

From (Command) Line to (Iconic) Constellation
Kenneth Goldsmith

One thing you should know about Bruce Andrews is how devoted he is to paper. Until recently, Bruce was still hammering out his poems on a circa 1978 IBM Selectric (Charles Bernstein has referred to Bruce as the best typist he knows). Bruce was finally forced to write on a computer when publishers started hinting to Bruce that they didn't want to deal with his work due to the fact that it was typed on paper instead of delivered on a floppy disc. Still, what's happened on the web over the past five years has, by and large, passed Bruce by. So I wasn't surprised recently when he raised the question of whether concrete and visual poetry's time on the page had passed. Bruce claimed that as a paper-based movement, it that had seen its moment in the 1960s and had retreated, leaving no strong legacy and few apparent inheritors to what was once a vigorous practice. While the tradition of concrete and visual poetry has spun off into many fruitful directions and numerous journals are still being produced today, he racked his brains trying to think of a living, paper-based legacy that he felt was moving the practice forward in a significant way. All he could come up with, he regretfully added, simply seemed to be anachronistic; a pale imitation and rehashing of the brightest parts of a movement that had inspired him to start writing in the late 60s and early 70s. I suggested that, perhaps, like 12-tone music or Serialism, concrete poetry had simply played itself out on the page and there was no further work to do in that medium. Bruce responded that if this was the case, he found it surprising that finally, at a time when everybody has the tools—Photoshop and Illustrator—to do fantastic concrete poetry on the page, the practice in its current state was far from vigorous.

It got me thinking about why Bruce would make comments like that when, historically, concrete poetry on the page is still inspiring. My most cherished books are the various anthologies that appeared in the 1960s. In fact, it was a trip to the Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of Visual and Concrete Poetry in the late 80s that sewed the seeds for what would become UbuWeb half a decade later. At the time of my visit, I was deep into the mainstream art world and the Sackners had purchased a work of mine. They invited me down to install the piece and to see their collection. As vast and impressive as it was, there was a touch of sadness to the affair. Things seemed like relics of a period gone by. The highlights of the collection were numerous great works from the 20th century avant-garde, spanning from Russian Constructivism to well-known historical figures like Ian Hamilton Finlay and John Cage. However, by and large, the contemporary works struck me as ineffectual.

In retrospect, I see that it was the time of my visit that made me feel this way as much as the quality of the work itself. Much of the Sackner collection had an unabashed modernist bent to it which felt awfully dated two decades into post-modernism. The optimistic utopianism of most of those works seemed naive in the climate of the late 80s when we no longer crafted sculpture, instead we devised objects; when we no longer wrote poetry,

instead we constructed texts. I left the Sackners intrigued but disconnected; something wasn't making sense.

Fast forward to early 2001 at the Poetry Plastique show at Marianne Boesky Gallery in the dead center of the New York City art world. I'm sitting on a panel in a room surrounded by artwork that could, in many respects, be termed concrete and visual poetry. The panel is led by Marjorie Perloff who begins her opening statement by remarking that today concrete poetry is hot: scholars are jumping all over it, conferences are held about it and exhibitions like the one we were sitting in are becoming ever more common. I've been encouraged by this turn of events but I still couldn't understand just how and why this stuff found its way back into the discourse?

Part of the answer came a few weeks later at the Society of the Americas on Park Avenue where I was giving a presentation on UbuWeb in a program dedicated to the founding Noigandres member Décio Pignatari. After a long evening of several academic papers, presentations and readings, Décio saddled up to the stage and began recalling the history of concrete poetry as it applied to the Noigandres group in São Paulo in the early 1950s. I was stunned. Everything he was saying seemed to predict the mechanics of the internet in so many respects: delivery, content, interface, distribution, multi-media, just to name a few. Suddenly it made sense: like de Kooning's famous statement: "History doesn't influence me. I influence it," it's taken the web to make us see just how prescient concrete poetics was in predicting its own lively reception half a century later. I immediately understood that what had been missing from concrete poetry was an appropriate environment in which it could flourish. For many years, concrete poetry has been in limbo: it's been a displaced genre in search of a new medium. And now it's found one.

A Genre in Search of a Medium

Concrete poetry's move from line to constellation, predicts the parallel move in computing from command line interface to graphical user interfaces. The first time I saw a graphical interface in January of 1995, I was particularly struck by one element: the interlaced gif. As the alternating lines filled, before my eyes, an entire medium was changing from line to constellation. I was reminded of the Noigandres group's definition of concrete poetry: "[the] tension of thing-words in space-time." When we look at early concrete poetry manifestos, we can't help but recognize this web environment. The 1958 laundry list of physical attributes the Noigandres group found inspiring from various poetic precursors is astounding in how much of it addresses the space of the screen:

"... space ("blancs") and typographical devices as substantive elements of

composition. ...ideogramic method... word-ideogram; organic interpenetration of time and space... atomization of words, physiognomical typography; expressionistic emphasis on space... the vision, rather than the praxis... direct speech, economy and functional architecture..." (Solt, 71)

Focusing in more specifically on the iconic tendencies of the concrete, the Swiss poet, Eugen Gomringer, in his 1954 manifesto "From Line to Constellation" states:

"Our languages are on the road to formal simplification, abbreviated, restricted forms of language are emerging. The content of a sentence is often conveyed in a single word. Moreover, there is a tendency among languages for the many to be replaced by a few which are generally valid. So the new poem is simple and can be perceived visually as a whole as well as in its parts... its concern is with brevity and conciseness." (Solt, 67)

And Mary Ellen Solt updates Gomringer's concerns specifically in regard to electronic media in her 1968 *Concrete Poetry a World View*

"Uses of language in poetry of the traditional type are not keeping pace with live processes of language and rapid methods of communication at work in our contemporary world. Contemporary languages exhibit the following tendencies...: a move toward 'formal simplification,' abbreviated statement on all levels of communication from the headline, the advertising slogan, to the scientific formula—the quick, concentrated visual message." (Solt, 10)

With its implied dynamism and hyperspace, the concrete poets seemed to be begging for multimedia to enter into their practice. Since the technology was not yet available, they stuck with the page. As such, they used the widely-known analog page-based metaphors to describe a multimedia experience: Webern's "Klangfarbenmelodie" ("Tone-Color-Melodies") and Joyce's concept of the "verbivocovisual," which was also employed in regard to electronic media by Marshall McLuhan a few years later.

Anticipating Instability

According to Johanna Drucker, "Concrete poetry's most conspicuous feature is its attention to the visual appearance of the text on the page." (Drucker, 110) I'd argue that from today's vantage-point, its most conspicuous feature is its attention to the visual appearance of the text *off* the page. The web-viewing environment is an unstable one. Due to the many variables in viewing conditions (everything from operating systems to monitors), we've grown accustomed to our pages looking different on every machine. While conventional poems tend to hold their semantic and for-

mal properties in a variety of media, visual poetry has always operated in an unstable environment even when presented on a page.

Take, for example, Décio Pignatari's cine-poem "LIFE" from 1958. In Mary Ellen Solt's large format *Concrete Poetry A World View* (Solt, 109, *Figure 1*), the entire poem appears on one page. There are six separate boxes with the letters "I, L, F, E", a figure 8, and the word "LIFE" stacked on top of one another in two rows; it's like looking at a letteristic elevation of a building. This is quite different from the same poem reproduced in Emmett Williams' *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (Williams, unpaginated, *Figure 2*), where the poem is spread across 6 pages, each with a single letter or word on a page. In addition, each page is annotated at the bottom by the editorial comment (translate: navigational tool) that says "Décio Pignatari (continued from preceding page)" as if to imply cinematic continuity.

The two books are different shapes and sizes and the visual qualities of the poem are retrofitted to each of the various formats. In both books, the page purports to be white, but upon closer examination, the differences become more pronounced: the Williams anthology is printed on a creamy matte stock where as the Solt is on a smooth grayish-white stock.

Breaking down the poem even further, the letters themselves appear differently in each edition: due to their size, the Solt edition letters appear to be smooth and mechanical where as in the Williams' edition, the outline of the letters are jagged and seemingly hand-drawn (translate: anti-aliased, bitmapped).

Obviously such differences in layout and environment give way to different readings—and hence meanings—of the same poem.

How different, then, are the conditions of traditional verse. Take for example, Michael Palmer's poem "Sun" as reproduced in the University of California's *Poems for the Millennium Volume Two* (Rothenberg and Joris, 720-22) and Sun and Moon's *From the Other Side of the Coin* (Messerli, 670-73). Both use a similarly sized serif typeface on a similarly colored paper stock. But more importantly, Palmer's line breaks are consistent across both editions, respecting the author's intentions. When transported to the web, Palmer's poem remains intact. Replicated on the Dia Center's website, "Sun's" lines break identically to the way they do in both printed editions. The only difference on the web is that the poem is set in a sans-serif typeface that in no way alters its meaning or Palmer's intentions. In any medium, there is only one way to lay out his poem; the words remain in set in stone, hence the meaning—as dictated by the author's formal decisions—remains consistent regardless of the medium.

On the web, the variables increase when motion is introduced. Using the rather primitive model of the flip-book, the Williams anthology moves the reader from "page to page" (metaphorically from "frame to frame"). When Décio showed "LIFE" during his talk at the Society of the Americas, he "animated" it by quickly flipping back and forth through a series of slides. The same evening, during my talk, I showed an animated version of

his 1960 cine-poem “Organismo”, formally similar to “LIFE” that resides on UbuWeb. As an animated gif, it mechanically employs the same device as a flip-book, moving frame by frame into an endlessly repeating loop. But looking at that version (done in 1997), I’m struck how primitive the gif animation looks today in comparison to the prevalent Shockwave and Flash technologies. One of Flash’s striking qualities is the ability of the file to expand and adapt itself automatically to the width of any browser window: if your screen is small, the file visually shrinks itself down to perfectly fill the window without missing a beat. The same goes for a large screen. Indeed, Shockwave, Flash, Sun System’s Java and Adobe’s PDF format aim to provide the cross-browser, cross-platform stability to the web—both textually and visually—that is inherent to the Palmer poem.

Such technologies dovetail with Max Bense’s utopian 1965 statement: “...concrete poetry does not separate languages; it unites them; it combines them. It is this part of its linguistic intention that makes concrete poetry the first international poetical movement.” (Solt, 73) 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 today in the de-centered, constellation-oriented global networks where no one geographic entity has sole possession of content.

Flat and Cool

Bense’s statement echoes the modernist sentiments of the International Style. In fact, the Noigandres’ hard-line allegiance to modernism has its parallels in today’s cyber-landscape. For example, over the years there has been a relentless effort (generally ending in failure) to try to incorporate dimensionality into what are, in essence, flat mediums: the interface and the screen. The Noigandres adhered closely to Greenbergian modernist tenets such as non-illusionistic space and full autonomy of the artwork. Looking though examples of early concrete works, in fact, none are illusionistic; instead, unadorned sans-serif language inhabits the plane of the white page and, as Greenberg says, “[the] shapes flatten and spread in the dense, two-dimensional atmosphere.”

In doing so, the emotional temperature is intentionally kept cool, controlled and rational, which is echoed in the Noigandres’ “Pilot Plan” definition of concrete poetry:

“Concrete poetry: total responsibility before language. Through realism. Against a poetry of expression, subjective and hedonistic. To create precise problems and to solve them in terms of sensible language. A general art of the word. The poem-product: useful object.” (Solt, 71)

Figure 1 - Décio Pignatari

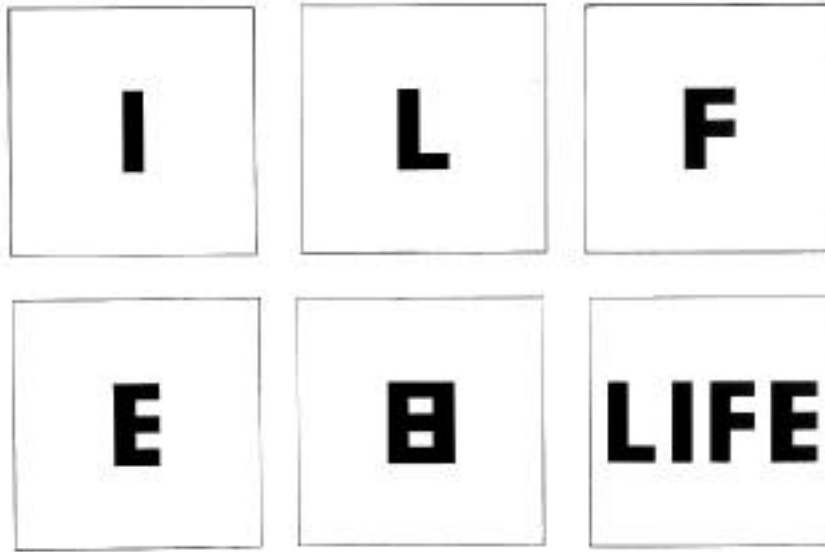


Figure 1. Décio Pignatari's cine-poem "LIFE" as published in Mary Ellen Solt's large format *Concrete Poetry A World View* (University of Indiana, 1968).

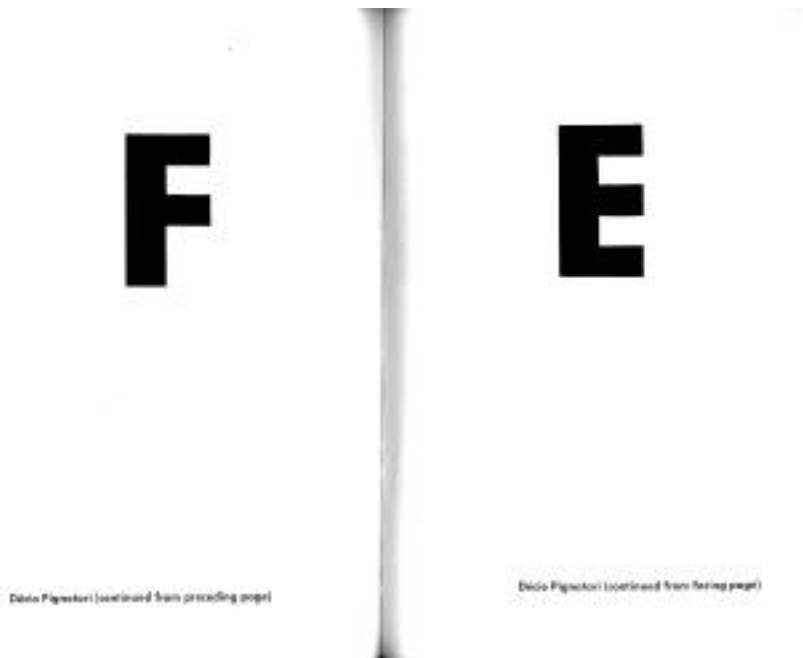


Figure 2. Excerpt from Décio Pignatari's cine-poem "LIFE" as published in Emmett Williams' *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (Something Else Press, 1967).

The Noigandres' definition reads like something out of a programming textbook. And it's that sort of mathematical level-headedness which makes their poetry so adaptable to today's computing environment.

Pignatari's "LIFE" is an example of a work that invokes the mechanics of the International style. By using a typography similar to the logo of *Life* magazine (in 1958 available in several languages around the world), Pignatari suggests that the poem itself will be understood by all due, not only to its use of ideogrammatic language but, just as importantly, to brand recognition. One criticism leveled toward concrete poetry is that it's nothing more than graphic design. In fact, concrete poetry embraced the parallels between the two, often using commercial graphics and language to critique the products it invoked (cf. Pignatari's anti-advertisement poem "Beba Coca Cola"). And nowhere is this more evidenced than the web. With everyone working from the same set of tools—Photoshop, Illustrator and Director—in the same medium and in the same 72 dpi resolution, it's often hard to tell fine art from advertising on the web (several sites such as rtmk.com go out of their way to conflate the two).

UbuWeb Wants to Be Free

If, as I began this paper, concrete poetry on the page is a foregone conclusion and the future of the genre is on the web, where should its distribution mechanism be located? I took this task upon myself and created UbuWeb in 1996, a year after the widespread introduction of Netscape 1.0. Although still primitive, the web was even then a Noigandrian "verbivocovisual" space.

UbuWeb began as little more than a replication of the book model. We were interested in a strictly distributive practice, using the web's omnipresence as a means to putting long-out-of-print anthologies of concrete poetry back in print, so to speak. Flat scans of historical and contemporary work made up most of the site. Everything could have easily been printed on paper and bound into a book.

However, with advanced technologies becoming more prevalent, UbuWeb began to widen its scope. There came a time when it was apparent to me that concrete and visual poetry wanted to move beyond the page and off the static screen. When UbuWeb began receiving sophisticated submissions for our Contemporary section in Flash, Java, JavaScript, Shockwave, dHTML, etc., our policy changed to accepting only web medium-specific poetry. If it couldn't be reproduced on a page, we were interested in it (the historical section necessarily remained static).

Once a mass of work began to cohere, comprised of advanced web-specific technologies, I began to sense a fulfillment of the Noigandres' prophecies. This is, perhaps, best typified on UbuWeb by Brian Kim Stefans' epic Flash project "The Dreamlife of Letters." "Dreamlife" came

about as a response to a dense text by poet and feminist literary theorist Rachel Blau DuPlessis. In a Cageian write-through gesture, Stefans created a new page-oriented static poem out of DuPlessis' text. He states:

“As words almost invariably take on nearly obscene meanings when they are left to linger on their own, and as DuPlessis's text was so loaded to begin with, I didn't enjoy my [response] poem that much. More importantly, as it was in a sort of antique 'concrete' mode, it resembled a much older aesthetic, one well explored by Gomringer, the De Campos brothers and numerous others in the past fifty years, and so it wasn't very interesting to me.”
(Stefans, UbuWeb)

So Stefans turned his unsatisfactory static response into an 11-minute Flash file, which Stefans refers to as a “short film.” I take it that in Stefan's statement, he uses the phrase “antique concrete mode” to mean page-based visual poetry. What he does, however, in “Dreamlife” is to take classic concrete elements and, using web-specific technologies, bring them to places that the “antique concretists” could only dream of.

As we view Stefan's piece, elements of the classic concrete style parade by on the screen: the concern with a flat picture plane, the use of unadorned sans-serif letters, the cinematic unfolding of successive chapters (recalling Pignatari's cine-poem “LIFE”), the interplay between fractured language and semantic sense, the minimalist use of language and the melding of words and icon-based semiotic symbols. Even the choice of color—orange—has a retro 60s feel to it, referencing the Augusto de Campos frontispiece, “Poetamenos (Poet-Minus)” from Solt's 1968 concrete poetry anthology.

I have viewed Stefan's piece on Netscape and Explorer, on Windows and on Mac, on small monitors and on large projection screens and the poem remains consistent on all platforms, even going so far as to adapt itself, size-wise, to whatever screen it's presented on. I have accessed and demonstrated Stefans' piece to audiences wherever a web connection was available. I have fast-forwarded his poem and have rewound it. I have skipped sections and have played it randomly. I've watched the piece through in its entirety; I've looped it like a screensaver and let it run all day on my machine. On UbuWeb, as long as the site is active, Stefans work will never go out of print. As such, UbuWeb is a new model for concrete, visual and sound poetry and thrives worldwide on a new system of distribution.

In closing, I am reminded of a story: in 1996, my wife and I went to see Pietro Sparta, a very successful art dealer living in the tiny French town of Chagny. He had a beautiful industrial space and a stable made up of internationally known conceptual artists. After seeing his shows, we went to a cafe for drinks and he told us how he ended up in this unique situation. His father, a Communist sympathizer, was thrown out of Sicily for his politics. He moved his family to France when he found factory work in Chagny. While there, one of his sons died and was buried in the town. According

to Sicilian tradition, a family can never leave the place where a son is buried; hence Chagny became the Sparta's new home. Stuck in a small town, Pietro became interested in contemporary art by reading glossy art magazines procured from the newsstand in Chagny. He became obsessed and started corresponding with the artists. Before long, when in France, the artists came to see Sparta. Soon he won their trust and began holding modest exhibitions. The artists were so impressed by his sincerity and devotion for art that they began showing their best work with him. Little by little his reputation grew until he was able to buy the factory that his father worked in when he first came to town and convert it into a spacious and gorgeous gallery. Today, he still lives in Chagny. And his father, now retired, maintains the numerous and luscious plantings on the former factory grounds.

Object

Goldsmith

Texts Cited

Dia Center for the Arts website, <http://www.diacenter.org>

Drucker, Johanna. *Figuring the Word* New York City: Granary Books, 1998.

Messerili, Douglas, ed. *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry 1960-1990*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1994.

Rothenberg, Jerome and Joris, Pierre, eds. *Poems for the Millennium* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998.

rtmark website, <http://www.rtmark.com>

Solt, Mary Ellen. *Concrete Poetry: A World View* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968.

UbuWeb Visual, Concrete and Sound Poetry, <http://www.ubu.com>

Williams, Emmett, ed. *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* New York: Something Else Press, 1967.

Concrete poetry's move from line to constellation, predicts the parallel move in computing from command line interface to graphical user interfaces. The first time I saw a graphical interface in January of 1995, I was particularly struck by one element: the interlaced gif. As the alternating lines filled, before my eyes, an entire medium was changing from line to constellation. Focusing in more specifically on the iconic tendencies of the concrete, the Swiss poet, Eugen Gomringer, in his 1954 manifesto "From Line to Constellation" states: "Our languages are on the road to formal simplification, abbreviated, restricted forms of language are emerging. The content of a sentence is often conveyed in a single word. An iconic system is a structured set of related icons. A complex icon can be composed from other icons in the iconic system, and therefore express a more complex visual concept. An iconic sentence (called visual sentence by Lakin, iconic sentence or action sentence by Tanimoto [TANIMOTO86], and iconic statement by Korfhage) is a spatial arrangement of icons from an iconic system. A visual language is a set of iconic sentences constructed with given syntax and semantics. There is a gap tolerance in a line. Similarly we can construct other grammar rules for lines other than horizontal lines, and for any other shapes. From (Command) Line to (Iconic) Constellation. Harriet: Poetry Foundation Blog -- Kenneth Goldsmith Author Archive. External links. Kenneth Goldsmith page at the Academy of American Poets. Kenneth Goldsmith Entry from the Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Poetry. Kenneth Goldsmith at the Electronic Poetry Center. "Sucking on Words" (2007) a documentary about Goldsmith by Simon Morris at ubu.com.