right to decide globally on all signs, on all language.” Launching a series of “poetic

unmaskings” in the next issue, Sarenco inveigled against artists who betrayed the revolutionary cause, starting with Carlo Belloli, hailed as one of Italy’s foremost concrete poets, whose dubious history under the Fascist regime he underscored, while a subsequent installment stamped the words ‘German-Swiss reaction’ across the program for a Hamburg exhibition of “visual poetry” that featured Gomringer and the Vienna school of concrete poets. *Poesia visiva* was not to be coopted or tamed. In April, *Lotta Poetica* announced a boycott of the 1972 Venice Biennale, which had invited poets to send a small set of carefully pre-selected works in order to lend “a little patina of extra-parliamentarism” to the usual display of establishment art. “They are trying to neutralize a cultural phenomenon of vast scope, like that of *poesia visiva*, reducing it to the level of conceptual art and minimalizing it historically, at the very time artistic movements are also being discovered and launched elsewhere . . . as presents of American imperialism and the Atlantic pact.” Signed by Sarenco, de Vree, Arias-Misson, Damen, Bory, Miccini, and others, a second petition threatened to boycott the Milanese gallery *L’uomo e l’arte* unless the group received written assurances that none of its work would be sent on to Venice. “The hour of the poet: let’s take a stand against unconditional ‘recuperation!’” In May, *Lotta Poetica* declared solidarity with the “Front of Visual Artists,” which had organized a blockade of an exhibition of Georges Pompidou’s collection at the Grand Palais in Paris: “Expo Pompidou = 72 artists in the service of power.” The Year of *Poesia Visiva* was off to a militant and confrontational start.

At the center of it all was the explosive alliance of Sarenco and de Vree, who had joined together the year before to found *Lotta Poetica* in the northern Italian city of Brescia. Stridently Marxist by the time de Vree met him, Sarenco had been explor-

*Lotta Poetica*, no. 1 (June 1971).



ing the crosscurrents of visual poetry, media criticism, and political engagement that informed avant-garde experimentation in Italy since the early 1960s. Forging a close friendship with Miccini, one of the pioneers of *poesia visiva*, in 1964, Sarenco gradually built up an extensive network of ties with others working in the field, both at home and abroad, before establishing his base in Brescia, where he founded the review *Amodulo* in 1968 and, two years later, a gallery by the same name. Scrawled on a photograph of a young woman stooping to pick up a cobblestone to throw at police during a street demonstration, the words ‘poetical license’ in Sarenco’s eponymous 1971 poem must have appealed instantly to de Vree, who had integrated images of protest and violent confrontations with authorities into his own work since “the revolutionary days of May 1968.” The two seemed inseparable. Published in June 1971, the first issue of *Lotta Poetica* announced the merger of *Amodulo* and *De Tafelronde* around the express aim of the new journal “to impose a continuous battle on two levels: a) at a linguistic level for the destruction of the cultural structures of bourgeois society. b) at a political level at the side of the avant-garde of the working class and the student movement.” Working together, Sarenco and de Vree tapped their respective networks to assemble an impressive team on the editorial board – Bertini, Miccini, Perfetti, Chopin, Arias-Misson, Gerz, Ulrichs, to name a few. As *Lotta Poetica* rallied experimental poets from across Europe around the banner of *poesia visiva*, they expanded the enterprise to include an exhibition space, Studio Brescia, issuing over twenty catalogs for individual and collective shows in



the next few years. "Everything depends on the organization in Brescia of the new gallery . . . , which will be the center of *poesia visiva*," de Vree wrote Chopin in July 1972. "The latter leaves us no respite on the side of the exhibitions, which will be numerous before the end of the year (in Italy, Yugoslavia, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium)." Absorbing more and more of his time, de Vree's new alliance with Sarenco sparked tension with Chopin, who worried he was turning his back on ten years of common endeavors in order to devote himself exclusively to work that had more to do with political engagement than experimental poetry. De Vree pushed back. Chopin's "engagement against

dictatorship" and partisan devotion to sound poetry had "limited the number of those who are on the path you prefer," just as the commitments of *poesia visiva* had done in his case. "If you feel you are being hurt by my evolution, it is up to you to decide" whether to continue collaborating. As for the label 'poesia visiva,' "it momentarily serves to define where we are with evolutive poetry." In the end, the friendship survived. But Italy remained de Vree's "center of gravity" for years to come.

It was a late discovery. By the time *Lotta Poetica* entered the fray, experimental poets in Italy had been refining the art of *poesia visiva* for the better art of a decade, creating stunning, provocative, sophisticated works, an entire rich reservoir on which the magazine was able freely to draw. As elsewhere in Europe, 1963 was a crucial year, witnessing the founding of the *Gruppo 63* and the *Gruppo 70*, both key moments in the emergence of the Italian "neo-avant-garde." While the first retained a tight literary focus, the latter brought poets, painters, and musicians together, seeking to develop new forms of creative expression capable of withstanding the multimedia onslaught in a new era of modern mass communications and consumer society. The two groups shared a critical awareness of this challenge, however, and there was significant overlap between them. The semiologist, writer, and cultural critic Umberto Eco participated in the founding congresses of both, as did the poet Lamberto Pignotti, who had helped set the stage with a critical article on the sly ubiquity of technology in culture, "The Industry You Don't See," published in 1962. "The poet should ask himself whether the flower of his dreams isn't perhaps made of plastic before releasing his imagi-

nation at full gallop," Pignotti wryly noted, arguing the need for a new *poesia tecnologica* to surpass outdated forms of literary expression. Presiding over a conference on "Art and Communication" in May 1963, Pignotti launched the *Gruppo 70* with Miccini and Giuseppe Chiari in Florence. Alongside painters and musicians, many of the leading artists of what would soon be called *poesia visiva* joined the group: Perfetti and Isgrò, Ketty La Rocca, Lucia Marcucci, Luciano Ori, and others, all determined to expand the reach of poetry by integrating, adapting, but also sharply criticizing the sophisticated techniques of mass media. By the end of the year, collective exhibitions of *Gruppo*

70 introduced one of the signature gestures of *poesia visiva*, the subversive collaging of text and images from the popular press, juxtaposed to provoke critical awareness of the messages they conveyed. The issue of *impegno*, "engagement," was central to theoretical discussions at the group's next conference, "Art and Technology," held in Florence the following year. While Miccini called on artists to "transform mass media into mass culture," Pignotti urged the use of "new and

Lamberto Pignotti, "Declina il turno degli 'arrabbiati.' Original collage, *poesia visiva* (1963).



*Poesie e no*. Performance still photograph, 1965. From left to right: Eugenio Miccini, Lucia Marcucci, Lamberto Pignotti, Antonio Bueno.



Eugenio Miccini, *Viaggio tra le nuvole*. Original collage, *poesia visiva* (1967).

more powerful means of diffusion" in collaborative works aimed at direct public intervention in the promulgation of societal norms and attitudes. Staged at a Florentine gallery a few months prior to the conference, the multimedia spectacle *Poesy and Not* gave a good indication of the kind of work Pignotti had in mind. Snippets from *L'Espresso* and the *Corriera della Sera*, fragments of poems and theoretical texts, phrases of pop songs, classical and experimental music, video projections of paintings and *poesia visiva* all blended together in a raucous group performance that solicited participation from a live audience.



Anonymous, "guerra," Geiger, no. 1 (1967).

did *Luna Park*, named after a popular amusement franchise, another multimedia spectacle and installation that employed film collages, "ornaments," and comic book characters to engage audiences in ironic conversation. But it was in the practice of "extraction/abstraction" of text and images from print media that the new art of *poesia visiva* achieved its most eye-catching and provocative results. Published in the first issue of Adriano Spatola's review *Geiger* in 1967, the anonymous poem "Guerra" superimposed the Italian word for war over photographs and advertisements (including one for baby food) on pages torn from popular magazines, each one different in the three hundred copies of the elaborately produced run. Repeated countless times to form a martini glass/ice cream dish overflowing with phallic shapes, 'guerra' interferes, disturbs, and

For the rest of the decade, the artists of *Gruppo 70* continued to explore the subversive potential of mass communications passed through the "ideological filter" of *impegno*, honing their skills in public performances, installations, festivals, and exhibitions, as the passion for engagement with social issues only intensified with the rising tide of political protest. *Poetry and Not* passed through several iterations, as

complicates, while also highlighting the original intent and message of a fashion photograph in the copy shown here. Alongside war, imperialism, and the fetishization of commodities, the media's depiction of women was a frequent target of *poesia visiva*. Pignotti, who worked with students at the University of Bologna to assemble a taxonomy of roles assigned to women by mass media, addressed the problem relentlessly, from his earliest collages to the "Visible/Invisible" series of the 1970s and works of sustained semiotic criticism, such as his massive 1978 survey, *Brand and Feminine: Woman Invented by Advertising*. Yet the most powerful assaults came from women artists themselves. Although excluded from the early theoretical debates and first exhibitions of *Gruppo 70*, La Rocca and Marcucci excelled at the art, collaging texts and images from the media to produce brilliant, sophisticated, compelling works that were at the same time lucid indictments of the power of mass communications, particularly when it came to the subordination of women to the coercive masculine gaze. "Who says that/they are all equal / us?! / beautiful /and / sweet," clipped lines from the tabloids read, juxtaposed against headshots of women

Mostra Luna Park (Florence, 1965).



applying makeup on a jet black background in one of La Rocca's collaged poems, while another splices the round cutout of a photograph showing Vietnamese children eating over the clipped out photograph of a nude model in seductive pose, all beneath the phrase "healthy as our daily bread." Another model, this one draped in a towel and smiling, appears in Marcucci's "Warrior's Rest" next to the headlines "Vices on the Street" and "Sport Money Sex." Joining the model's gaze is a single male eye, positioned as a kiss on her cheek in a bold black circle, while the imperative "change" hovers over both. Shown here in a spread from an exhibition catalog produced by Sarenco, de Vree, and Miccini in 1971, La Rocca's "Us 2" uses a traffic sign to indicate the parting ways of a couple, displayed alongside a work by Mirella Bentivoglio, another prominent woman artist, "I love you." One of the most widely circulated images of *poesia visiva*, Bentivoglio's poem breaks apart the Italian 'amo' ('I love'), inserting the English word 'am' between the open lips of a woman, with the 'o' left as a lingering expression dangling underneath.

Graphically stunning, often beautiful, the collage works of La Rocca, Marcucci, and Bentivoglio instantly catch the eye, but there is nothing quick, easy, or smooth in the effect of reading these poems. Coded for immediate, intuitive recognition and comprehension, the familiar elements of commercial advertising and tabloid headlines become strange and confusing when taken out of context, mixed together in jarring combinations that disrupt the flow of mass communication by breaking the hidden rules of its underlying syntax and grammar: "Poetry is violence, that is to say the transgression of linguistic and stylistic



*Poesia visiva* by Mirella Bentivoglio, Ketty La Rocca, Luciano Ori, and Carlo Alberto Sitta, in Paul de Vree, Eugenio Miccini, and Sarenco, eds., *Archivio Denza di Poesia Visiva: Selezione internazionale 1969-1971* (Milan, n.d.).



tradition, transgression of the pitiless logic of the society of opulence and its methodic and authoritarian rationalism," Miccini wrote, summing up the approach developed in Italy over the past decade in 1971. "*Poesia visiva* occupies itself in an obstinate fashion with the problems of communication and information theory. It seeks, with the aid of expansions, rejections, overprinting, interruptions of the channels of communication, to revive conscience, ... to provoke a deviation of the senses, an ironic inversion of meanings, and finally a surprise that augments their information value." Displaying a virtuoso command of the instruments of modern mass media, Italian visual poets trained them against the system in a sophisticated assault on everyday language that could not help but appeal to experimental poets across Europe: "*Poesia visiva* is a 'Trojan horse,' and it wages war like a guerilla." While the subversive practice of collage proved a particularly effective weapon, the arsenal of *poesia visiva* included a wide range of techniques, from complex to disarmingly

simple. Scrawling words like 'zero,' 'versus,' 'thrilling,' and 'souvenir' on news photographs, Pignotti challenged their iconic power, a gesture later adopted by Sarenco in "Poetical License," while he assembled sensational reports on current events into personal "journals" mocking the construction of Italian history in media headlines. Newspaper stories also form the basis of musical "scores" by Luciano Ori, one of the founding members of the *Gruppo 70*, who transformed them into a series of melodramatic operas published in Miccini's *Techne* series in 1973. Accompanied by barking dogs, police sirens – "pianoforte/very tragic" – and strains from *Love Story*, "love is a virus" recounts the trial of a university instructor charged with holding his "lover" captive in his villa, reprinting a blow-by-blow account published in *La Nazione* divided into segments of "dialogue" and "scenic action" marked with stage instructions for a cast of "characters," including the judge and prosecutor, a psychiatrist, hospital and asylum attendants, the accused's family, "the

public and passers-by," alongside leading roles for the perpetrator and his victim. "Thank you, my love – for ha-ving chal-lenged all the world to-ge-ther with me – for ha-ving searched out an-o-o-ther – li-ife by my side," lyrics of a popular song croon below. Dripping with bitter irony, Ori's composition is a lurid indictment of both media and readers who conspire to turn even the most brutal acts of society into diverting spectacle and farce.

*Poesia visiva* took many forms. Patiently canceling out the text on endless yards of teletype with meaningless invented symbols, the Neapolitan poet Luciano Caruso produced a massive scroll, the very length and volume of which offers wordless commentary on the flood of "information" feeding the machines of mass communication. Fascinated by medieval writing,

Caruso wrote a thesis on *carmina figurata*, one of the earliest forms of visual poetry (and a favorite technique in the Baroque art of *poesia artificiosa*), which he often used as raw material in making artist books, unique handcrafted works that explore the physicality of media with remarkable sensitivity and skill. A profound artistic reflection on the opacity of writing systems, Caruso's *Silence* displays a series of texts inscribed in non-Western linguistic characters, each placed alongside another



Luciano Caruso, *Silence: Block-Poem* (1975).

text in Italian hand under a rice paper enclosure treated with an emulsion, allowing only glimpses at the underlying messages to shimmer through. Broken lines of a running commentary in Italian follow along beneath, but the sense is lost through constant interruption. Pairing texts in Coptic and Italian, the page shown here is accompanied by the lines: "x)but they are divided according to the bodies that are how to say their instruments and yet the division that//." The sentence is never completed. Materiality and writing are also the subject of intense exploration in the works of Ugo Carrega, who joined Arias-Misson in setting up the plastic poem/barrier at the entrance to the exhibition

Lamberto Pignotti, 3 postage stamps with fumetti (1968 and 1983).

Fumetti were another favorite weapon in *poesia visiva*'s assault on the power of mass media. Applied to allegorical representations of Italy on postage stamps, the result is both subversive and comical in these



tiny works by Lamberto Pignotti, who often employed humor to marvelous effect. "Lately when I read about war or economic problems, I get the hives," 'Italy' remarks in one of the speech balloons. "No one loves me, everyone hates me," an early modern warrior laments while wielding a pike in another.

Luciano Caruso, untitled scroll (1969).



of concrete poetry at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Expressing a potent critique of instrumental language, Carrega insisted that the reduction of writing to abstract code for conveying verbal content had obscured the actual physical presence and visual properties of the signs, symbols, and material supports on which it depended. Yet these too had something to say. "Everything is language." Writing in rust on sheets of metal,

Ugo Carrega, *Non si muore di fame, ma ...* (n.d.).



sculpting letters into a three-dimensional "Tower of Babel," composing poems on ponderous plaster disks and broken panes of glass, Carrega underscored the weight and substance of writing, but also its vulnerability and fragility, its metamorphosis through ageing, accident, even weather in his "Wet Words," painted in tempura and splattered with drops of water until they ran. Physical transformations of media became elements of composition, conveying a poetic meaning beyond words, to which they lent "a given reality" on sheets of crumpled paper. Carrega also integrated stones, splinters of wood, and gestural strokes of paint as material signs to extend the range and expressive possibilities of writing. "The Trace Outside-the-Body renders visual the internality of the Body," he exclaimed. "The Trace is therefore SIGNIFIED + SIGNIFIER, making it possible to know (REVEIL in short) the Body in Time and in Space."

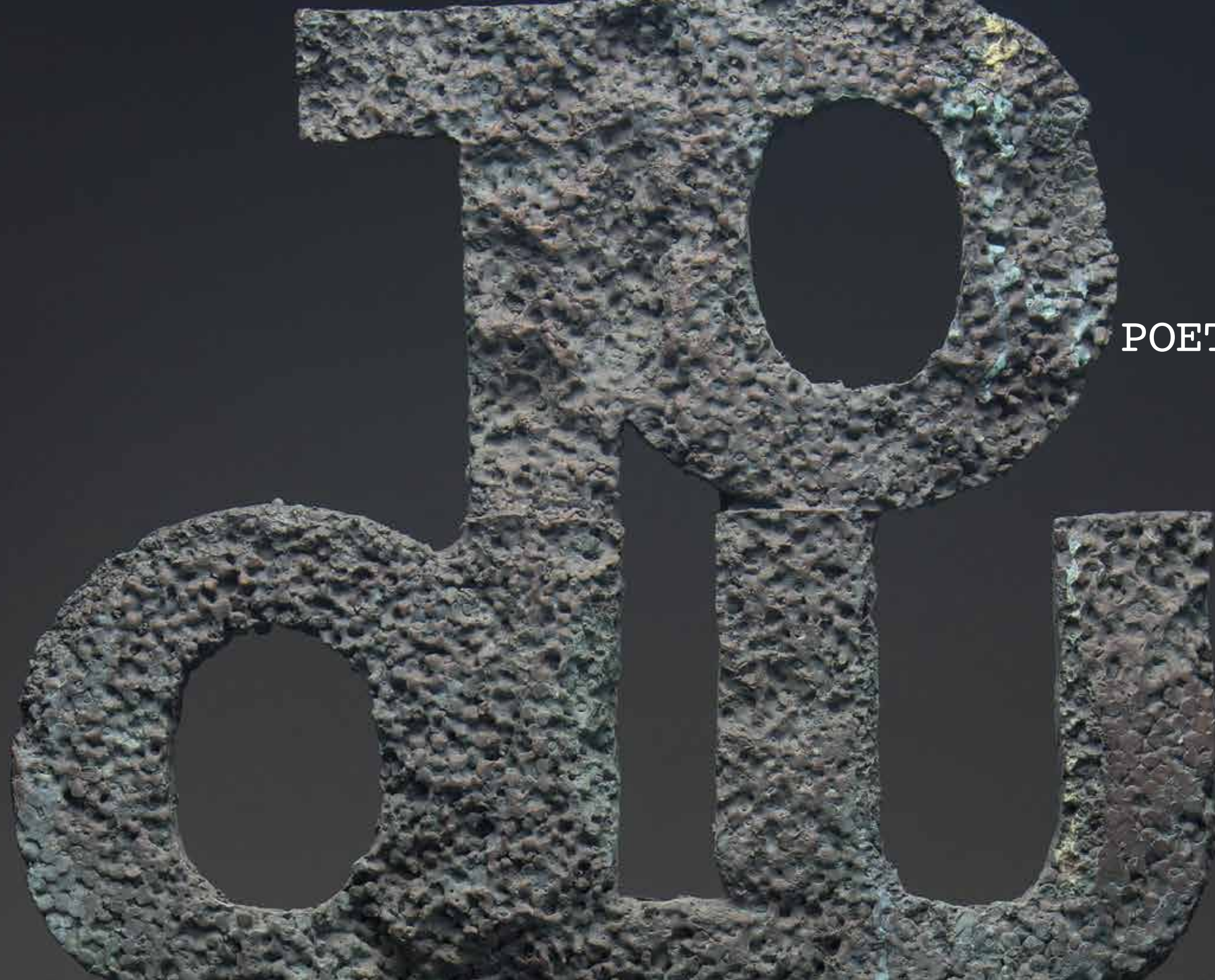
Carrega's recondite meditations on the materiality of writing and language have taken us a long way from the passionate battles of *Lotta Poetica*. Refusing to join in protests against exploitation of artists by galleries and museums, the poet himself admitted to being "outside the times," and he sharply rebuked Sarenco's "romantic" outbursts as no less captive to instrumental language than the commands of the authorities he attacked. "The artist is social in his creative moment, a moment that finds its spur in the unhappiness of that instant, a variation on what is known, on thoughts, on what has already been said, done, seen," Carrega declared. "He is social in setting himself outside to recognize and reveal – reveal!" Fiercely independent, the anarchist poet kept his distance from dogmatic commitments and collec-



Ugo Carrega, *Come si comporta la menta sognata dalla mano?* (1980).

tivist political engagement, much as Chopin had done. But he belonged to the same world. "Writing has served the notaries, the bureaucrats, the merchants, the politicians, the cheats and frauds in general. Now writing must also return to serving man." Sharing this conviction with experimental poets across postwar Europe, Carrega strove to develop a new material language capable of capturing expressions of human thought and experience that transcended the drive for utilitarian communication, a search that led him – again like Chopin – to emphasize the role of the body. Writing for Carrega was physical, the act of leaving material traces of a lived moment on material supports, in which mind and body were both deeply involved. Citing André Breton, the poet used the example of a chess move to illustrate the complex process of negotiation and indeterminacy he was trying to capture. Once the move was decided and the hand rested on the chess piece, an "intermediate stage" entered into play as both opponents considered the consequences before action was finally taken. "It is in this interregnum that the principle of writing is founded. Primary, originary, creative writing, at a distance from secondary writing like that of conventional common codes." Blending both, established signs of communication with gestures that emerge in the tense "passage" between composition and execution, Carrega's poetry seeks to preserve the moment of expression in the material practice he called the New Writing. "How does the mind behave when dreamed by the hand?" This eloquent piece – also a work of *poesia visiva* – attempts to convey an answer.





POETRY MATTERS



## POETRY MATTERS

Matter mattered in the experimental poetry of the avant-garde. From the day Mallarmé grasped “paper” as a compositional element, allowing it to “intervene” in the sense and flow of words (“the others”) on the pages of *Un Coup de dés*, the physical dimensions of media took on a life of their own, shaping the adventures of poetry, which in turn fashioned them to express meanings that lay far beyond the abstract reach of words. Typography, layout, inks (and paint), material supports, signs, symbols, letters became substance, substantial, not only as visual components, but often for their tactile qualities and weight. Safely locked behind a sheet of glass, Carrega’s *Tower of Babel* beckons the viewer to reach out and feel its jagged, crumbled letters, aiding and abetting in the process of ageing and transformation the poet so cherished in his work. Much of the material on display calls out (gently) for touch and handling: the delicate tissue of Claus’s translucent poems; felt, wood, staples, a bar of soap, Lemaître’s linotype block in *Ur*; the rough layers of media in Caruso’s



Production materials for Jean-Clarence Lambert and Gianni Bertini, *Folies françaises d'après 'Elle'* (Paris, 1964-1966).

... the man-size foam rubber letters absorbed the salt water, then the physical and esthetic planes merged. POEMX pronounced us, ... the people were articulated by the poemx, the soaked rubber letters became the word POEMX, the beach became 'beach,' the waves 'waves,' the blue sky 'the blue sky,' and all the people watching and laughing and taking pictures became 'all the people watching and laughing and taking pictures.'

Alain Arias-Misson, 1970

sculpted collages; above all, perhaps, the production materials used, artifacts of physical work with physical media that consumed so much time and energy; Iliazd's meticulous cut-and-paste maquettes for *Poésie de mots inconnus*; Bertini's tracing paper, stencils, plastic forms, endless variations of screen prints, each pulled by hand for *Folies françaises d'après 'Elle'*. Works of visual poetry often invite the reader to take them in hand, to sense their weight and texture, and of course to turn (or flip) their pages if they take the form of a book. Come back when the exhibition is over, they say. The reading room is where the real encounter takes place. Sound too was raw material, broken apart from words and letters, carried from deep within the “factory” of living human bodies on physical airwaves and electromagnetic vibration, captured on magnetic tape, laboriously reworked in analog recordings (here the digital comes to our aid, allowing visitors to “touch” the poetry directly, or rather the poetry to touch them, through the use of MP3 players and stereo headphones). Experimental poetry *mattered*.

Visual, tactile, aural, corporeal, the physical properties of media push against the boundaries of the two-dimensional page, seen as mere surface for words to occupy, bearing meanings that are themselves present only in the remotest sense, abstract, conceptual, highly contrived. In fact, as we all know, pages have more than one side. Without pausing to think, we turn them over to follow the succession of words on the back. Depending on the quality of paper and the intensity with which the words were inscribed, ink or impressions from the other side may perhaps bleed through, reminding us for an instant of the physical

medium, that both sides of the page coexist on a single sheet, but we quickly shake off the interference to focus on the matter at hand. What if we were to *stop* reading, though, even for a moment, to see the page for what it is, a material three-dimensional object that conveys a multitude of concurrent impressions at once? Exploring the possibilities, Claus created stunning visual poetry from the “interference” of handwriting on sheets of translucent paper, a medium Broodthaers also employed in his homage to Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de dés*. The superimposition of text and image echoes that of voices in Heidsieck’s score *D2 + D3Z*, published on transparent sheets in a volume of Chopin’s *OU* series in 1973. Layered between the gestural strokes of paintings by Jean Degottex, poem and prints blend together in successive pairs, receding downwards in multidimensional collage, the whole fastened in clear sheets of plexiglass firmly secured with bolts. Books were objects too. Gathering words in mass, the ancient medium seemed to embody the reality of their cumulative material weight, defying visions of the page as insubstantial surface. “The book-object ... first of all poses a singular and resistant object: it refuses to disappear behind the signified, it establishes itself as significant in its own right,” wrote Lambert, author with Bertini of one of the most spectacular “book-objects” of the postwar era, *Folies françaises*. “In this incidentally it serves and coincides most closely with certain ambitions of poetry we know. It manifests and sometimes magnifies them.” The book as material object occupied many experimental poets at the time. Caruso’s s handmade scroll and artist’s books, *Silence* and *Molotov is a Publisher Who Prints*

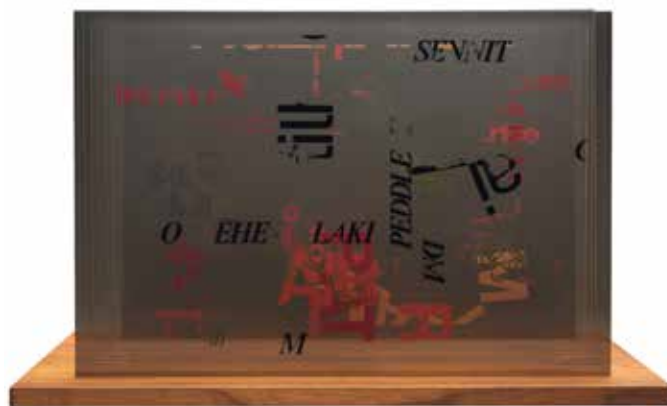


Ugo Carrega, *La Torre di Babele* (2008).



*Bottles*, Miccini's multimedia medley *Liber*, the disintegrating prose and typewriter poems of Chopin's *Last Novel of the World* explore the possibilities of the medium, which became the focus of particularly intense experimentation on the part of Bory. "These books will not be like ours," the poet believed, imagining new forms no longer bound by the limited vision of the past. "They will be constituted of pages and words/fundamentally different./For example signs without apparent links among them/and never repeating and yet language./Writing in perpetual evolution/not in several centuries like ours/but in a few minutes./Different writing from page to page./Books where the signs of language will be constituted by the voids between words./Books without pages or books without end."

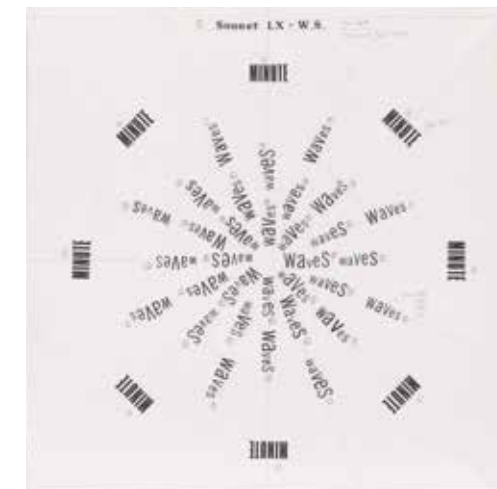
John Cage and Calvin Sumsion, *Not Wanting to Say Anything about Marcel* (Cincinnati, 1969).



Striving for corporeal substance, experimental poetry sometimes burst the bounds of pages and books altogether; taking shape in pieces of freestanding sculpture like Carrega's *Tower of Babel* and *You don't die of hunger alone, but ...*, composed of six pieces of broken glass inserted into a wooden base. Merging across the panes, the words here form patterns of interference, as they do in Claus's work, but the depth and dimensionality of the poem are far more pronounced. A similar effect is achieved in John Cage's "plexigram," *Not Wanting to Say Anything about Marcel*. One of the few American pieces on display, Cage's work is a spectacular example of a genre of three-dimensional poetry that flourished on both sides of the Atlantic. Scattering words, letters, symbols, and fragments across eight sheets of plexiglass printed in color lithography and evenly spaced in slots routed on the wooden base, the work can be "read," but, in keeping with Cage's penchant for chance, only with help from the *I Ching*. A set of detailed instructions lays out the possible interpretations, depending on a roll of the dice. Arias-Misson, author of the "man-size" signs and letters of the public poem, also produced three-dimensional works in plexiglass, such as the one sketched in this preparatory map for "Sonnet LX – W.S." (William Shakespeare). The placement of words on receding sheets, numbered here in red ink, captures the rocking motion of 'waves' in 'minutes' of time – a curious echo of the merging of physical and aesthetic planes in POEMX – while another charts the path of seagulls dodging each other on intersecting three-dimensional paths between boundaries marked 'time,' 'space,' 'existence,' and 'the unsayable.'

A passion for Arias-Misson, the quest to make poetry come alive, to give it body and movement in physical space, continues to inspire new works and new experimental forms. More than fifty years after he staged the first public poem in Brussels, Arias-Misson is again taking his giant letters outside for a stroll at the Pompidou Center in Paris and here at Yale, on Beinecke Plaza, for the opening of *Beyond Words* in September. "Institutions and museums in Europe seem to have woken up to the 'novelty' of the Public Poem," he muses – "does that portend the End of the Public Poem?" It is, however, the new technology of holographic projection that has fired the poet's imagination. Having first used lasers to inscribe swirling three-dimensional lines of poetry into solid blocks of plexiglass, Arias-Misson is now able to animate them. Sweeping around and behind a solid block of wooden letters – the word 'tree' – set inside a holographic vitrine, figures composed of miniscule verse speak themselves as they dance and embrace in the poem "Eden." At long last, Arias-Misson remarked, the dream behind his painstaking sketches for the plexiglass poems of the 1970s has become reality.

Machines of a different sort loomed large in experiments of the 1960s and 1970s, which explored mechanical processes of physical transfer alongside other material dimensions of poetic media. "Microphone = phonetic poem. Typewriter = mechanical poem," Pierre Garnier wrote, arguing that a common modus of operation in these technologies had given rise to similar strategies and practices in the new genres. "The voice *hits* the magnetic tape. The keys under the impulsion of fingers *hit* the ribbon that prints the blank page through percussion. Speech actions and



Alain Arias-Misson, manuscript sketch for three-dimensional plexiglass poem, "Sonnet LX—W.S." (c. 1975).

writing actions appear in parallel. Creation of linguistic fields, of points of energy, of superimpositions, of words decomposed into their letters, words that mutate into energy ... constellating centers, noise (smudges, tears, etc.), destructions, mixes." Evoking the image of poets slamming ink onto paper; realigning, canceling, overwriting with repeated strokes until smudges and tears appear in the emergent patterns, Garnier captures the moment of physical force and passion that went into even the most rigorously composed typewriter poems. His argument for a link between the two genres is also suggestive, particularly in the



MEC, no. 1 (December 1969).

case of the sound poet Chopin, who spent the last years of his life hammering away deep into the night to produce a vast stream of typewriter poem collages in the *Mille pensées*. The typewriter was certainly an icon of experimental poetry, appearing on the cover of *Approches* and again in Bory's gilded sculpture, *Fin des mots*, "End of Words." But there were other machines, and other physical processes of media transfer as well. Wolman invented a method all his own, using scotch tape to detach strips of print from papers and then dissolving the plastic film residue with an alcohol solution after adhering the distorted type onto wood, canvas, or another sup-

port. A change in the manufacturer's formula spelled an end to Wolman's "Scotch Art" in the 1970s, as the tape became indissoluble, but the artist went on to work with photocopy machines in new experiments with manipulation and the media of transfer in works like *Pocket Portraits* and *Duhring Duhring*. Photography and screen prints were some of Bertini's favorite tools. Passing headlines, images, and the work of fellow experimental poets through multiple stages of "obvious manipulation," Bertini turned the process of material transfer into a form of art in the review *MEC*.

Where does it all leave us? Explorations of physical media and the *matte*ring of poetic language seem remote from the concerns and realities of the digital age, where sounds, images, fragments of text stream and merge almost effortlessly in the apparent absence of material constraints. Yet experimental poets of the postwar avant-garde also believed they were living in an age of new, almost limitless technical possibilities. It was precisely the flood of "instant" communication, the (relative) ease with which text, image, and sound could be mixed and matched in powerful new forms of messaging that inspired many poets to explore the nonverbal aspects of media as autonomous elements of composition. The focus on materiality was, as Lambert noted, often a sign of "resistance" to the flow of signifiers that seemed always to point in the wrong direction. "Information is an organized distraction," as Gerz put it in *Agentzia*, amid images of television screens, advertising models, casualties of war. Taking up the visual signs and symbols of mass media as raw material, the artists of *poesia visiva* devel-

oped a sophisticated arsenal of techniques aimed at uncovering and short-circuiting the processes of manipulation that made them such an effective means of conveying "subliminal" messages of authority. Chopin and others did much the same with sound, tearing it loose from the "totalitarian" import of language, mixing it up in channels of elaborate postproduction technology. Computers were just another tool. Beat poet Brion Gysin used them early on, working with the programmer Ian Sommerville to produce a stream of verbal permutations in "I am that I am." So too did Bory, whose archive is a superb source for exploring the transition of visual and sound poetry to digital platforms. Nearly all of the strategies and techniques developed in the postwar era easily find application in computer technology, which not only enhances them but presents entirely new possibilities as well. Arias-Misson's "Eden" fulfills what could only be a dream in the 1970s. Projected on the marble panes of Beinecke Library, two works by the Canadian poet David Jhave Johnston brilliantly illustrate the potential for new forms. Generated by computer, letters take corporeal form only to melt in "Bitfrost for Viola," a poem that echoes Bory's *Gutenberg Apocalypse*, while *ReRites* performs an endless series of permutations on poetic language mined from big data servers, passed through algorithms, and "edited by a human." Poetry beyond words thrives in the digital age. The question is not one of endings. The question is, where do we go from here?



Julien Blaine, "Exp(losion)," screen print by Gianni Bertini, from *Festival de Fort Boyard* (Paris, 1967).



## IMPRINT

### Exhibition

*Beyond Words: Experimental Poetry and the Avant-Garde*  
on view August 30 to December 15, 2019

at

Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library  
Yale University  
121 Wall Street, New Haven, Connecticut

[www.library.yale.edu/beinecke](http://www.library.yale.edu/beinecke)

### Design

Gabriele Linke Grafikdesign, Berlin  
[www.linke-design.com](http://www.linke-design.com)

### Print

Ruksaldruck, Berlin

### Paper

Condat Matt Périgord

### Outside Cover

Detail of Julien Blaine, "Exp(l)osion," screen print by Gianni Bertini, from *Festival de Fort Boyard* (Paris, 1967).

### Inside Cover

Detail of Paul de Vree, "toute prédication," original screen print from de Vree, *Poesia Visiva: een keuze* (Antwerp, 1979).

### Frontispiece

Jean-François Bory, *La fin des mots* (1979).

