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## INFORMATION IN FORM: "THE TENSION OF THINGS-WORDS IN SPACE-TIME"

### Spaces of Concrete

In 1955, the Swiss artist and poet Andre Thomkins began collecting words that carried meaning in two or more of the German, French, and English languages. A member of the Darmstadt Circle of experimental poets and artists, a group that included the American Emmett Williams, the Icelandic Dieter Roth, the German Claus Bremer, and the Romanian Daniel Spoerri, Thomkins was used to operating in a polylinguistic environment. Much in the same way that Augusto de Campos, in his "City Poem" (1963; see fig. 3.5), took up the Latin roots shared by words in English, French, and Portuguese that can be completed with the suffixes "city / cidade / and cité," Thomkins implemented the list as form, and used words that infiltrate and occupy different national languages, though with different pronunciations and meanings, as a way to address both the impediments and opportunities created by an increasingly connected international cultural sphere. The poem appears in Williams's anthology as a simple list of words, six per

line, but Williams's gloss describes a different form: "Dogmat-Mot' is a mobile composition of 120 words arranged on mobile discs which present the reader with ever-changing phrases" (n. pag.). The poem-as-object, a triangular arrangement of ten hexagons with words printed around their edges and trisectonally, all of which hinge on a central pivot, allows readers to operate the poem as program, and to speak and read "several languages simultaneously – with all the attendant ambiguities" (Williams n. pag.) (see fig. 5.1).

Thomkins's poem-object is evidence that the combinatorial and permutational approach to language as material that operates across borders was a concern of concrete poetry from its earliest days. I have already pointed to similar concerns in the work of Haroldo and Augusto de Campos as well as that of Eugen Gomringer and Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová. In relating concrete poetry to its historical position within the emergence of a technologically produced global imaginary, I have connected permutational and polylinguistic compositions to the feelings, both optimistic and anxious, stemming from the mechanical approach to language, specifically how it developed out of Alan Turing and other mathematicians' code-breaking efforts during WWII. What is especially interesting about Thomkins's poem-object, then, is less the poetry of it than its objectness. Williams says that it was "published" by Galerie der Spiegel in Cologne in 1965, but is *published* the correct term? The poem is not on a page, or at least a page as it is conventionally understood. Nor is it a book, though an argument could be made that the structure contains the potential for various poetic permutations, and is therefore more like a book than a page. Should it be framed? Should it be shelved?

The lesson I want to draw from Thomkins's piece, to which I will return later, is that concrete poetry operates within a space that is particularly difficult to locate. Its poetic form is inextricable from its distributive form, and its method of circulation is by no means homogenous: it manifests as sculpture, as painting, as poster; as handwritten, mechanical, or photo-printed; on pages of mass-printed editions and small-press books, folios, and ephemera. It is certainly true that previous poetic movements, specifically the historical avant-gardes, also challenged standard disciplinary categories, but not to the extent of concrete poetry. The Dada poets were close associates of the Dada painters, but the poetry of Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, and Kurt Schwitters was designed to function on a page or a stage. The Futurists' words were liberated from the line but not the page, even if that page was not always a standard size. The Surrealists, as well, though experimental with images and

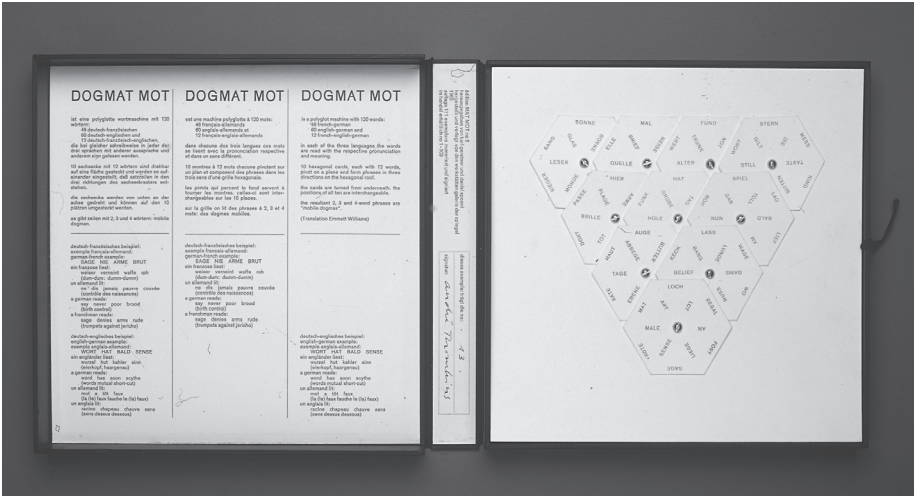


Figure 5.1  
 Andre Thomkins. "Dogmat Mot"

psychology, were less so with form. Isidore Isou's Lettristes might come closer to concrete poetry's elusive distributive form, as they branch into painting and film, but the Lettriste movement was not a poetic movement as much as it was a self-consciously avant-garde project. The concrete poets, however – perhaps because their experience of space in the second half of the twentieth century had shifted so far from that of the poets and artists of the first – slide between the gallery and the book, the poster and the page, the mass-printed anthology and the fine-art press edition. The tension between the word and the image, and the possibilities for distribution that each historically adopts, is part of what has kept concrete poetry out of dominant cultural discourse for so long, but is also a large part of what makes it so significant as a twentieth-century poetic experiment. By looking specifically at the shift within the work from an aesthetics of production to one of distribution and reception, I argue that it enacts an understanding of space that has implications for poetry, visual art, and culture on a global scale within its period and beyond.

Concrete poetry's dispersed geography, although paradoxically integral to its cohesion as an international movement, sometimes accentuates its incongruities and makes mapping the work difficult. The movement's chronological development is also an impediment; the period between 1955 and 1971 provides a convenient bracket, but it is a considerable span, and encompasses the transformation of the work from an early orthodoxy to a more experimental practice. The period and movement also occupies a precarious historical position on the hinge between modernism and post-modernism and as such demands to be read against the spatial characteristics of both.

Traditionally, approaching the concept of space within literature evokes Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoön*, the eighteenth-century essay which attempts to outline the formal imperatives of literary and visual representation. Literature, Lessing argues, operates temporally, through narrative. The plastic arts operate spatially, as there is no order in visual representation: foreground and background function in simultaneous relation to each other. It is with reference to this text that the literary critic Joseph Frank opens his 1945 essay "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," which deals with how modernist writers attempted to refute Lessing's criteria by forcing their readers to experience texts outside of the temporality of narrative. Frank deals with the major modernist authors – James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Gustav Flaubert, Ezra Pound – and outlines how their practice of shifting narration and disjointed syntax attempted to spatialize literature, disrupting

the idea of a narrative linearity. He positions the techniques and concerns of the Imagists in opposition to the verbiage of the Victorian era, and locates a possible explanation for such a shift in the work of the early twentieth-century German critic Wilhelm Worringer, who theorized that the spiritual stability of an era can be determined by the degree to which its cultural production adheres to naturalistic representation. Worringer's argument, although reductive, posits that naturalistic representation, particularly in the plastic arts, arises from cultures that have a harmonized relationship with the cosmos, and thus delight in representing the order they find themselves in. Example periods cited are ancient Greece, the Italian Renaissance, and Western Europe at the end of the eighteenth century. Non-naturalistic representation, conversely, springs from cultures with a confused relationship to the cosmos, and who thus delight in the transformation of nature into lines and planes; simplified, if not scientific, representation allows them an escape from the external world. Examples of art from these perturbed periods are Egyptian monumental sculpture, Byzantine art, and most of the work produced during the twentieth century. Naturalistic style is characterized by perspective and depth; non-naturalistic style is characterized by shifting vantage points and surface (Frank 71). Geoffrey Cook makes a similar point when he argues that examples of visual poetry throughout history seem to arrive on the cusp of an episteme (141).

Frank cites Pound's *Cantos* to argue his point about the obliteration of the conventional idea of time-space, as the work juxtaposes ancient, Renaissance, and modern references in no discernible progressive order. Languages – Greek, French, Italian, and Chinese – appear beside each other in a collapsing of geography and tradition. This technique is a disruption of the literary analogue of Renaissance perspective, as is the work of Woolf, in a text like *To the Lighthouse*, or Joyce, in a text like *Ulysses*. The unfolding of a narrative does not, in these works, follow an order that allows for the comfortable positioning of a reader:

Past and present are apprehended spatially, locked in a timeless unity that, while it may accentuate surface differences, eliminates any feeling of sequence by the very act of juxtaposition. Ever since the Renaissance, modern man has cultivated both the objective visual imagination (the ability to portray space) and the objective historical imagination (the ability to apprehend chronological time); both have now been abandoned. (76)

Modern literature aims for a space of simultaneity rather than one of causal progression, what Marshall McLuhan has argued is an acoustic space rather than a visual space (see, in particular, *Verbi-Voco Visual Explorations*; 1967). In a footnote at the end of his essay, Frank notes that some critics' objections to his argument insist, in lockstep with Lessing, on the time-based nature of literature. Frank responds: "I could not agree more. But this has not stopped modern writers from working out techniques to achieve the impossible – as much as possible" (76).

Concrete poetry's space complicates Frank's space. Its resistance to standard ideas of poetry and the book position it somewhere beyond modernism – in spite of the explicitly stated influence of writers such as Ezra Pound, James Joyce and Guillaume Apollinaire – functioning within what Rosalind Krauss might refer to as an "expanded field" of poetry. But examining concrete poetry in light of Frank's understanding of how space functions in literature allows us to situate the work historically. If non-naturalistic representation is a sign of a confused relationship to the cosmos, it is easy to identify in a literature that departs so drastically from conventional form the anxiety that came in the wake of the nuclear bomb and cold war posturing. On a different level, the degree to which the disruption of the literary analog of Renaissance perspective – the poetic line, and to a lesser extent, the page – appears in concrete poetry to be beyond the most radical time-space experiments of Pound's *Cantos*. The Austrian concrete poet Gerhard Rühm's 1958 placard poem "Jetzt" is an example of a poem that deals explicitly with both visual and literary perspective, and of the connection between time and space that Lessing's *Laocoön* attempts to treat programmatically (see fig. 5.2). The poem presents the word "jetzt," which is German for *now*, in various different font sizes and typefaces, some beginning with an uppercase *J*, some with a lowercase, some with serifs, some without. The idea of a stable present is confounded by the spatial understanding of *now* as a fleeting, shifting time index, one that contradicts itself as soon as it signifies: *now*, once read, becomes *then*, in a constant coming into being and passing away that the layout of the poem encourages. As such it evokes the experience of simultaneity in a more effective manner than Pound or his contemporaries, although in this case with a more explicitly temporal reference.

Like the blank middle in Gomringer's "silencio," which performs the silence that the presentation of the word destroys, the blank space in Rühm's poem enacts the *now* that the repetition of "jetzt" annihilates. Making use of both the idea of perspective, in the larger words occupying the foreground and the smaller words the background, as well as the idea of font size





corresponding to volume, a strategy implemented by the poetic and graphic avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, the poem refuses to provide the reader/viewer with a fixed position in the way that a conventional poetic line would, or a photograph or perspectival painting would: no representation of “jetzt” could be any more *now*, or *present*, to use a pun, than any of the other representations. Depending on how the reader imagines the movement of the poem, the larger words can either be closer to the present – a less stale now – or further from it, if it seems like the text grows from the smaller text, rather than vice versa. Both of these readings suggest progressive movement, rather than a simultaneity of nows, just in different intensities, producing alternative and equally fruitful readings. How can some nows be of more importance, or of different characters than others? And what is the blank space out of which the nows emerge? In an age of globalization and uneven development, and for what I have previously referred to as the poetry of the Marshall Plan, the answer seems to be that there are places that are now and places that are then. In the commercialization of culture as well as the tyranny of progression in modernization, trends that meet intensely in the postwar period of affluence and reconstruction, the emphasis on now, in whatever language, carries within it a political character that would not have been there had this been a Futurist or Dadaist poem.

The various typefaces in Rühm’s poem position it within a culture of the increased visualization of language, particularly in relation to advertising. Language in advertising was no longer meant to function transparently, but to communicate a disruption of standardized lines and representation. Stephen Bann makes this clear when he says: “Concrete poetry thematizes the operation of language in general, the way it affects us, and the way we communicate with it. Concrete poetry thus operates in a way that is comparable to how advertising works, utilizing the various types of graphic signals that we react to in everyday life” (Schaffner n. pag.). Words referred to themselves, in an attempt to stand on their own, creating a new poetics that was put to great use by developers of *brands*. In this sense the term “jetzt” gains greater meaning by parodying the consumerist desire to be up to date – the modernist “make it new” comes to ground in post-WWII consumer culture as “buy it new.” The dizzying assault of the various “jetzt”s performs the anxiety of the consumer, to whom history simply means out of style.

The drastically altered mediascape that arose at mid-century alongside electronic media is what led Marshall McLuhan to theorize the experience of space as acoustic rather than visual. As the media critic Richard Cavell puts it:

“To combine a notion of space as socially produced with an inquiry into the technologies of spatial production is to work towards a social theory of the production of space. McLuhan sought to examine not only how society produces space but also how technologies of space produce society” (Cavell 30). People live on Earth but in different worlds. How are those worlds produced? McLuhan’s position is that the technology of the book since Gutenberg, and the rise in literacy the printing press allowed for, has emphasized a visual understanding of space, as ordered and linear. With the development of electronic media, however, ideas of spatial order are destabilized, resulting in a collapsing of time and space.<sup>1</sup> Voices become disembodied via telephony and sound recording; bodies become disarticulated by photography and film. Renaissance perspective and the printed page are replaced by a media environment that demands a new proprioception.

While it might seem counterintuitive to apply the term “acoustic” to visual poetry, it becomes appropriate when referring to the understanding of space on which the work relies. McLuhan’s work was known and engaged with by various concrete poets. Décio Pignatari, significantly, translated McLuhan’s *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) into Portuguese in 1969.<sup>2</sup> The Noigandres group’s embrace of McLuhan should not come as a surprise, as their own project was also concerned with the transformation of *space* at mid-century. The “Plano-Piloto” [1958] refers to this new spatial understanding:

concrete Poetry: product of a critical evolution of forms. assuming that the historical cycle of verse (as formal-rhythmical unit) is closed, concrete poetry begins by being aware of graphic space as structural agent. [...]

concrete poetry: tension of things-words in space-time.

dynamic structure: multiplicity of concomitant movements.  
(de Campos, de Campos, and Pignatari 90)

The “Plano-Piloto” outlines a development of space beyond that of the line of verse and emphasizes ideas of movement and simultaneity in place of fixed perspective and progressive, causal relationships. Rühm’s “Jetzt,” also written in 1958, shares a similar excitement and suspicion of the new spaces, and how they are to be implemented and felt.

The emphasis on space, and its transformation from the rigid and ordered to the floating and fluid, comes out in the cultural criticism that engaged with shifts in both production and consumption that overlapped the most active period of concrete poetry. And although it might at this point in time seem out-dated, a discussion of how postmodern approaches to culture account for compositional shifts and conditions of circulation in concrete poetry opens up a range of illuminating questions, largely due to concrete poetry's historical position at the height and then cusp of modernism. The poets worked in a moment characterized by post-colonial uprisings, massive national reconstruction projects, the rise of the superpowers, and the initiation of the cold war. All of these factors influenced culture on a global scale, and help us understand postmodernism less as a style of literary or art production than a dominant mode of culture. Such an approach pre-emptly any protest that the techniques we might identify as characteristic of postmodern cultural production – such as the use of popular culture in high art contexts, or the fragmentation of the subject – have already been put to extensive use by modernist writers and painters; this is the type of protest that usually results in the separation of the work from its historical contingencies. A similar reasoning might be offered in response to those who claim concrete poetry is as old as the first written symbol, or that it remains a viable poetic category for contemporary poets. These positions, as I argue in my introductory chapter, serve to elucidate a literary style, but impede a greater understanding of the movement's reasons for coming into being, or for its expiration.

As Fredric Jameson points out in his early essay “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” in the section dealing with his theories of cognitive mapping, humans' perception of the world changes over time, and those changes have material effects on culture and the organization of living. It is a point that might seem obvious, especially for a historical dialectician, but Jameson makes an effort to shift attention away from the temporal and toward the spatial, performing a critique Marshall McLuhan had spent much of the 1960s and '70s enacting extensively in his theories and book work. Jameson uses developments in cartography – from maps of coastlines to larger regions, to the globe in its entirety, and then to the representation of curved lines on a flat map – as examples of technological advances that shift the way people relate to their spaces, or “how technologies of space produce society” (Cavell 30). The time period Jameson identifies as the emergence of postmodernism is marked not only by a rapid increase in communication, but also by a new visual representation of the globe in the form of

photographs from outer space. This visualization has the double effect, as I argue in chapter 3, of drastically altering the human scale so integral to the modernist imagination, while developing a new understanding of the Earth's geography.

If modernism as a cultural dominant was marked by a consideration of time, specifically the march toward some better, mechanized future, post-modernism is defined by space. Grand narratives become grand spectacles; the synchronic overtakes the diachronic. Jameson's primary metaphor for the postmodern space is the Bonaventure Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, and he foregrounds his inability to critique the structure in the lexicon with which he is accustomed to speaking about architecture: volume, line, order, etc. What he speaks about instead is a deracination of the hotel visitors' spatial understanding, how they become disoriented and confused within the interior, and are unable to see into the building from the exterior thanks to its reflective glass surface. Jameson's understanding of the influence of post-modernism on culture comes out of his observation of architecture, a form that he argues is more than any other cultural sector tied to the economical shifts from the realm of the nation and its industries to the accelerated wealth production of multinational corporations within finance capital. He points to the headquarters of multinational corporations, whose architectural style, though hardly homogenous, carries the residue of their moment better than other media, and it is these buildings' aesthetic opposition to modernist styles that Jameson reads onto other cultural artefacts: the rise of photography as a fine art medium, for example, or the linguistic disjunction found in language poetry representing the breaking down of a unified subject position (Jameson 63–4). A similar experience of deracination and frustration of disciplinary tools of analysis greets the literary critic in her/his encounter with concrete poetry. Ideas of language are imploded; there is no standard measure of meter, form, or syntax. Imagery becomes image, literally. The modernist subject disappears, and national and linguistic borders become blurred.

David Harvey, in his book *The Condition of Postmodernity*, continues Jameson's trajectory but emphasizes how both the economic and cultural sectors contribute to a particular historical understanding of the world. He recognizes how space and place can often become confused, and sympathizes with those critics who resisted postmodernism's global perspective in favour of local conditions of production and the urgency that those conditions often call out for. But he warns against positioning it in opposition to the new modes of post-Fordist capitalism: "The assertion of any place-bound



Figure 5.3

Décio Pignatari. "Cr\$isto é a solução"

identity has to rest at some point on the motivational power of tradition. It is difficult, however, to maintain any sense of historical continuity in the face of all the flux and ephemerality of flexible accumulation” (303). He offers a similar refutation of other critics’ emphasis on cultural representations of postmodernism by warning against the fusion of aesthetic and social understanding of space, noting that it is not just in architecture that we can identify the effects of new forms of global capital in the very transformation of urban infrastructure to attract investment, and that postmodernist space also produces geographies of uneven development.<sup>3</sup>

A characteristic of postmodern cultural production that also seemed to irritate those with a modernist sensibility is the presence of a populism where a rigorous aesthetic order once ruled. In architecture, Jameson notes that the buildings take on a form that is meant to impress and entertain rather than shape and motivate. The postmodern architects, he argues in agreement with Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi, and Steven Izenour, did in fact learn from Las Vegas. The paradigm of the architect/artist as genius is replaced by the market as genius; the idea of history as linear and progressivist is refuted. Similarly, in concrete poetry there is a tension between the popular and austere styles that makes it difficult to position as either modern or postmodern; it is much better approached as both. There is a general trend in the Brazilians’ work, at least, that moves from clean, ordered works that approach the popular by using the poster form, or by referring to consumer goods, like Décio Pignatari’s “Beba Coca Cola” or “LIFE,” towards poems that implement photographic printing techniques or more illustrative methods, utilizing structures beyond the semantic possibilities of verbal language.

Examples of the latter type of poem are Augusto de Campos’s “Olho Por Olho” (1964) and Pignatari’s “Cr\$isto é a solução” (1966; see figs. 2.12 and 5.3). Pignatari’s poem, which folded out to 16” x 6.5” from *Invenção* No. 5, whose dimensions were much greater than the dollar bill it references at 10” x 7,” ties the fervour of the market to that of religion in a very stark way, replacing the portrait of George Washington on the American one-dollar bill with that of a heavenward gazing Christ, wearing a crown of thorns. Printed on the back is the phrase “Cr\$isto é a solução” and a legend, in English, explaining that “cr\$” is the abbreviation for the cruzeiro, the Brazilian currency, “isto” is Portuguese for *this*, and “é a solução” means *is the solution*. The meaning of the work is not difficult to access: the worship of the market, represented in the paired iconography of Christ and the American dollar, produces a power structure similar to that of the church, who for millennia have been comforting the poor and disenfranchised with assurances that God, or Christ, is the

answer. The poem's message is not nuanced, but its boldness and transparent political message is an indicator of a particular cultural shift.

The relationship between poetry and advertising becomes even clearer at this point than it was in the early part of the movement, especially in the poet's use of photo-based printing techniques. Pignatari worked in the advertising sector, and has talked about how, at the same time he was writing concrete poems, he was creating word designs and acronyms for corporations and governmental departments. *LUBRAX*, for example, is a word he came up with for the Brazilian national oil corporation Petrobras, and that refers to a type of motor oil ("Entretien" 451). He also used concrete poetry methods to compose an advertisement for a pharmaceutical company's antidiarrheal medicine in which the phrase "PERTURBAÇÕES INTESTINAIS" (Digestive Troubles) is gradually squeezed together into a cohesive lump before being replaced by the encroaching brand name of the medicine, "DISENFÓRMIO" (1963) (see fig. 5.4). In an interview in 1992, Pignatari claims with some pride that he and fellow concrete poet Luis Angelo Pinto were the first poets to work in the advertising industry in Brazil ("Entretien" 451). It was not necessarily rare for graphic designers to produce concrete poetry: Marcel Wyss and Dieter Roth, Eugen Gomringer's collaborators on *Spirale*, a proto-concrete journal, were both trained and practising graphic designers, as were various Italian and Russian Futurists. However, the movement of a poet in the opposite direction speaks to the relationship concrete poetry wished to develop with the spectacle of contemporary global culture, even in its basest forms.<sup>4</sup> In this way the networks of communication and lines of transportation that information and commodity exchange travelled through became something concrete poets aimed to emulate, piggybacking on the expansive routes' capital.

It would be inaccurate to accuse concrete poetry of a cynicism or capitulation, especially given the history of the Brazilians' political work, but it would be just as irresponsible to believe that all reference to the lexicon of advertising is oppositional in the modernist tradition of the avant-garde. The poem "\$ kill" (1969), by the British poet John Sharkey, is visual in the simplest terms, mimetic and obviously positioned against the American imperialist state and its wars in Indochina (see fig. 5.5). There is little else to see in "\$ kill" than a reduced politics of protest that activists in growing antiwar and anti-imperial movements implemented with the same verve and strategies of corporate advertising. One could talk, perhaps, about the regularity of repeated words as lines of visual composition, especially the bold letters

PERTURBAÇÕES INTESTINAIS

N PERTURBAÇÕES INTESTINAIS F  
EN PERTURBAÇÕES INTESTINAIS F  
SEN PERTURBAÇÕES INTESTINAIS F  
ISEN PERTURBAÇÕES INTESTINAIS F  
DISEN PERTURBAÇÕES INTESTINAIS F  
DISENFÓRMIO

**Neomicina**

Antibiótico de pequena absorção e de poderosa ação no combate aos diferentes agentes da infecção intestinal.

**Ftalilsulfatiazol**

Sulfa de baixa solubilidade e de grande utilidade na redução da flora patogênica.

**Sulfadiazina**

Completa a terapêutica atingindo os focos de origem das infecções intestinais, bem como os bacilos disentericos localizados profundamente na mucosa intestinal.

**Pectina**

Hidrato de carbono obtido de frutas cítricas de efeito antitóxico (diminui a absorção de toxinas) e sintomático (atua como constipante).

**Homatropina**

Antiespasmódico eficaz nas manifestações dolorosas decorrentes das infecções intestinais.

**Disenformio pediátrico**

Neomicina 25 mg; Ftalilsulfatiazol 125 mg; Sulfadiazina 125 mg; Pectina 20 mg; Homatropina 0,1 mg; Veículo para 5 cm<sup>3</sup>.

**Disenformio comprimidos**

Neomicina 50 mg; Ftalilsulfatiazol 250 mg; Sulfadiazina 250 mg; Pectina 30 mg; Homatropina 0,5 mg.



**Prociencx**

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Figure 5.4

Décio Pignatari. "Disenformio [advertisement]"





in “kill” against the regular letters in “maim” which is meant to evoke the red and white lines of the American flag. The negative space in “kill,” though, specifically the gap between the *k* and the *i*, make it formally difficult. If the word were printed in uppercase, as “KILL,” the problem is still not solved, as the distance between the horizontal lines in the *L*s produce a similar problem with spacing. Similarly, the visual energy of the \$ in place of the stars might distract the reader from noticing there are fifty-five dollar signs replacing the fifty stars, but I suspect that it is more a question of composition than a political statement: would it be a comment on the perceived colonial project of American-style capitalism? The title of the piece, which could be pronounced “skill,” certainly refers to how efficient the United States’ military had become at warfare, and ties the poem directly to the anti-Vietnam War movement. Sharkey’s technique likely responds to what he saw as the blatant crimes of a military and economic superpower, and takes advantage of a simplified, spectacularized good (socialism) versus bad (capitalism) politics. In this way the “skill” referred to in the title of the poem might also denote a shift in poetic or artistic “skill,” from the carefully constructed, formally balanced verbi-visual composition, to the advertising techniques of the poster, though designed to resist the conditions those advertising methods sought to exploit. This poem was designed to reject close reading, to communicate an obvious and polemical message quickly and effectively. The renunciation of the reader’s time and engagement, and also the reader’s skill, is a significant characteristic of concrete poetry’s project, and one that points directly to the conditions of language and communication in an emergent consumerist moment.

While it is true that the process of reading and comprehension had accelerated beyond early twentieth-century practices by the time of Sharkey’s work, and that part of the project of concrete poetry from its early theorizations was to facilitate quick comprehension of poems across languages, a reduced poetic language was never meant to result in a reduced understanding of the complexity of ideas. For an example of a protest poem that follows a more complex strategy of concrete composition, one need only look at Augusto de Campos’s “LUXO LIXO” (1967) or Hansjörg Mayer’s “USA” (1965), both of which use the structures of words to extract immanent critiques of social and geo-political power relations, the former dealing with the unequal distribution of wealth in developmentalist Brazil, and the latter with the cultural, economic, and military presence of the United States in post-WWII Europe (see figs 5.6 and 4.1).

LUXO	LUXO	LUXO	LUXO	LUXO LUXO LUXO
LUXO	LUXO	LUXO	LUXO	LUXO LUXO LUXO
LUXO	LUXO	LUXO LUXO	LUXO LUXO LUXO	LUXO LUXO LUXO
LUXO	LUXO	LUXOXO	LUXO	LUXO LUXO LUXO
LUXO	LUXO	LUXO	LUXO	LUXO LUXO LUXO
LUXO	LUXO	LUXOXO	LUXO	LUXO LUXO LUXO
LUXO LUXO	LUXO	LUXO LUXO	LUXO	LUXO LUXO LUXO
LUXO LUXO	LUXO	LUXO	LUXO	LUXO LUXO LUXO
LUXO LUXO	LUXO	LUXO	LUXO	LUXO LUXO LUXO

Figure 5.6  
 Augusto de Campos. "LUXO LIXO"

## Technology Art

There is a diagram in David Harvey's *Condition of Postmodernism* that illustrates the relative size of the Earth to the technologies available to physically navigate it. Referring to annihilation of space through time, Harvey makes the blunt point that the methods we use for moving through space qualitatively alter our experiences of what is possible in the span of human life. While concrete poetry is not a supersonic jet, it is not completely divorced from that technology, either. What concrete poetry performed so well across its various iterations was the interrogation of not only the poetic line, but the literary page and the letter, as well. Spatially, all of those factors functioned differently than before; the context in which they were uttered and distributed, the cultural community on a grand scale, had changed drastically in relation to new modes of electronic communication. Kenneth Goldsmith, in his short essay "From (Command) Line to (Iconic) Constellation" (2001) argues that the attention that concrete poetry received at the turn of the twenty-first century – referring primarily to the Yale Conference in honour of Haroldo de Campos in 1999, and the exhibition *Poetry Plastique*, curated by Charles Bernstein at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York in 2001 – can be understood by its proximity to the development of the internet, a cultural mode of transportation that delivers on concrete poetry's promise of a global, networked space.

Goldsmith says the idea of the connection between concrete poetry and cyberspace came to him while listening to Décio Pignatari speak about the project of concrete poetry in Brazil and realizing that the lexicon Pignatari was using was similar to that which is often used to describe the experience of the internet: interface, delivery, content, multi-media, distribution, etc. (Goldsmith n. pag.). He notes that we, as readers and subjects in many ways produced by the internet, are now used to seeing texts in different formats, and on different machines (standard monitors, cell phones, public information screens, e-book readers). More people now pay attention to fonts because of the rise of the computer; anyone who has had to create an event notification now knows how fonts and layout contribute to meaning. Both students and teachers are likely conscious of how language can be manipulated visually to adhere to a specific page length, either via spacing, kerning, or font selection. To visually stretch an argument to appear longer, replace Times New Roman with Courier. To condense an argument into a determined page length, switch to Arial Narrow. The same strategies are often achieved, in ways that were once the trade secrets of typesetters, graphic designers and

contract writers, by the manipulation of font size. This is a relatively recent body of knowledge for a word-processing public, but the emphasis on the space of the page and the shift between typesetting was at the fore of concrete poetry. Goldsmith points to the ways in which poems were published in several forms in different publications as anticipating the manipulation of language experienced by citizens of the computer age. Décio Pignatari's "LIFE", for example, appeared over six pages in Emmett Williams' anthology, on a single page in Mary Ellen Solt's, and as an eight-page pamphlet in *Noigandres*. Likewise, Ronaldo Azeredo's "Velocidade" appears in an ornate, serified font in Williams', but in Solt's is presented in a font much closer to its original, Futura.

On the occasion of the the New York-based publishing house Primary Information's reissuing of Williams's *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* in 2013, a tweet from UbuWeb, the indispensable online archive of art and poetry that Goldsmith founded in 1996, makes the connection between concrete poetry and contemporary internet culture clear: "Just so ya know, UbuWeb was founded, based on, and inspired by that anthology of concrete poetry. It's still the fuel that runs the site" (Goldsmith [ubuweb]).<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, Goldsmith cites Max Bense's argument, from his 1965 manifesto "Concrete Poetry," that concrete poetry does not separate languages, but unites them, as having specific relevance to the current global, cyberspatial condition. He notes that "Bense's insistence on a combinatory universally readable language predicts the types of distributive systems that the web enables. It insists on a poetics of pan-internationality or non-nationality, which finds its expression in the decentred, constellation-oriented global networks where no one geographic entity has sole possession of content" (n. pag.). Goldsmith's optimism here – though it sounds dated, just over a decade later, coming before the monetization of the internet and debates over net neutrality and digital piracy – argues forcefully for the re-examination of concrete poetry within larger cultural and historical contexts. In this sense concrete poetry parallels the concerns and conditions of a similarly neglected form within visual art, and one which operated contemporaneously with it: technology art. An examination of how technology art operated within its own spatial parameters will aid in understanding how cultural spaces operated differently at the end of a particular formulation of modernism.

While concrete poetry took up the nascent shift from the page to the screen in its composition, technology art made a similar transformation in the realm of visual art. The work poses difficulties for critical reception in

much the same way as concrete poetry, deracinating the gallery visitor and confounding discourses of composition and sites of meaning. The critical project of Edward Shanken, an art historian who focuses on the intersections of technology and art, recuperates the electronic, or cybernetic moment in art production that has been overshadowed by the contemporaneous, much more successful language-based conceptualism. In his essay “Art in the Information Age: Technology and Conceptual Art,” Shanken points to an exhibition not often mentioned in discussions of art and technology, *The Machine: As Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*, organized by Pontus Hultén at the Museum of Modern Art in 1968, an exhibition Hultén described “as a simultaneously nostalgic and futuristic exhibition on art and mechanical technology” (433). The impetus for the show was the collective feeling that the machine was giving way to electronics, and thus the space the machine occupied – traditionally the factory, farm, or some other specific geography of production – was being phased out in favour of a more dispersed, “post-industrial” space. This shift, from the mechanical to the electronic, operates as another popular metaphor for the spatial hinge between modernity and postmodernity.

The same year as Hultén’s show, Jasia Reichardt, who had curated the *concrete poetry britain canada united states* exhibition at the Institute for Contemporary Art in London in 1966, organized *Cybernetic Serendipity*, a show that included poets, artists, and engineers, and which would travel to Washington, D.C. and San Francisco in 1969–70. Reichardt’s show would prove to be a primary influence on the two major exhibitions of technology art that were mounted in New York in 1970: Kynaston McShine’s *Information*, at the Museum for Modern Art, and Jack Burnham’s *Software*, at the Jewish Museum. It is Burnham’s show that Shanken sees as the most interesting of them all, however, specifically in its embrace of software as a model for human interaction. He writes:

*Software* was predicated [...] on the ideas of “software” and “information technology” as metaphors for art. Burnham conceived of “software” as parallel to the aesthetic principles, concepts or programs that underlie the formal embodiment of actual art objects, which in turn parallel “hardware.” In this regard, he interpreted contemporary experimental art practices, including conceptual art, as predominantly concerned with the software aspect of aesthetic production. (434)

This passage offers an entrance into the relationship between technology art and conceptual art, both of which have significant crossover and engagement with concrete poets and poetics. All three movements interrogated the ideological structures of the reception of art and literature within modernist discourse, and sought to reposition the relationship: technology art in the metaphor of electronic networks, conceptual art in the realm of linguistic positivism, and concrete poetry in the treatment of language as material.

In an essay in *Artforum* in 1968, Burnham writes of his concern over the growing polarity between high art and what he refers to as unobjects, or information-technology based artworks, and how each fits into an increasingly information-saturated culture. He compares the “‘new car’ of the automobile stylist” with the “syndrome of formalist invention in art, where ‘discoveries’ are made through visual manipulation,” emphasizing that repetition was passing for innovation at a time when technological innovation, in the form of software language, offered a real opportunity to alter the language and production of culture. As evidence he points to the practices of the artists Ad Reinhardt and Donald Judd, and the writer Alain Robbe-Grillet, all of whom practice a style of writing that attempts to describe their work as completely as possible, in spite of the risk of banality or loss of a literary style. Burnham connects that instinct towards completeness to the language that programmed the modern computer. Locating the root of this descriptive practice in Judd’s writings between 1962 and 1965, Burnham argues that it “resembles what a computer programmer would call an entity’s ‘list structure’ or all the enumerated properties needed to *physically* rebuild an object” (31). He gives the example of Robert Morris’s contribution to the 68<sup>th</sup> American Exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1966, comprised of two sans-serif L-shaped forms that had shown in New York the previous year. Burnham explains that the fact that Morris sent the plans to the Chicago museum’s carpenters instead of shipping the forms, which would have been more expensive than rebuilding them, proves that “in the context of a systems esthetic possession of a privately fabricated work is no longer important. Accurate information takes priority over history and geographical location” (31). Although Morris is closely connected to conceptual art, minimalism, and performance art, not technology art, it is his mode of production in this instance, rather than the actual work produced, that Burnham links to a call for future art production which would emphasize greater technological interaction between artists and institutions, as well as audiences.

Such a radical break in art production would face serious opposition. Even Sol LeWitt's definition of conceptual art, as an idea machine that makes the work, still has as its ultimate embodiment a physical work of art. Likewise, as I outline in chapter 4, even those artists who made nothing were still able to sell their ideas via gallerists like Seth Siegel, who marketed objects of mass production (xeroxed pages, for example) as limited editions. On the whole, conceptual artists resisted computer technology as a site for their ideas, although they widely utilized the contemporaneous shifts in technologies of reproduction: the photocopier, telex, and snapshot photograph were all central to the distribution of much of the work. There are various concrete poems which occupy a middle ground between technology art and conceptual art methods, as composition that begins in a systematic approach ends up in a physical work, and encourages the production of further work: Haroldo de Campos's "ALEA I – VARIAÇÕES SEMÂNTICAS" is one example; Thomkins's "Dogmat-Mot" is another. In Thomkins's final poem-object, which relates directly to the kind of cross-linguistic computational methods of Alan Turing's codebreaking project during WWII, though on a much smaller scale, the meanings of the words become detached from their signifiers, and the words are reduced to their linguistic material, full of information in the way Weaver and Shannon use the term: it is all potential meaning, no message. The poem does not even have a proper orientation that would allow the reader-operator to feel oriented towards the work, just as it has no ground-level language to allow the construction of a lexical key. It is an intentional abdication of authorial intent, a removal of the composing subject that operates at the same time as an exclusion of the reading subject. It gestures towards the fantasy of inter-linguistic communication via a frustration borne from indeterminacy.

Johanna Drucker is enthusiastic about Burnham's understanding of material as giving way to the systemic, and about his development of a "sculptural practice grounded in relationships" ("Interactive" 43). She agrees with Shanken about Burnham's approach to software, arguing that the difference between Burnham and McShine's exhibitions is that *Software* was about participation, while *Information* was about control (44). Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Information* was better funded and had more institutional support. Its roster of artists drew heavily from the current stock of conceptual artists. *Software* was more experimental, and suffered for it; the exhibition ended up grossly over budget and had technical difficulties. As Shanken observes, the reception of both shows at the time and throughout much of the interim, is of a certain character:



Critics opined that [technology-based art] was dominated by the materiality and spectacle of mechanical apparatus, which was anathema to the conceptual project. Technical failures of art and technology exhibitions, like *Software* (which, ironically, was plagued with software problems), contributed to waning public interest, just at the moment that a succession of large, successful exhibitions of conceptual art were mounted. Widespread skepticism towards the military-industrial complex after May 1968 and amidst the Vietnam War, the Cold War and mounting ecological concerns all contributed to problematizing the artistic use of technology – and the production of aesthetic objects in general – within the context of commodity capitalism. (“Art in the Information Age” 436)

But there is something in Burnham’s approach and in much of technology art that is worthy of recuperation. There is something fascinating about an exhibition of art literally *not working*, instead of just having theoretical or curatorial deficiencies.

And it is important to realize that the institutional blitz of the 1970 exhibitions were neither the beginning nor the end of the movement. The British painter and educator Roy Ascott had been trying to fuse painting and cybernetics since the 1950s, and had by 1966 developed the Cybernetic Art Matrix (CAM), a network of artists and thinkers that would be regulated by a sort of social feedback between the members:

CAM was intended to provide a variety of functions, such as facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration between *geographically remote* artists and scientists, providing a pragmatic art education curriculum for the young, and enriching the lives of “the new leisured class” by enhancing creative behavior and providing amenities and modes of aesthetic play. (Shanken, “Cybernetics” 274; emphasis added)

A similar impulse is present in Reichardt’s exhibition *Cybernetic Serendipity*, where displays of poems created by computers and of formulae created to create images are presented side by side, with no distinction made between the disciplines of the contributors: poet beside scientist, philosopher beside programmer.

In relating the work of this period to the innovations, both social and technological, brought about by internet, Drucker points to Ted Nelson and

Ned Woodman's contribution to *Software, Labyrinth*, an interactive catalogue of the exhibition that allowed viewers to determine their own path through an interlinked database of texts, thus choosing their own non-linear narrative that would then be printed out for them (Drucker, "Interactive" 35). This early use of hypertext heralds the postmodern shift towards ideas of hyperspace: having replaced the single authorized text with a possibility of exponential texts within a compositional system, the rules of analysis become frustrated. This shift is an important one in the difference between modernism and postmodernism. Whereas modernist literature might have juxtaposed disparate scenes within a narrative structure, the *order* was still determined by a single author, and made solid by authorial intent. In postmodernism, such authority is abandoned to the vicissitudes of a program or system of meaning production, and a certain level of *uncontrol* is aimed for.

The form of Nelson and Woodman's project is not in the record of the printouts, but in the program for the potential production of the texts; it is written in a language that is at once quite simple, from the perspective of a computer programmer, and at the same time inaccessible to everyone else, going far beyond the modernist notion of difficulty in literature. As a result, work such as Nelson and Woodman's cannot be archived in the way that a traditional catalogue of an institutional exhibition might be, in book form with an essay by the curator and photographs of the installation. It challenges our understanding of where art or literary work exists, and consequently our concepts of access and authorship. Although there are images of the software exhibition available, they are insufficient for documenting the participatory character of the exhibition, the very point of which was to challenge the print- and image-based dominance of art production and criticism. The challenge, it can be argued, was successful inasmuch as the critical legacy of the show has been relatively small. But that can only be of minor comfort to the participants.

### The Mathematical Way of Thinking

Computer language therefore becomes one kind of technological Esperanto for a newly imagined community of mechanical subjects. The modernist subject is mathematicized by what Max Bense refers to as the project of "generative aesthetics" in an essay he contributed to Reichardt's exhibition. Bense, a professor of science and philosophy in Germany and a major figure in the Stuttgart concrete poetry scene since 1961, describes generative

aesthetics as the “artificial production of probabilities, differing from the norm using theorems and programs” (“Generative” 58). It is, he argues, “an aesthetics of production which makes possible the methodical production of aesthetic states, by dividing this process into a finite number of distinct and separate steps which are capable of formulation” (58). Highlighting the wider culture’s relationship to the expanding emphasis on automation and the role of machines in information production and control, Reichardt reprints an American newspaper article on the page preceding Bense’s essay that is dated 1 April, 1950, and that describes the Washington, DC, unveiling of a machine the Americans captured from Nazi Germany during the war. Called the *Müllabfuhrwortmaschine*, it is referred to as “Hitler’s most deadly secret weapon,” and functions by matching up semantic “entities,” “operators,” and “entity phrases” to develop sentences like “Subversive elements were revealed to be related by marriage to a well-known columnist,” or “Capitalist warmonger is a weak link in atomic security.” The source of the information on the machine is a relocated Nazi scientist whose name, Dr Krankheit, in its similarity to Walter Cronkite, along with the date and absence of any specific newspaper citation, signals the article is a prank; but it is significant for its display of the types of anxiety around the production of meaning through the development of new, mechanical languages (Reichardt, *Cybernetics, Art* 56).

Bense’s “Statistical Poem” (1966) puts the aesthetic of mechanical production into action by taking a series of basic German words and running them through a system of repetition. The complete poem appears as a block of text that does not adhere to ideas of line breaks or order beyond the compositional system. The poetic value, or the aesthetic of the work, is disinterested, cold, and ordered. The words, “es” (it), “ist” (is), “wenn” (if), “aber” (but), “doch” (still), and “nicht” (not) are first presented as a list, then in combinations of two, then three, etc., until the final line, which uses all the words together in a phrase that translates as *but if it is still not* (Bense, “Statistical” 264). There is a tension in the poem’s generative process that engages with the expectation of language to express coherent, syntactical meaning, and the last line participates in the interrogation of language’s function. If language can produce meaning without the human, or at least with the human in a reduced form (creating a formula, choosing the material, then implementing the formula), how does that meaning function, and what philosophical implications might it have? The process becomes metalinguistic, and the power of the work comes from not only the reader’s frustration with the impeded meaning, but

in the desire that impediment produces in her/him to complete the phrases, and thus become an active participant in the production of the poem.

The basis for Bense's approach to composition can be found, like that of the early concrete poets, in the ideas of the concrete artist Max Bill. In Bill's 1949 essay "The Mathematical Way of Thinking in the Visual Art of Our Time," he is not so explicit as to require the fusion of mathematic/mechanical and literary/artistic production, but he does call for a recognition of the role mathematical thought plays in modernist creativity and aesthetics. He responds to those critics who claim that mathematics lacks the emotional charge of aesthetics by emphasizing the need for reason to accompany feeling in art. In an almost cartoonish statement of the ideals of modernist rationalism, he argues that "It is mankind's ability to reason which makes it possible to coordinate emotional values in such a way that what we call art ensues" (7). He points to the paintings of Piet Mondrian as a model of the successful removal of what is alien to the medium, specifically the "mere naturalistic replica of [a] subject" through perspective and figurative representation (5). He identifies the flourishing of the mathematical way of thinking in the twentieth century in the work of the Constructivists, which developed alongside the proliferation of aerial photography and blueprints related to what Le Corbusier would call the "engineer's aesthetic." At the same time, he notes, "mathematics itself had arrived at a stage of evolution in which the proof of many apparently logical deductions ceased to be demonstrable and theorems were presented that the imagination proved incapable of grasping" (8). Einstein's Theory of Relativity would be the famous example of this type of mathematical shift; Bernhard Riemann, N.I. Lobatschewsky, and Janus Bolyai's refutation of Euclid's Fifth Postulate, which deals with parallel lines and terminal space, would be an earlier, lesser known but no less significant contribution (Whittaker 34). These approaches refute an idea of ordered, rational space, arguing that lines, when experienced on a scale beyond the human – on the level of the cosmos, for example – do not adhere to a conventional understanding of space, much in the same way that electronic media, by connecting disparate geographies, alter the understanding of space produced by the technology of the book, or the alphabet before that. Mathematics had become a metaphor of order and control as well as chaos and fluidity, and brought with that shift a transformation of what had been previously thought possible. It was no longer the math of factories, and of scientific management. It had become the math of the computer, and the spaceship, the math of the atom and all its potential and terror.

For Bill, mathematics provides a primary mode of cognition that determines not only spatial understanding, but emotional understanding as well. It allows for both individuation and collectivity. It allows subjects to apprehend their relationship to their physical surroundings, and therefore influences their appraisal of the “interactions of separate objects, or groups of objects, one to another. And again, since it is mathematics that lends significance to these relationships, it is only a natural step from having perceived them to desiring to portray them. This, in brief, is the genesis of a work of art” (7). However suspicious any claim to identify a genesis of a work of art might seem, Bill’s ideas nevertheless had tremendous influence not only within the field of concrete art, but concrete poetry, as well, both through the work of Eugen Gomringer, his secretary at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, and his influence on the visual artists associated with the Noigandres group, including the “pualistas” Waldemar Cordeiro and Hermelindo Fiaminghi, who were accused by the Rio de Janeiro neo-concretists of being too rigid in their devotion to Max Bill’s teaching (Mammí 22). While his examples are heavily weighted toward the visual realm, it is clear that certain poets followed his position, replacing the syntactic line with a grid and emphasizing the geometry of letters and their relationships to each other beyond semantic meaning. Bill’s presentation of mathematics as a universal language made its way into the transnational impulses of various poets’ critical writing, as well, most explicitly – unsurprisingly – in the early texts of Gomringer.

There is a difference, however, between the production of texts via mathematical formulae or mechanical programs and concrete poetry: the former does not automatically result in the latter. While Bense’s “Statistical Poem” is, at its base, a programmed presentation of language, there is an aesthetic sensibility that works backward from the final line, “but if it is still not,” to parse the various arrangements of its semantic elements. The poem could have worked backward from “is if not still it but,” and the effect would have been reduced. It would be likewise lessened if it worked backward from “his are till gut lit by,” to engage in a simplifying exercise. Bense’s aesthetic is not present in the same way in work that depends on a computer program to produce the final text, though the distinction is at times difficult to identify. Some of Edwin Morgan’s poems, which are written from the perspective of a computer, and which include imagined difficulties like key jams and programming errors in order to illustrate how computer technology and human creativity might influence and struggle with one another, need to be distinguished from projects like that of Robin McKinnon Wood and Margaret Masterman, who offer as an example of a computer poem a text that resulted from a programming

bug that they could not replicate. It came out of a program meant to combine the physical with the literary to produce poetry mechanically: the program was meant to divide “continuous text into ‘Phrasings’ corresponding to the rhythmic divisions of speech or spoken prose. These units usually include two stress-points and a terminal intonation feature, forming breath-groups which are also sense-groups” (Wood and Masterman 55). This type of experiment is perhaps better positioned within the history of automata and linguistic standardization than an aesthetic sphere. Friedrich Kittler, in *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, traces this history as far back as a competition held in 1779 by the Academy of Sciences in St Petersburg that commissioned engineers to develop a machine “capable of purely pronouncing the five vowels” (36). The Academy of Sciences hoped these machines would do away with regional accents and dialects, those pesky markers of history, class, and geography that stood in the way of “enlightenment” culture. The difference between the inventors of automata in the late eighteenth century and the programmers and engineers of the mid-twentieth, though, was that they were now imagining the machines not so much as models but as artists. Johanna Drucker identifies the habit

of engineers developing pleasing or curious results (more commonly in digital imagery, but also in language) and determining it “art.” Artists and poets, though they might use technology, are aware that aesthetics is a discourse within history, and their work relies upon that knowledge. (Drucker, “Interactive” 40)

For early technology artists, it was the metaphor of software and networks that offered more promise and excitement than the images or texts the process produced.

In a text that examines the history of the computer in humanities research and artistic production, Drucker expands on her distinction between the engineer and the artist, identifying two related methods of knowledge production: *aesthesis* and *mathesis*. *Aesthesis* refers to the role of the human in digital environments, and describes the influence of human thought and behaviour on the design of digital environments and vice versa. *Mathesis* is a term meant to describe an assumption of objectivity or autonomy from culture: “Knowledge forms are never stable or self-identical but always situated within conditions of use. Knowledge, then, is necessarily partial, subjective, and situated. Objectivity, we have long recognized, is the wish dream of an early rational age, one that was mechanistic in its approaches” (*Speclab* xiv).

Bill makes a similar distinction in his call for a nuanced understanding of the connection between mathematics and creative production, rejecting the work that tries to fuse (computer) science and art, and which received so much opposition from the artistic sphere for its apparent lack of emotion or spirit. The scientific aleatoric, of which Wood and Masterman's work is an example, does not represent Bill's theory, and fits more in the category of *mathesis*. Bense's "Statistical Text," de Campos's "ALEA I," and even Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová's "Developer" series, all of which begin with an investigation of the poetic relationship between deliberately chosen words and semantemes and use procedural methods to extract them, are examples of the use of the mathematical way of thinking that results in *aesthesis*.

A poem that straddles the divide between the programmatic and the poetic, between the aleatoric and the composed, and combines the fields of concrete poetry and technology art, is Stephen Scobie's "Instructions for Computer Poem 3 – Night and Day." The piece, which was installed in the University of British Columbia's 1969 exhibition, *Concrete Poetry: An Exhibition in Four Parts*, is presented as a sheet outlining the rules of the piece, a series of computer printouts hung on the wall, and a printer installed in a room with a pile of paper collected at its base (see fig. 5.7). The poem's "rules" begin with two lists, labelled "List A – night" and "List B – day," each of which is made up of words that describe the concepts of night and day, but also contains words that are only slightly related. The list for night, for example, has words such as "night," "black," "darkness," and "midnight," but also includes words such as "dies," "under," "waste," and "far." Likewise, the list for day has "sun," "blue," and "radiant," but also includes "become," "leap," and "together" (Scobie n. pag.). Though setting up a binary between day and night, Scobie recognizes that language, even when selected from a condensed list by a computer, adheres to meanings which have been socially constructed, and which have aesthetic associations that are at times rooted in common use but are also subject to the whims of the user, in this case one who is interested in the poetic possibilities of language. The curiosity of his word choice in his lists is contrasted with the calculated, mechanical language he uses to describe the production of the work.

Without including the actual programming data that would be entered into the machine, as Carl Fernbach-Flarsheim might do, or displaying potential failures of the computational approach to poetic composition, as Edwin Morgan might do, Scobie's poem adopts a style that becomes opaque in its attempt at transparency. It challenges the reader, in its description of the computer's function, to imagine the poems from a mechanical perspective.

The reader is therefore required to shift her/his expectation of what poetry should be: first in the negotiation of the lists describing night and day, where poetry would likely be expected to be neither as binaristic nor as exhaustive or banal, and then again in trying to envision which words would or could be randomly selected from the list and positioned in lines that would potentially have some movement between the concepts of night and day, but also that might end up being obscured by overprinting:

One complete poem will consist of four “runs.” These four runs are all to be shown on one print-out sheet, over the same area. Thus it will be necessary to store the first three runs until all the selection is complete. The runs are to be superimposed: overprinting is allowed. Runs 1 and 2 will be from list A; runs 3 and 4 from list B – thus, in the event of any overprinting, list B words will always be printed over list A words. (Scobie n. pag.)

More detailed description follows, prompting the question: where is the poetry located? And what is the relationship between the poet and the computer as creative subjects? The poem is arguably the lists and description of the potential work, which would satisfy a reader who demands creativity be located in a thinking, human subject. But Scobie’s language complicates that position, positing that a “complete poem” only comes into being after it has been mechanically composed and printed. This is a shift from the aleatoric practices of Fluxus experiments with language, and even from Tristan Tzara’s method for writing a Dada poem – cutting up a newspaper article and then extracting the words one by one – in that it emphasizes both the human and the mechanical. Scobie chooses the concepts and the lists of words, and designs the software (in collaboration with a computer programmer), but the computer chooses and arranges the words as well as prints them onto a page: a level of composition and material production that departs significantly from previous experimental, procedural poetics, even those of Augusto de Campos, Bense, and Hiršal and Grögerová.

### Situating Concrete Poetry

Having outlined the shifts in conceptions of space that influenced the production, or poetics, of concrete poetry, I now want to emphasize the spaces in which the reader-viewer experiences the work: the spaces of distribution.



Computer Poem 3. Night and Day

The basic material of the poem is the following lists of words:

List A - night	List B - day
night	day
moon	dawn
darkness	sun
forest	blue
stars	seed
ocean	waken
lantern	become
black	bright
far	singing
fear	butterfly
gloomy	sundials
mirk	laugh
stumbles	together
shadows	beyond
fell	white
sang	loves
moan	golden
owls	wonder
darker	radiant
darkens	happiness
death	shine
dies	daisychain
below	welcome
under	noon
mystery	enchanting
wild	soft
groans	leap
weeping	runs
nightingale	meadows
waste	waterfalls
stifle	cloud
midnight	above
sunset	green
prowl	river
blind	arise

One complete poem will consist of four "runs". These four runs are all to be shown on one print-out sheet, over the same area. Thus it will be necessary to store the first three runs until all the selection is complete. The runs are to be superimposed: overprinting is allowed. Runs 1 and 2 will be from list A; runs 3 and 4 from list B - thus, in the event of any overprinting, list B words will always be printed over list A words.

In each run, the computer will randomly select 10 groups of words from the opposite list. Each group will consist of between 1 and 3 words, the number to vary randomly. No word may be used twice in one run.

In each run, these groups are to be placed at random among the eligible spots in the designated area, which is a print-out sheet 60 spaces wide and 45 lines deep. Only every third line may be used for printing.

Eligible spots are as follows:

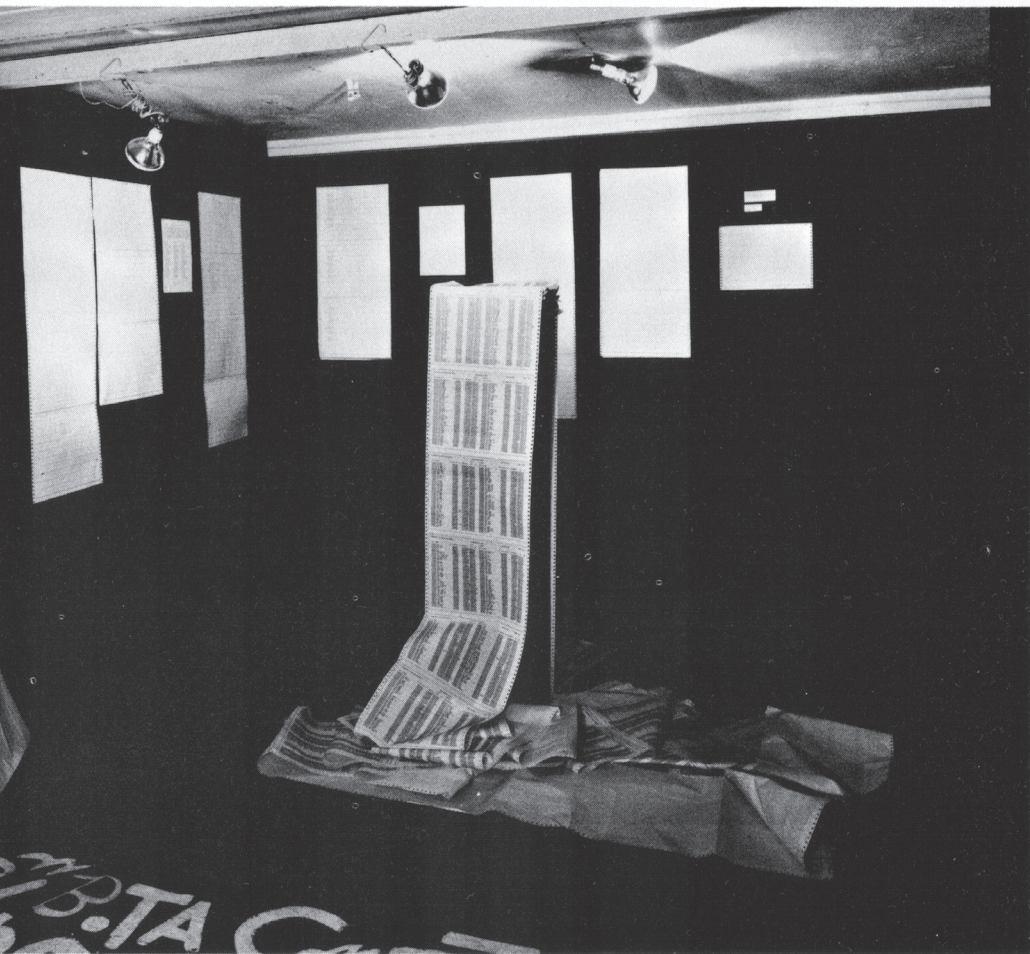
for list A, beginning at spaces 0, 10, 20, 30, 40 of every third line.

for list B, beginning at spaces 15, 25, 35, 45, 55 of the same lines.

This provides 75 eligible spots for each list, only 10 of which will be used per run. There should be, as a result, a general shift from left to right from list A words to list B words. In the unlikely event of one run overprinting on itself, the group chosen second will overprint on the group chosen first.

Figure 5.7

Stephen Scobie. "Computer Poem"



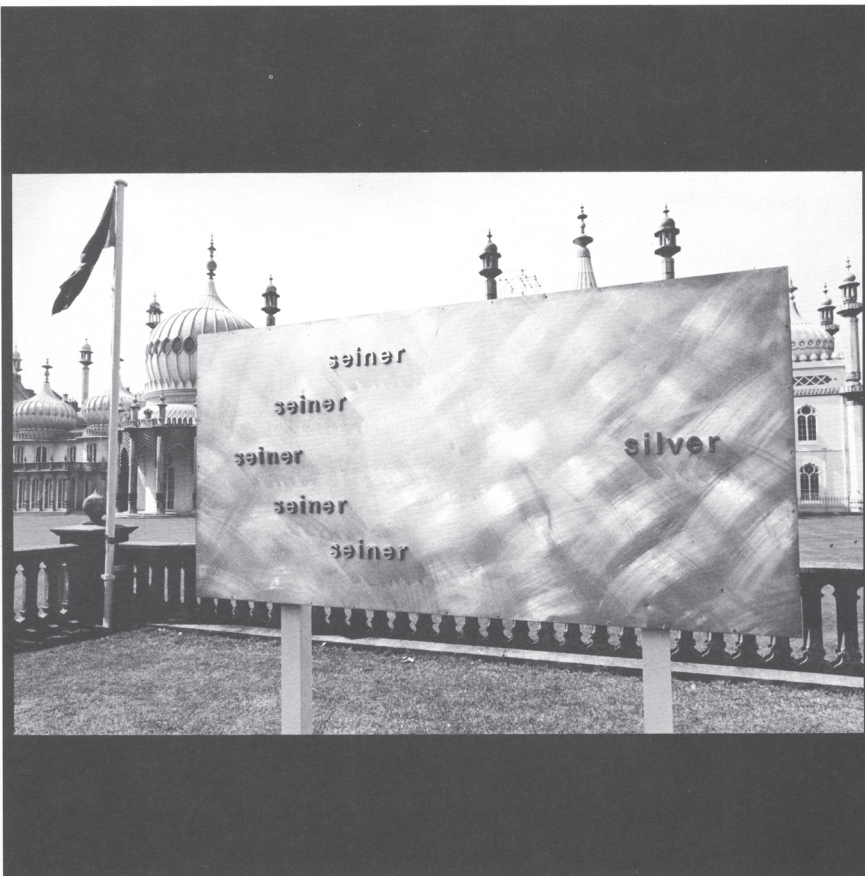


Figure 5.8  
Ian Hamilton Finlay. "Purse Sein"

Scobie's poetic proposition in itself disrupts ideas of poetic and linguistic material and meaning, but the form the work takes in the gallery offers an example of an equally radical gesture, and one which opens up questions of where concrete poetry belongs, and which borders it can cross or blur before it becomes something different. The installation photograph included in the exhibition catalogue shows Scobie's work in a semi-chaotic state: a dot matrix printer sits on a high (reading level) plinth with paper cascading down from it, collecting on the floor where it looks like people have picked it up to view it then dropped it down again, crumpled and loose. Poems in sequence have been torn from the printer and hung on the wall, with notices and explanatory texts interspersed. The image recalls the first time we see Peter Sellers' character, Group Captain Lionel Mandrake, in Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove*: reinforcing the film's critique of communications technologies and a surfeit of information as diminishing, rather than increasing, people's ability to understand each other, Sellers appears from behind a long sheet of paper he is reading, which he then lets fall to the floor in a heap.

Poems that, like Scobie's, require photographic documentation in order to be circulated are commonly found in concrete poetry publications. The work of Ian Hamilton Finlay, to whom Scobie is connected as a critic and scholar, often takes on site-specific, sculptural form (see fig. 5.8). The garden at his home, called "Little Sparta," in Stonypath, Scotland, functions as a site for a collection of his sculpture poems. The series of "plastic poems" by Kitasono Katue, which are photographs of crumpled pages and other objects, is also an example. The necessity for a work to be documented by photography is standard for visual art, but is rare for written poetry as it has taken form since the development of the printing press. Much of concrete poetry took advantage of new techniques in printing and design to depart from the authoritative line of typesetting, a compositional strategy which emphasized the visual material of language over its syntactic function, and it was a small but natural progression from the disruption of the line to that of the page, and then the book. The placement of concrete poetry within a gallery therefore makes sense. The space of the gallery allows for the juxtaposition of work in ways that the book – either fine-press portfolio or mass-printed anthology – is unable to perform. It allows for a simultaneity and disorder that consecutive pages confound.

This is not to say that the gallery is somehow superior to the book for the distribution of concrete poetry, but simply that the presentation of the work it makes possible contributes to the function of the work. And it should also be noted that the idea of the gallery is neither stable nor free from historical

context, having undergone significant transformation within the twentieth century alone. The exhibition catalogue, which is also a twentieth-century development, though it in some ways documents an exhibition, is less an accurate representation than a recognition of the limitations of available spaces of distribution. The poetry anthology, and more specifically the international anthology, which has arguably been the dominant form of concrete poetry's distribution, performs a similar function in that it both increases access to the work while at the same time accentuating its spatial impediments: small print runs, poster poems, small editions or unique texts, sculpture-poems, and so on. Gomringer's manifesto "Concrete Poetry" was written as an introduction to a planned anthology in 1956, and there were several anthologies published during the years of the movement's peak activity, including the retrospective and mass-printed anthologies of the late 1960s and early '70s. In a footnote to one of his many essays on concrete poetry, Claus Clüver offers this impressive list:

The anthologies by year are: Max Bense and Elisabeth Walther, eds., *Konkrete poesie international. Roth* (Stuttgart, 1965) no. 21; *Poesia concreta internacional*, catalogue of exhibition at Galeria Universitaria Aristos, March-May 1966 (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1966); Stephen Bann, ed., Concrete poetry issue, *Beloit Poetry Journal* 17,1 (1967); Stephen Bann, ed., *Concrete Poetry: An International Anthology* (London: London Magazine Editions, 1967); Eugene Wildman, ed., "Anthology of Concretism," *Chicago Review* 19,4 (1966); Emmett Williams, ed., *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967); Mary Ellen Solt, ed., "A World Look at Concrete Poetry," *Artes Hispánicas / Hispanic Arts* 1, 3-4 (1968); Adriano Spatola, ed., "Antologia della poesia concreta," *Il peso del concreto*, ed. Ezio Gribaudo (Torino, 1968); Carlo Belloli and Ernesto L. Francalanci, eds., *Poesia concreta: indirizzi concreti, visuali e fonetici*, catalogue of exhibition organized by Dietrich Mahlow and Arrigo Lora-Totino, Ca' Giustinian, Sala delle Colonne, 25 September-10 October 1969 (Venezia: Stamperia di Venezia, 1969); Max Bense and Elisabeth Walter, eds., *Konkrete poesie international 2. Roth* (Stuttgart, 1970) no. 41; Liesbeth Crommelin, ed., *klankteksten / ? konkrete poëzie / visuele teksten* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1970). The earliest international anthology using "Concrete Poetry" as the collective

title was Eugen Gomringer's "Kleine Anthologie konkrete Poesie," *Spirale* 8 (1960): 37–44. (Clüver, "Concrete Poetry" 54–5)

The concrete poetry anthologies, so central to the works' distribution and historical context, have contested the book form in varying ways, challenging the linear organization of information as well as their own ability to contain a work in its original form, or, like an exhibition catalogue, simply to reproduce it. The anthology becomes what the French author and Minister of Culture André Malraux, who was an active cultural figure in Europe around the mid-twentieth century, championed as a "museum without walls." Malraux developed this term to describe the proliferation of books utilizing photographic printing techniques that opened up the experience of cultural artefacts to new, larger audiences who would benefit from the privilege that had previously been limited to populations of the grand urban centres of the west. Malraux's vision was pragmatic, certainly, but also ideologically inflected. For him, the beautifully printed, full-colour books were a tool to continue European imperialism via culture. At a moment when a beleaguered French colonial power was being challenged in the First Indochina War — the first of several anticolonial struggles to follow in the 1950s and '60s — Malraux was imagining a way for Europe's power to shift modes, another example of the collapsing of time and space instigated by technological advancement in the twentieth century. Though Malraux had the masterpieces of European painting and sculpture primarily in mind, the idea that works functioned better via wider distribution than within a designated space of observation applies to the impulse found in the anthologies of concrete poetry. Concrete poetry anthologies departed from previous anthologies in their embrace of the visual and international characteristics of the work. In the way that Brian O'Doherty, in *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, argues that a gallery "viewer" is one who looks but also who is *looked through*, like a camera's viewfinder, in that s/he is produced by the gallery space, the reader of concrete poetry is *read through*, or produced by the space of the anthology: a space that aims for globality and hypertextuality to match the shifting spatial order at mid-century (O'Doherty 55; 61).

The anthology form is an ancient one; the word has its root in the Greek *anthologia*, the verb for flower gathering. Contemporary students and instructors may not associate such bucolic imagery with the term, having likely had the experience of reading heavy and standardizing literary anthologies, and discussing the canonizing practices of the anthologies' compilers.

Leah Price locates the print-based anthology, as we understand it today – as opposed to the oral collection of poems referred to in the Greek context – within the rise of the printing press, which in combination with the defeat of perpetual copyright in 1774 resulted in an exponential increase in the amount of writing that *could* be printed and accessed by a wide public (4). As early as the 1700s, there was a concern that the sheer amount of printed information available to the public might contribute to the dilution of high culture. Expansive novels such as George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* or Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*, themselves products of the print revolution, were popular sites for extraction, the implication being that a skilled anthologist can provide a more efficient experience of reading long texts, selecting choice passages to function synecdochally, and preventing the vast expenditures of time required to consume the entire work. Price cites the eighteenth-century British anthologist Vicesimus Knox defending his practice: “the art of printing has multiplied books to such a degree, that ... it becomes necessary to read in the classical sense of the word, *LEGERE*, that is, to *pick out* ... the best parts of books” (quoted in Price 4). Francis Turner Palgrave described his authoritative 1861 anthology, *The Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language* – the text Ezra Pound loathed and at one point tried to replace with a collection of his own choosing – as a project which aimed to improve a culture in which “everything is to be read, and everything only once” (quoted in Price 4). The anthologists of the nineteenth century, like their contemporaneous urban planners, played the role of cultural surgeon, bleeding literary works in order to save them from being subsumed into some grand agglomerated literary corpus.

Friedrich Kittler writes that in Germany in the early nineteenth century, the anthology was used as a way to *reduce* reading. The accumulation of texts since the invention of movable type had resulted in a reading mania, where women, in particular, were reading *too much*. Anthologies such as *Education and Instruction for the Female Sex*, by Betty Gleim, an instructor at an all-girls school, were specifically produced in order to narrow the scope of consumption, and to form taste in the reader, rather than to develop creative powers. Gender was not the only terrain that was to be managed by anthologies, however. The Bavarian Minister of Education, Immanuel Niethammer, sought to create, once and for all, an anthology that would end the reading mania for both sexes, and which would interpellate the readers into a grander cultural order: “Only because ‘the Bible has ceased to be a unifying point for the education of all classes’ and ‘can hardly be expected to attain that position again, given the kind of thinking now in ascendancy’ was there ‘the need for

a *National Book*” (Kittler 149). No less grand a figure than Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was charged with collecting work for Niethammer’s grand vision, but his choices turned out to be too historical-empirical, and the text failed to live up to Niethammer’s expectations for an anthologist’s poetic: the works seemed flat placed against each other, and the arrangement displayed little of the energy and inspiration of Goethe’s talent for language.

The responsibilities of the concrete poetry anthologists were not so grand, but they were still substantial, and might perhaps be compared more aptly to the figure of programmer than that of surgeon. Like Dudley Fitts’s 1942 anthology, *Contemporary Latin American Anthology* – which was funded in part by the United States’ Office for the Coordination of Inter-American Affairs, and which placed English translations alongside Spanish and Portuguese poetry in an attempt to foster a Pan-American identity that would link Argentina to Alaska – the concrete poetry anthologies were tasked with producing a global connectivity. And, again like Fitts’s anthology, the works presented suffer for their breadth. In this way, the concrete poetry anthology becomes a kind of material contradiction. Works that are composed on a typewriter lose the indentation that the letter makes on the page; poster poems lose their scale. Booklets like Pignatarì’s “LIFE” are reduced to consecutive pages; longer poems, like Emmett Williams’s “Sweethearts,” are excerpted. Three-dimensional works appear as a single, authoritative photograph;<sup>6</sup> works in colour sometimes end up in black and white. The whims of an editor or publisher, who might not appreciate the significance of design or layout to the meaning of poems, might also get in the way. In a recent interview Gerhard Rühm complained that Dick Higgins, “the congenial but over-eager publisher” of Something Else Press, reproduced some of his texts “in a graphically incorrect way” (“Interview” n. pag.). Rühm absolves Williams, the editor of the Something Else Press anthology, of responsibility for the errors, noting that he was also dissatisfied with aspects of the final text. But the issue of collecting and reproducing polylinguistic, multiformed work in the standardized and regulated space of the anthology challenged some of the basic concerns of the movement. Poetry that emphasized the materiality of language and the alterations it had undergone during the emergence of a new global imaginary ended up contained within a book, the very space of the poetic tradition against which much of it was positioned. Some of the anthologies gesture toward recognizing the limitation of the book and the black and white page, most significantly in the use of colour in Solt and Bann’s anthologies, and in the inclusion of Augusto de Campos’s fold-out poem “LUXO LIXO,” in Solt’s text, but these are exceptions. Williams’s and



Wildman's texts are all in black and white, as is Bory's, though his contains considerably more photographs than the other two. These mass printed, Anglo-American texts differentiate themselves from the large portfolios published by fine arts presses such as Eugen Gomringer Press in Switzerland, Edition Hansjörg Mayer in Germany, and the Noigandres Press in Brazil. Ian Hamilton Finlay's Wild Hawthorn Press in Stonypath, Scotland produced ephemera and small runs, resisting the urge toward massification and the compromises it requires.

The order of the poems in the mass-printed anthologies is curiously varied. All of the texts seem to advocate a hypertextual approach, as do most anthologies; the reader is not expected to consume the text from start to finish, but to follow her/his interest. The binding of the pages prevents an experience similar to that Nelson and Woodman created for the Software exhibition catalogue, however. Readers might flip through Solt's or Bann's texts, but even a basic engagement of the poetry would inform them that it is organized by nation or language group. Williams's text is not paginated, but the poets appear in alphabetical order, which privileges linguistic ordering versus that of numerical ordering. Wildman's editorial presentation is more content-based, and seems to be organized by his taste, with the poets and their nations listed at the beginning, and then before each contribution. Bory's is similar, but he lists the poets and the poem titles at the end and, as the title *Once Again* implies, he positions concrete poetry and the examples of *poesia visiva* within the ancient tradition of visual literature, in a manner similar to that of the visual poetry collections that were typical of the early 1970s (particularly Klaus Peter Dencker's *Text-Bilder: Visuelle Poesie international*, Berjouhi Bowler's *The Word as Image*, and Massin's *The Word as Image*).<sup>7</sup> Adding to this ahistoricity is his and Wildman's decision to present all of the texts without dates.<sup>8</sup>

A text that enacts concrete poetry's critique of the book in its content as well as its form is British-Canadian poet Steve McCaffery's *Carnival: The First Panel, 1967* (see fig. 5.10). Considering the time of its composition, it is difficult not to locate in the visual character of the work the stylistic influence of John Furnival and Henri Chopin. Furnival's *Tower of Babel* (1964) displays a busyness similar to McCaffery's text, and Chopin's regular use of the black and red ribbon on a typewriter to create patterns out of repeated words and letters is a precursor. The tendency to mix passages of more conventional, lined poetry amongst that pattern, especially with alternative spellings based on sound, gestures toward the work of the western Canadian concrete and visual poet bill bissett. McCaffery also includes as an epigraph a passage from

the De Stijl manifesto (1920) that outlines what concrete art and concrete literature should be:

the duality between poetry and prose can no longer be maintained  
 the duality between form and content can no longer be maintained  
 thus for the modern writer form will have a directly spiritual  
 meaning  
 it will not describe events  
 it will not describe at all  
 but DESCRIBE  
 it will recreate in the word the common meaning of events a  
 constructive unity of form and content. (McCaffery n. pag.)

The inclusion of this passage in combination with the apparent influences of previous concrete poets positions the work firmly within the concrete poetry genre, but in other ways McCaffery's text can be seen as a departure from the tradition. Like bissett, who, despite producing visual-based poetry and publishing other visual poets in his Vancouver blowointment press since the early 1960s, went largely unrecognized by the International Concrete Poetry movement, McCaffery produced work that was more expressive than what concrete poetry had come to be known for. This poetry was visual, but not shaped, and for the most part the images that the letters, words, and symbols developed could not be related back to the subject of the poem as easily in a Furnival text, for example. Caroline Bayard has noted that the difference between Canadian concrete poetry and the work of the international movement, dominated by the Europeans and South Americans, was that Canadian poets approached concrete poetry without the sophisticated printing techniques available to those poets who were trained as graphic designers, and thus were less likely to emulate the type of visuality that linked the work to the altered linguistic landscape that came with the rise of advertising and communication networks. Canadian concrete poets were more likely to arrive at concrete poetry via poetic communities, and had more of a DIY aesthetic than those poets who produced fine art press editions. bpNichol is the only Canadian concrete poet to have had any real recognition by the international community, appearing in Solt's and William's anthologies and participating in the retrospective, movement-culminating exhibition at the Stedelijk museum in 1970. Though Nichol's style was varied, utilizing typewritten, handwritten, and cartoon-like language, it is only his cleanly printed work that appears in the anthologies and catalogue.



Figure 5.9  
Julien Blaine. "Brevage épandu"



Figure 5.10

Steve McCaffery. From *Carnival: The First Panel: 1967-70*

Where McCaffery's *Carnival* departs from concrete poetry most, however, is in its demand for the participation of the reader. The book, or pad, as it might be called, comes with the pages bound at the top but perforated; in order to experience the composition of the piece as a whole, a reader must tear the pages out and arrange them. In this way the contradiction of the presentation of concrete poetry – a genre that emphasizes simultaneity – within book form is revealed, and the reader becomes active in the tactile refutation of the book, a physical analogue of the poetic line. Previous concrete poetry publications have performed a similar rejection through refusing to bind their pages, instead collecting them within a folding cover, specifically the large format portfolios printed by Edition Hansjörg Mayer and Eugen Gomringer Press, and the catalogue for the UBC exhibition, but none has performed the critique so effectively as McCaffery's, which forces the reader to choose: either keep the book intact, but know that the experience of it is impeded by the technology of the book, or destroy the book in order to respect the poetry, and in doing so reject the physical benefits of the book form, such as containment, order, and stability.

### Moving Beyond Concrete

McCaffery continued his critique of the book over a period of years, most productively in collaboration with bpNichol under the name of the Toronto Research Group (TRG). McCaffery, who had come to Canada from England to do graduate work at York University, only met Nichol in 1969, and much of the research that they performed together took place in the 1970s, the publication of the TRG's manifesto coming in the spring 1973 issue of the journal *Open Letter*. This historical positioning places McCaffery and Nichol at the end of the International Concrete Poetry movement, and when considered alongside their poetic work of the same period, argues for treating them as initiators of a post-concrete poetics. McCaffery's 1970 *Transitions to the Beast*, published by Nichol's Ganglia Press, was written in direct counterposition to the semiotic poetry that came out of Brazilian concrete poetry circles in the mid-60s, and distributed primarily through *Invenção*. The short essay printed on the back of McCaffery's text identifies Pignatari and Pinto's work in particular, and diminishes its attempt at an alinear and nonlexical poetry inasmuch as it is dependent upon a lexical key for decoding its meaning. For McCaffery, the work of the Brazilians is too strictly semiotically influenced. His work rejects a direct relationship

between his imagistic work and previously existing concepts. Whereas the Brazilians, in both the semiotic poems as well as the more orthodox concrete work, were concerned with the creation of new, collective language that can communicate quickly, a language to function in the new, rapidly developed world, McCaffery sought to frustrate equivalence:

the semiotic form acted only as the initial impulse to search for a nonlexical sign language                      increasingly [...] im feeling the need for a more rawly human & a less technocratic approach to borderblur for a greater perceptual system entry in short of more personal feeling & due attention to our more simplistic responses to & in front of language. (McCaffery n. pag.)

The insertion of an idiosyncratic poetic subject is something that McCaffery shares with Nichol and bissett, both of whom developed a highly personalized poetic style that often utilized hand drawn letters and figures alongside or overtop of text. All of their work countered the distanced, technologically determined subject of much of concrete poetry: the procedural had given way to the performative. There is nothing more contrary to the tradition of concrete poetry as it sprang from Max Bill than the reference, let alone a transition, to a beast (see fig. 5.11).

This emphasis on the creative subject runs counter to not only the dominant poetic theories around concrete poetry at the time, but also the reception of concrete poetry exhibitions within art criticism. A year before, in an essay published in the catalogue that accompanied the UBC exhibition, Ian Wallace hailed concrete poetry as the final step in literary modernism, one that emphasized the opacity of language. He celebrated the work as doing what conventional literature was no longer capable of: “challeng[ing] the imagination in an era charged with powerful electronic media whose effects are most strongly felt in the appearance of things and our emotional identifications with these appearances” (n. pag.). The emphasis on the work is still on the material conditions that produce it. In a review of the show for *Artforum*, a twenty-two-year-old Jeff Wall emphasizes how intelligent the work is, picking out Hansjörg Mayer’s *Alphabetquadratbuch* as an example:

The fact that the finished product tells us a great deal about the medium in which [Mayer] is working, and the method of manipulation he employs upon the medium, and very little

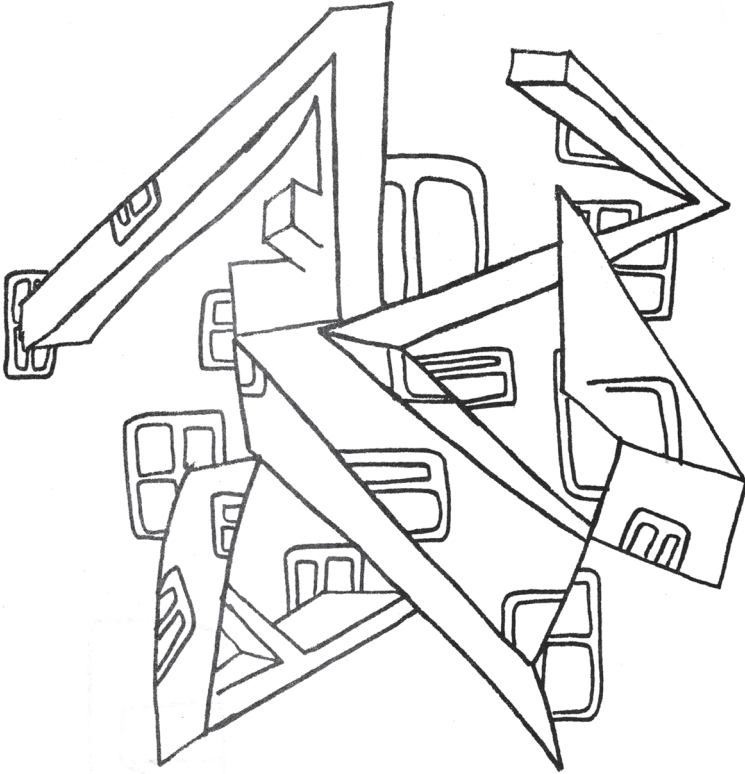


Figure 5.11

Steve McCaffery. From *Transitions to the Beast*

“about” the artist himself is a result of the artist’s realization of the most intelligent and valuable means of making contact with his audience. (71)

Following this passage Wall places Mayer alongside the American conceptualists as a figure who is doing intelligent, philosophical work around language. But Wall’s approach, like Wallace’s, seems to come out of a Greenbergian emphasis on the expression of *form* that would soon be challenged by the post-structural theories of language McCaffery and Nichol were beginning to read, theories which elevated play and contingency, and the agency of the reader, over structural ideas of communication and form. While Wallace and Wall positioned concrete poetry at the end of modernism, McCaffery and Nichol located it in the beginning of something else.

McCaffery and Nichol were perhaps the first concrete poets to engage with the critical theory around writing and language that emerged in the mid-1960s. Though claiming literary references similar to those of many concrete poets, specifically the grand modernist figures of Gertrude Stein and James Joyce, as well as those belonging to the tradition of shaped or visual literature like that of Rabelais or Madeline Gins, they also claimed inspiration from the ideas of Roland Barthes and other continental theorists (McCaffery and Nichol 15). In his introduction to the collected research reports of the TRG, McCaffery emphasizes how “important [it] is to realize the scope and context of our readings: [Edmond] Jabés, [Jacques] Derrida, Barthes and [Jacques] Lacan had all been read by 1974” (17). Their investigations into post-structural and postmodern theory contributed to their suspicion of the order implied by much concrete poetry, and specifically the mechanistic approach that resulted from engagements with new computer technology. In their 1972 “TRG Research Report 2: Narrative – The Book as Machine,” an excerpt from one Nichol’s notebooks is printed as a mathematical formula Nichol composed in order to measure a reader’s “ability to gain access to the book / machine” (75). The sardonic algebra is presented as hand-written in the midst of a typeset book, with variables representing the “degree of adherence to or antipathy towards traditional book / machine values on the part of the reader” and “the degree to which the book / machine is utilized traditionally or in a non-traditional way by the writer” (75). The pages following apply the formula to various texts using playful hypothetical readers and texts, with all the calculations done in Nichol’s distinctive handwriting. The resistance to the technological determinism comes out as well in their response to Kitasono Katue’s self-portraits, in which the poet



crumples a page of his own writing and then photographs it, offering the photo-documentation as a poem. McCaffery and Nichol argue that the poems participate in that modernist photographic mode of ‘exact reportage,’ and claim that it would have been more effective if the reader were asked to tear the page out themselves: “It is precisely because Katué does *not* choose to bypass photo-documentation and use the page as instruction leaflet or the subject-goal of intervention that his work is less effective than it might have been and remains allied to traditional, reified ‘art’” (72). Their idea of concrete had become softer; they had inserted the subject back into the work in the forms of the writer as well as the reader, insisting on the practice of an engaged reception of the work to counter the early, orthodox concrete ideal of efficient, reduced language communicating across geographies. Concrete poetry aimed to create a reader; McCaffery and Nichol aimed to have readers create the work.

McCaffery positions the work he produced with Nichol as not limited to their national environment. After an anecdote about the Canadian poet Dorothy Livesay poking McCaffery in the stomach with an umbrella and accusing him, an English immigrant, of taking publishing space from Canadian writers, McCaffery defends the TRG’s perspective: “Through the several intellectual differences of our writing lives both [bp] and myself maintained a common subscription to Gertrude Stein’s credo that the writer’s responsibility is to be contemporary. Contemporary for TRG was non-canonic and international” (18). But the TRG’s internationalism is different than what the International Concrete Poetry movement knew as international, just as their post-structural theoretical base was different from the cybernetic and communications theory of the concrete poets. For McCaffery and Nichol, internationalism was not so much the recognition of new networks of communication and cultural exchange opening up terrain, an internationalism that was closely tied to the ideals of modernist development, but rather it was a non-nationalism, a theoretical space that was separate from the material conditions of global citizenry, and as such leaned more towards the cosmopolitanism that Timothy Brennan sees as incompatible with the political project of internationalism (see chapter 2). The internationalism that defined the experience of a figure like Eugen Gomringer, who left Bolivia as a child and moved to Switzerland, itself a polylinguistic space, or of Emmett Williams, an American living in Germany and collaborating with Daniel Spoerri, a Romanian, and other Europeans in the Material Group, is different than that of McCaffery, who moved from England to Canada, one of its colonies. Though Canada is bilingual, there is no evidence that McCaffery or Nichol

were interested in the politics of national or international subject formation. In fact, the emphasis by Canadian poets in the late '60s and early '70s on the creation of a national identity was part of what Nichol and McCaffery were actively writing against. But antinationalism is not the same as internationalism. What they considered concrete poetry, as well, was not the same as what had been, up until then, the dominant understanding of the form. It is appropriate that the bulk of their theoretical and poetic output comes within the period I have identified as the terminus of concrete poetry as an international project.

McCaffery and Nichol's work can therefore be viewed as completing the transition from modernism to postmodernism that the international concrete poetry movement had begun in the mid-1950s, switching from a modernist internationalism to a postmodern globalism, and inserting the human subject and its accompanying need for contingency and play into a space where order and structure had previously ruled. The value of reading concrete poetry within postmodernism and the post-structuralism that often gets lumped into the same category is not to claim that it was performing a postmodern function *avant la lettre*, but that its function as a movement, and the conditions which brought about its methods, are both linked to a cultural and economic historical position hinged between modernism and postmodernism. This obfuscating, uncomfortable position is the same one they occupy formally, between poetry and visual art, and between the corresponding distributive forms of the book and the gallery.