BEYOND WORDS
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EXPERIMENTAL POETRY AND THE AVANT-GARDE
Words are at the heart and soul of poetry. Whether summoned in hours of deep contemplation, snatchèd 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-rhythms of François Dufrêne, 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 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

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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
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 within postwar Europe easily stretches the bounds of a single exhibition.

Bristing with color and texture, sight, sound, and passion, the experimental poetry of postwar Europe 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, whereas the articulation of words in order to manipulate, splice, and stitch together meaning and form. But it also leaves room 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.

Beyond Words

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The experimental poetry of postwar Europe not only provided a forum for the expression of personal desires and political beliefs, but also challenged the mindless conformity and mass media of the day. As Eugenio Miccini declared, explaining the strategy of inventing the “iconography of mass media” in collaged poems: “and it wages war like a guerrilla.”

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 order to see what they are made of. Only then can we begin to grasp their meaning and explore possibilities that (also) lie beyond them.
IN PRICIPIO ERAT
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 incantations, they likely point back to earlier traditions and were in turn passed on by medieval scribes who painstakingly 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 ors 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, telesics, palindromes, rebus 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 secrets in his magisterial Prima columna ab oculo ponens metarepicurism (Rome, 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
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 strewed 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...
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 tormented) 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, sian experimented with visual and sound poetry continued to evolve in the 1920s and 30s, unbinding 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, zoun, or “beyondsenselanguage,” 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 Burliuk, 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 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, unbinding 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, zoun, also traveled west with the Georgian poet and master print-maker Iliazd, who joined in the creative fervent of Dada and Surrealism in Paris after fleeing Russia in 1921. “Not words, but letters are originally the material of poetry, Schwitters wrote, explaining the concept of “consis-tent 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, 1922).

— in all twenty-two visual and sound poets, including of course Iliazd himself. Set out with typographic genius on page after ex-quisitely 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 at the dawn of modern visual poetry, the Ursonate has assumed nearly mythical sta-tus in origin stories of contemporary sound poetry. Emerging from over a decade of ex-periment, recital, and refinement, the poem lives and breathes the spirit of creative inter-mingling 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 ini-tial nudge, but Russian Futurism and zoun also played a hand, as did the artist’s close collab-oration 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 found-er of Italian Futurism, F.T. Marinetti. Composed almost entirely of pure vocal acoustics, or “pri-mal 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 “consis-tent 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, 1922).
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
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 tabulae 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 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 Primes in 1953 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 Dufrêne left with others to launch Le Soulevement 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 genius,” he went on. “His ideas are invigorating. He is a serious person, and he provokes me.” Debord exclaimed: “Nothing can bind us momentarily, if not the revolutionary utility of provocations.”

Debord declared the film as “poorly made” – helped precipitate the break not long after the premiere, a moment that continued to occupy Debord for years and appears among the “load-bearing structures” of his Mémoires, a masterpiece in the art of detournement 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 be left unchallenged. That is the revolutionary utility of provocations,” Debord exclaimed in an invitation to the Lettrist International’s own exhibition of hypergraphies at the Galerie du Passage in 1954: “What’s in play is the seizure of power.”

Wolman mused, working out the implications of his own discovery in an early fragment. “Métopoëme 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 purely bodily acoustics devoid of visual recording – lips, palate and tongue, nose, larynx, lungs (and whether either inhalation or exhalation was involved) – Isou, Pomerand, and Lemaître quickly turned to live performance and sound poetry – Dufrêne abandoned writing (and Lettrism) altogether to explore pure bodily acoustics devoid of visual recording. He moved to Paris and other venues during the wild nights of improvisation at the Tabou and other venues 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 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 Primes in 1953 that Lettrism left sound puzzles and rebuses behind to explore the pure visuality of signs.

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Galleries in fact became another battleground, as Lettrism and its controversies spilled over into the world of art. Based out of the Galerie Primes, 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 crythmes, and to 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 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, and

Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, Mémoires (Copenhagen, 1958).
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 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 Estival’s Sigism 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 mégalithes 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.
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 Tápies, 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 Bazone and Le 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 cry-rythmes of Dufrêne 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 métigraphie and Lemaître’s hyergraphie 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 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.
Sound poetry traces its origins far back in time, well before its classic iteration in the modernist Unsonate of Kurt Schwitters. In principio est. But it emerged transformed by the experience of the Second World War. This was certainly true of Lettrism, and of Ison, in particular, with his long list of atrocities committed by the Word – “the first stereotype” – 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 the Soviet Union. “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. 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Channeling the trauma of war into météo poésie, 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 “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 technological utopianism of the avant-garde, abruptly cut short when the poet arranged an Absolute Discourse, abruptly cut short when the poet arranged an Absolute Discourse, abruptly cut short when the poet arranged an Absolute Discourse, abruptly cut short when the poet arranged an Absolute Discourse, abruptly cut short when the poet arranged an Absolute Discourse, abruptly cut short when the poet arranged an Absolute Discourse, abruptly cut short when the poet 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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 Dufrené, 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, altering, 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 enunciative 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 Dufrené and Wolman, whose mégopneumie 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, naval 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 employing 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,” Chopin noted, “is the ultimate experience for modern poetry.”

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

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

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 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 experimental 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 Dufrêne, “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 crystalization 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.

“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 “Bertiniization” 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 reflected 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 historical avant-garde, he worked with Louvano 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 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 Altagor – but without his polemical disregard for previous movements. On the contrary, it was time for a new edition of Iliazd’s Poetry of Unknown Words, Chopin noted in presenting the tables. 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 also situated them within overlapping force fields defined by a series of vertical polarities – “social” and “technical environments,” “masses”
Paul de Vrees, *Poesia visiva: een kaartje* (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 psychophysical 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 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 visible sounds: a concerted communication of creative spontaneous vibrations. Phonetic poetry cannot exist without a reinvention of recital, that is, a total sensitivity, itself at bottom part of the total kinetic spectacle Henri Chopin foresaw with the inevitable utilization of wave-driven machines. The oeuve of sound is the result of teamwork under the direction of the poet 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 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 visible sounds: a concerted communication of creative spontaneous vibrations. Phonetic poetry cannot exist without a reinvention of recital, that is, a total sensitivity, itself at bottom part of the total kinetic spectacle Henri Chopin foresaw 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.”

against 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 Heidegger, Pierre Garrier, an entire generation of young French experimental poets, in fact, announcing the change in bold typography right on the cover: “New Tendencies: Phonetic Phonics 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 Albért-Brobat, 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 Tafelronde, while de Vree reciprocated with articles on “avant-garde poetry-painting” in Cinquième 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 Dufrêne 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 *Explositieven* (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 Dufrêne, Hains, and Minmo Rotella;
Beat poet Brion Gysin; British and French visual poets Dom Sylvester Houedard, John Furnival, Gil Wolman, and Julien Blaine; experimental cineastes Serge Béguier (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 masterful 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. Interpersed 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 Dufrêne, 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 Charmoy, 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 Verbruggen, in 1970.
MIXING CONCRETE
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 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 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 anytime 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 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.”

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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 com-
municating, it is a material we animate," Pierre Garnier wrote,
introducing Spatialism and Concrete Poetry in 1968. Haying be-
come "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 de-
sire 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 engage-
ment, a call for the release of spontaneous human passion, that
seem remote from the cool functional rationalism and intellec-
tual rigor, the "total responsibility before language," announced
in the pre-concrete manner, just as it is impossible to write today
as though surrealism never existed." But experimental poetry
had in large part been inspired by the arrival of concrete
poetry, Bory immediately went on to acknowledge its trans-
formative impact. "Clearly, the next artists will not write in a
pre-concrete manner, just as it is impossible to write today
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had to move on. I think we must trust them to create, and to
continue to create important things," the young poet asserted.

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

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Jean-François Bory, "Saga," Approches no. 3 (1968).
periments 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 Toffolovre 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 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 “The Last Attempt of the Individual: Agenzia, no. 1 (1968).”

Grafting the words ‘yes’ and ‘history’ onto closeups of a jochen gerz’s grizzly “Batman,” published in the final issue in November 1967, julien blaine and his young companions, reviewing an exhibition on the eve of the Paris uprising in November 1967, julien blaine castigated the works on display 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 “The Last Attempt of the Individual: Agenzia, no. 1 (1968).”

Yet Bory also favored more direct, confrontational strategies. Mixing life-sized letters with nude bodies in provocative 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 agenzia. Bristling with graphic images of war, seductive advertising, televisions, apparatus of bureaucratic communication, the review pulled no punches. Agenzia: “accepts only reader-militants who are ready to assume responsibility for the blows their conscience suffers on late medieval figures in paintings from the age of Gutenberg.”

JACQUES GÉRARD, La fin des mots (1973).
tal reviews, turf battles in the galleries, live interactive performances, shocking images circulating in limited runs in experiments directed at unknowing participants in a consumer society at war. Expose the single underlying message of modern mass media, communications – euphemistic, hateful, enticing – finally join to together in this relentless barrage, the signs and symbols of global targets for some sort of military or sexual assault. Blurring with various nomenclatures, most of them signaling her as a model displayed on a standardized grid, each body part tagged with tanks, rifles interspersed with full frontal photos of a nude female. Bory’s experiments, operates like a flip-book, rat-

Quick Read in reading,” the review proudly warned. Issued in the Agentzia Points” declared of its members in 1971. “They reject all those seeing them, these petty transparent ones.” Listed among the group’s members were Baine, 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 – 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, 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 spilled 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 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 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.”
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 potential 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.
“But does there exist a revolutionary essence of the avant-garde?” Posea 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 in fused 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, 1971 was off to a militant 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 exploring 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 Amosolù 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 Amosolù 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...
“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 experimen
tal poetry. De Vree pushed back. Chopin’s “engagement against dictatorship” and partisan devotion to sound poetry had “lim- ited 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, provoc
tive, 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 semologist, 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 ex-
pression. Presiding over a conference on “Art and Communica-
tion” in May 1963, Pignotti launched the Gruppo 70 with Miccini and Giuseppe Chiarì in Florence. Alongside painters and musi-
cians, many of the leading artists of what would soon be called poesia visiva joined the group: Perfetti and Isgrò, Kitty La Rocca, Lucia Marucci, Luciano Ori, and others, all determined to expand the reach of poetry by integrating, adapting, but also sharply criticizing the sophisticated techniques of mass me-
dia. By the end of the year, collective exhibitions of Gruppo 70 introduced one of the sig-
nature gestures of poesia vi-
siva, the subversive collaging of text and images from the popular press, juxtaposed to provoke critical awareness of the messages they con-
voyed. The issue of impegni,
“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 artis-
ts to “transform mass media into mass culture,” Pignotti urged the use of “new and more powerful means of diffusion” in collaborative works aimed at direct public intervention in the promulgation of so-
cietal norms and attitudes. Staged at a Florentine gallery a few months prior to the conference, the multimedia spectacle Po-
etry 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 perfor-
mance that solicited participation from a live audience.
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 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 test 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 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.

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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...”
tradition, transgression of the pilfer logic of the society of op- ulence 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 abstruse fashion with the problems of communication and information theory: it seeks, with the aid of expansions, rejections, overprint- ing, 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 in- struments 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 across Europe: ”Poesia visiva” language that could not help but appeal to experimental poets

Caruso wrote a thesis on cor- mino (figurata, one of the ear- liest forms of visual poetry (and a favorite technique in the Baroque art of poesia or- tificiosa), which he often used as raw material in making art- ist books, unique handcrafted works that explore the physi- cality of media with remark- able sensitivity and skill. A profound artistic reflection on the opacity of writing systems, Caruso’s Silence displays a se- ries of texts inscribed in non- Western linguistic characters, each placed alongside another- 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 Ital- ian 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 ac- cording to the bodies that are how to say their instruments and yet the division that//.” The sentence is never completed. Mate- riality 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

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-ther — li-life by my side,” lyrics of a popular song croon below. Dripping with bitter irony, Ori’s composition is a lurid indict- ment of both media and readers who conspire to turn even the most brutal acts of society into diverting spectacle and farce.

Carus’s Silence takes many forms. Patiently canceling out the text on endless yards of teletype with meaningless invented symbols, the Neapolitan poet Luciano Caruso produced a mas- sive scroll, the very length and volume of which offers word- less commentary on the flood of “information” feeding the ma- chines of mass communication. Fascinated by medieval writing, Silences, Luciano Caruso, untitled scroll (1967).
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, 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 age, 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 collectivist 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 interim that the principle of writing is founded. Primary, originary, creative writing, at a distance from secondary writing like that of conventional common codes.”

Bending 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.
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 substantial, not only as visual components, but often for their tactile qualities and weight. Safely locked behind a sheet of glass, they were inscribed, ink or impressions from the other side may penetrate, reminding us for an instant of the physical sculpture, 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). In this sense, the ancient medium seemed to embody the reality of the cumulative material weight, defying visions of the page as insubstantial surface. “The book-object … first of all poses conceptual, highly contrived. In fact, as we all know, pages have more than one side. Without passing 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 Heidegger’s score DJ + DJZ, published on transparent sheets in a volume of Chopin’s OUI 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 handmade scroll and artist’s books, Silence and Molotov is a Publisher. Who Prints

P.O. 41107
2008.


Production materials for Jean-Clarence Lambert and Carrega’s 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 medium 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 passing 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 Heidegger’s score DJ + DJZ, published on transparent sheets in a volume of Chopin’s OUI 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 handmade scroll and artist’s books, Silence and Molotov is a Publisher. Who Prints
Among them / and never repeating and yet language. / Writing in words. / Books without pages or books without end.”

The signs of language will be constituted by the voids between fundamentally different. For example signs without apparent links imagining new forms no longer bound by the limited vision of Bory. “These books will not be like ours,” the poet believed, focus of particularly intense experimentation on the part of prose and typewriter poems of Chopin's Last Novel of the World

Liber, the disintegrating Miccini’s multimedia medley Bottles, … 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, Misson, author of the “man-size” signs and letters of the public poem, also produced three-dimensional works in 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.

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 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
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 support. 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 mattering 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 developed 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?
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Outside Cover

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).