

*Visual Poetics**Elisabeth A. Frost*

With notable exceptions, poetry as practiced and theorized by Anglophone poets before the twentieth century draws its analogies from music and develops from structures of sound and sequence – often through the metaphor of voice. The metaphors of sound pervading poetic practice are challenged in the twentieth century with the advent of print technologies that make typography and the space of the page newly available as compositional tools. American poets begin to cross the borders of medium and genre as never before, incorporating the visual into poetry and in many cases conceiving of poetry as itself a visually-based art.

For women poets, the stakes are high. If we consider the gendered reception of modern poetry, as well as theories of female spectatorship, a complex and layered counter-history emerges. Often relegated to the sidelines in the avant-garde coteries that championed visual approaches to poetry, women writers explore not only formal innovations but also specifically feminist possibilities of a visually-oriented poetics. In her call for a poetics to defy “the institution of gendered poetry and the male-gendered poetic voice” by writing “otherhow,” Rachel Blau DuPlessis invokes visuality as a metaphor – and a practice – of transgression, urging women to write “through the page, unframed . . . from edge to edge.”¹ Many women poets since the early twentieth century have created visual compositions precisely to question the gendered politics of the history of poetry, material culture, and reading or performance.

But what *is* visual poetics? The visual in – or as – poetry can be considered in numerous ways. Links between poetry and visual art may take the form of ekphrasis – writing about an existing artwork. Likewise, illustration of poetic texts is as old as writing itself. Imagism initiated a preoccupation that informs virtually all of twentieth-century American poetry, insisting on the importance of concrete (most often visual) language. Further, collaboration between artists and poets supplies another lens through which to “see” the visual in relation to poetry. Still, these

approaches often retain the traditional split between visual imagery on the one hand and symbolic language on the other: we assume that all language (printed, digitized, or spoken) is not a visual medium but a symbolic order, whose content references meaning rather than embodying it. Accordingly, studies of ekphrastic poetry, for example, tend to privilege theme and content rather than the visual qualities of the text itself.

By contrast, I will define visual poetics as writing that explores the materiality of word, page, or screen. Combining text with image and/or highlighting the materiality of the medium, visual poetics privileges acts of seeing in acts of reading. As Johanna Drucker observes, “All writing has the capacity to be both looked at and read, to be present as material and to function as the sign of an absent meaning.”²² In wide-ranging ways, all visual poetics stems from this understanding of materiality, though approaches vary widely, and are often divided into “expressivist” and “constructivist” modes. The former makes expression primary, explored through open form; the second denotes a focus on the object status of the text and the constructed nature of its language and/or visual elements, often involving pre-determined forms. Both orientations have their origins in modernism, which serves as a harbinger of myriad later examples that resist both voice-based lyric utterance and narrative form. These modes include composition by field, concrete poetry, the prismatic page, the performance page, and the photo-text or other hybrid visual genres. From Imagism to new media, the twentieth century evinces a profound visual turn in American poetry.

Modernism, Visuality, and Gender

Both material and aesthetic factors contribute to a revolution in the production of texts in the early twentieth century. The *vers libre* allowed for new forms; since lineation was no longer defined by meter, poetics could be based on elements other than sound. At the same time, the typewriter allowed anyone to *design* a page on a portable machine, creating what Michael Davidson calls “a new visual aesthetic—the word as image or object.”²³ Stéphane Mallarmé, describing *Un coup de dés* (1897), explains that the graphic design of his text corresponds to both an image on the page and a score for reading. At roughly the same time, Cubism offered a new way of seeing via fragmentation and juxtaposition – collage. Reconceiving words as material objects, Apollinaire’s “calligrammes” – poems designed in abstract or mimetic shapes – epitomize this turn to the visual, in experiments with page and typography taken up by numerous later

poets, from e.e. cummings to the New Conceptualists. But however liberating, these visual transformations are accompanied by anxiety about “feminization.” Ezra Pound’s and Wyndham Lewis’s insistent masculinism signaled their rejection of a “feminine” aesthetics in favor of the hard – the chiseled.⁴ This reaction against the “soft” and decadent, much like the pervasive recourse to a technological sublime, can be read as gendered attacks typifying an effort to master what they perceived as a dangerously open new poetics.

In ambivalent relation to this ideology, a number of women poets controvert male modernists’ gendered apprehensions. Their work sets the stage for the dramatic visual turn of the postwar years. Mina Loy’s idiosyncratic uses of white space, diacritical marks, and changes of scale in her poems and manifestos make for a dynamic and embodied page that effectively regenders Futurist aesthetics in an expressionist field. By contrast, Marianne Moore used syllabics to develop the stanza as compositional unit in a constructivist verbal/visual architecture. Inflecting collage to discursive ends, Moore developed as well an aesthetics of citation, in which quotation marks signify polyvocality: through these unsounded diacritical marks, Moore indicates her intertextuality, practicing appropriation long before it became commonplace. Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* adapts Cubist disruptions to fracture ways of seeing that anticipate later experiments with the prismatic. Stein’s scopophilia is in many ways the inverse of the mixed-media works of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, which perform a boldly erotic verbal/visual embodiment, prefiguring the performance page of the 1960s.

Of great importance to later women’s visual poetics, H.D. theorizes visuality in direct resistance to a masculinized heroic. H.D.’s poetics is often studied in terms of its musicality. But even in her earliest lyrics, which Pound argued epitomized Imagism, H.D. shows both a visual and an aural intent: we can see, not just hear, in her spare lines, a resistance to masculine rhetoric, a sharp-hewn lyric mode evident in later works from Lorine Niedecker – whose lyrics DuPlessis describes as “a formal answer to Bigness”⁵ – to Rae Armantrout. This minimal lyric mode, with its gendered implications, is coupled with the visionary. The radical *Notes on Thought and Vision* (1919) initiated a life-long exploration of the hieroglyph, of hermetic traditions, of an embodied spirituality, and of palimpsest (a layering of texts that results from partial erasure and reuse of an existing manuscript page). These are all evident in the symbolic approach in *Trilogy*, in which words are palimpsests, and short lyric units – often using puns and other verbal/visual play – reveal that etymology is a layering

of history and consciousness. These visual/aural puns move small moments of linguistic hieroglyphs into lyric constellations. H.D.'s fascination with film evidences her belief in the visionary, apparent in her resistance to the "talkies," with their naturalistic intrusion of sound. Such experiments presage the flourishing of visual poetics after World War II.

Compositions by Field

Illustrating a pervasive visual turn, Kathleen Fraser offers a taxonomy of contemporary women's poetics that depart from "the closed, airless containers of the well-behaved poem," all deriving in some way from Charles Olson's "composition by field," announced in the manifesto "Projective Verse" (1950). Olson described the new "OPEN verse" as a natural progression from the modernists' "revolution of the ear . . . the trochee's heave" (386). The page is not just an expressive but a corporeal space, in which type can "indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, . . . which [the poet] intends" (393). In many cases transformative, Olson is a source of ambivalence for women poets. DuPlessis points to the gendered nature not only of the (male) poet's "listening appendage" and his "projective acts" but also Olson's documented "masculinist investment in [women's] helpmeet ears."⁶ Fraser locates Olson's influence on women poets in the "concept of PAGE as canvas or screen on which to project flux" and to value "irregularity, counterpoint, adjacency, ambiguity."⁷ Her taxonomy of "new translations of formerly 'unspeakable' material" includes examples of the grid – linked both to Robert Duncan's "word grids" and to the work of artist Agnes Martin – that function almost like ideograms; here Fraser mentions Susan Howe, Laura Moriarty, Beverly Dahlen, Meredith Stricker, and Dale Going.⁸ She also describes "work in which the *absence* of reliable matter (as it represents meaning) is given visual body,"⁹ a pursuit seen in the work of Norma Cole and others. Three poets are notable for their decades-long explorations of field composition: DuPlessis adapts the Pound/Olson long poem to feminist critique; Fraser regenders the visuality that Olson championed; and Howe extends Olson's collage methods into engagements with a gendered American history.

DuPlessis has paid homage to Olson, and to the Objectivists, even as her theoretical and poetic interventions have changed the field of feminist cultural practice. The visual effects in the early "Writing" alter both reading and seeing: parallel texts occupy the same page space, subverting the idea of sequence; handwritten passages serve as traces of the body that made them; and the previously taboo subject matter of the daily details of

.A writing
 marks the
 patch of void
 foggy reflecting
 mist catches wet carlight

that everything tests
 condenses
 refracted silence
 The cold rush up
 the dark dark trees
 Somnulent spots of travel

film
 fine tip flairs
 baby wipes
 khaki thread
 nipples

Letters are canal-
 ized as white foams
 zagging, a fissure on the
 sheet,

tangle of branches unorganized without the leaves
 cock-eyed underbelly of
 plenitude of

mark. *outtakes, can imagine conversations?*
conversations?

*long passages of satisfaction swallowed up
 in darkness.*

Figure 8 Page from “Writing” by Rachel Blau DuPlessis.
Tabula Rosa. Elmwood, CT: Potes & Poets Press, 1987, 57. Copyright 1987 by
 Rachel Blau DuPlessis. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

childcare and of embodied lived experience alter the genre of lyric (see Figure 8). The serial form of “Writing” engendered the decades-long *Drafts*, a vast, integrated series of 114 linked poems that span multiple volumes. DuPlessis notes that *Drafts* began in an Italian notebook, given her by Fraser. Here DuPlessis “‘drew’ or ‘drafted’ words into the page, making a sketch pad of language.”¹⁰ This visual impulse ultimately takes form in page-spaces that are at once analytical zones, visual fields, and sites of lyric utterance in an open-ended feminist response to epic. Like Olson,

DuPlessis inscribes her pages with embodied language, sonically and visually layered and patterned, but in a feminist riposte to Olson's larger-than-life Maximus, DuPlessis structures *Drafts* around a metaphor of parental nurturance and unconventional generation: each poem in *Drafts* takes up material borrowed from an earlier poem in the sequence, identified as the "donor draft." This formal constraint exemplifies DuPlessis's complex engagements with the cognitive and the corporeal, the linguistic and the embodied visual, in an extensive poetic and theoretical practice.¹¹

Like DuPlessis, Fraser strives "to invent a visual shape for one's interior life," to capture "[t]rajectory and barrage, as if to see it on a radar screen, trapping and visualizing the private language still missing from public record."¹² "Etruscan Pages" (1993),¹³ for example, employs a visual method that Fraser credits in part to H.D.'s "invitation" to explore the unwritten page: "the layerings of old and new inscription were built from accretions of literal archaeological remnant bound together into current pages of language, visual figure, and event (present-time dreams and letters)."¹⁴ Fraser pays homage to H.D.'s invocation in *Trilogy* of "the blank pages / of the unwritten volume of the new,"¹⁵ while distinguishing her own "linguistic motion and visual notation" from H.D.'s "'air and crystal'" language.¹⁶ In this way, H.D. offers permission to claim the page, without programmatic insistence. Fraser's verbal-visual collage works include series for the wall and the page (some in collaboration), shaped poems (both abstract and concrete, as in *WING*), and typographic experiments with letters and phonemes. Since the 1960s, Fraser has tested the limits of symbolic language, evoking visually speech fragments and – or as – the inarticulate.¹⁷

The inarticulate is also a preoccupation for Susan Howe, who offers oblique forms of witness, combining archival research with collage methods to explore silencing, focusing often on a gendered American history that has erased women's and native people's voices. At times Howe's language is as spare on the page as H.D.'s. Often, though, it is so thickly overlaid that conventional reading becomes impossible: typeset lines veer off at all angles and are set over one another to create sharp-edged, abstract shapes in which individual words may be unreadable. In addition to long poems that employ citation and collage in painstaking visual arrangements, Howe has written works that incorporate photographs, notably *The Midnight* (2003). Her fascination with the intersections of poetry and the visual is evident as well in her long essay on the filmmaker Chris Marker, *Sorting Facts, or Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker* (2013), which itself imports photos, creating a layered visual-verbal dialogue. Since her beginnings, as

a visual artist, Howe has developed a profoundly visual *and* aural page. She has explored the materiality of both manuscript and print, as in the early *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), in which she framed Dickinson as an innovative poet who shaped her fascicles with minute attention to spacing and the paper on which she wrote. In *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (1987) and other long poems, a historical narrative breaks into fragments, reconceived as word grids. Howe's subsequent collages are more dramatic, with words or lines printed over one another to the point of illegibility. But Howe's strategies are hardly chaotic or random. One taxonomy identifies her four predominant visual forms: ballad-like two-line stanzas, indented text, exploded pages with sharp angles and overlaps, and rectangular word blocks.¹⁸ Howe extends Olson's "belief in type's exact placement as carrier of meaning,"¹⁹ consistently "concerned with gesture, the mark of the hand and the pen or pencil . . . as an acoustic signal or charge."²⁰

Concretism

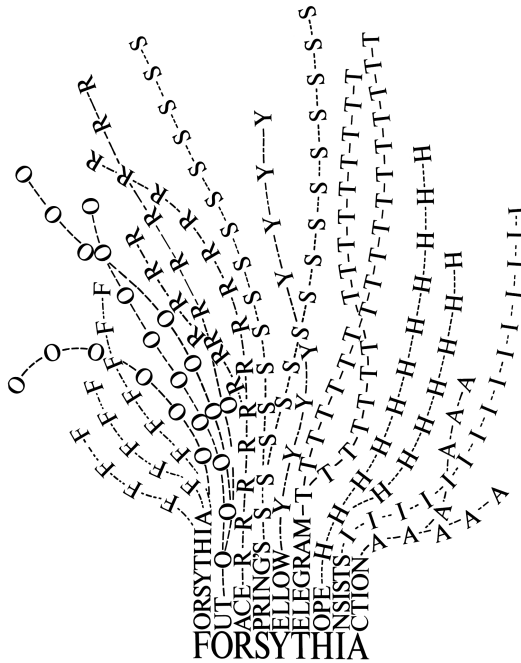
Like Olson, the concrete poets of the 1950s and 1960s rejected New Criticism and the personal lyric, with its "repetitious emotional content," to embrace "the conviction that the old grammatical-syntactical structures are no longer adequate."²¹ But, as Mary Ellen Solt remarks, "the concrete poet sees a need for moving farther away from grammar and syntax to a constellation of words with spatial syntax, or to the ideogram than does Olson." Rather than experiencing an embodied page, the reader must "perceive the poem as an object."²² In this respect, the concretists look back to Apollinaire and Mallarmé, rather than Olson's expressivist field.

Two anthologies of the late 1960s represent concretism as a global phenomenon: Solt's *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (1968) and Emmett Williams's *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967). Neither mentions the enormous gender disparity in the tables of contents. In Williams's 342-page collection of seventy-six poets from around the world, Solt is the sole woman included (in addition, two collaborative teams contain a woman partner). In Solt's anthology, the representation is similar. Her poetry, then, was singular in the circles in which she moved – the male concrete poets whose work she championed, often in the face of dismissal: writing in *Poetry*, David Rosenthal derided the concretists as either pursuing a mystical "white light of epiphany" or engaging in "a tidy little joke," and he dismissed Solt's *Flowers in Concrete* as "a mite precious," preferring Ian Hamilton Finlay as more aware of "metaphysical possibilities" (127).

Rosenthal's denigration may be explained by the gendered nature of Solt's experiments. As A.S. Bessa notes, Solt found material in her domestic life, as in *Marriage-A Code Poem* (1976). In *Flowers in Concrete*, Solt "attempted to relate the word as object to the object to which it refers by studying the law of growth of the flower and making a visual equivalent." Solt's "Forsythia" is iconic – taking the shape of the branches of the plant rising from a rectangular pot – but Solt also uses other modes of representation. The letters of the base spell out "FORSYTHIA," each letter leading vertically to words that spin off into branches, to read, "FORSYTHIA OUT RACE SPRING'S YELLOW TELEGRAM HOPE INSISTS ACTION." Within the potted forsythia lie multiple "actions" – the coming of spring, the plant's growth, and the swifter telegram, with its Morse code, whose dots and dashes appear as diacritical marks. Solt's "still" object, then, meditates not just on the association of spring with "hope" but on the perception of time, speed, and organic as well as technological modes of communication, in this way tracking collisions between the natural and the mechanical (see Figure 9).

Such is the case with another practitioner of visual poetics of the period. In a career that spanned over three decades, May Swenson addressed the tensions among romantic, aesthetic, and scientific approaches to the natural world. Sometimes likened to e.e. cummings in its form and to Moore in its preoccupation with science, Swenson's work is consistently visual and feminist. *Iconographs* (1970) was Swenson's most extended experiment with visual poetics. To distinguish her approach from that of the concretists, Swenson explains that she wrote the text first and only then shaped it. Swenson coins the term "iconograph"; as she notes, the prefix "icono-" denotes "image" or "likeness," terms less restrictive than "icon." Similarly, even though the suffix "-graph" derives from the Greek for "carve," the English "graph" denotes a "system of connections or interrelations" (86), fundamental to Swenson's feminist practice. In each "iconograph," spacing, drawn and typeset lines, and diacritical marks serve specific yet varying functions. Although some poems are shaped mimetically, most use space abstractly, for rhythmic as well as visual effect. In this sense we might apply the term "iconoclastic" to Swenson's work, as it resists formal reductiveness in an effort "To make an existence in space, as well as in time, for the poem" (86). Neither lyrics in organic form, nor constructivist visual "objects," Swenson's iconographs embrace multiple aesthetics and undogmatic ways of seeing.

Like much of Swenson's other work, *Iconographs* undercuts gender binaries. The first two poems, frequently anthologized, focus on the self



Mary Ellen Solt

Figure 9 “Forsythia” by Mary Ellen Solt.

Flowers in Concrete (Portfolio Edition). UbuWeb. http://ubu.com/historical/solt/solt_flowers.html. Copyright 1969 by Mary Ellen Solt. Used with permission of the Estate of Mary Ellen Solt. All rights reserved.

in relation. The interlocutors of “Bleeding” – the “knife” and the “cut” – partake of a sado-masochistic dependency. The poem moves down the page, with a gash of white space down its center. Although the pairing of bleeding flesh and phallic knife suggests feminine and masculine roles, neither is gendered, allowing for a “queering” of the familiar binary. Conversely, with its vertical zig-zag of short lines interrupted by two longer horizontal lines, “Women” states ironically that women should be “pedestals / to men” or “sweet / oldfashioned / painted / rocking / horses,” “joyfully / ridden” (14). In a fascinating parallel to a poem of Solt’s called “Moon Shot Sonnet,” Swenson’s “Orbiter 5 Shows How Earth Looks from the Moon” uses long lines to suggest shape – the “shadow-image of ‘a

woman in a square Kimono” as supposedly seen in an early photo of the earth from the moon.²³ Swenson shows how intent we are to attribute not just anthropomorphic qualities but also gender to all phenomena.

In the decades since Solt’s and Swenson’s experiments, the impulse behind concrete poetry can be seen in numerous forays into typography, some of which continue to cross the lines between Language Arts and poetry. Notably, Joanna Drucker – writer, visual artist, and theorist – has defined the field of visual poetics and contributed in multiple hybrid forms through her explorations of book arts. The concretist strain appears in other poets who experiment with typography, sometimes in recurring forms that highlight the object status of language and/or generate alternate means of signification. Some reinvent symbolic language at the micro level, as in Alice Fulton’s “bride sign” (=), an indeterminate mark that plays with visuality and gender. More extensively, Joan Retallack interrogates both concrete impulses and abstract shapings of the page in such works as *Afterrimages* (1995), and poets as various as Tina Darragh, Julie Patton, Rosmarie Waldrop, and Jena Osman explore concretism in their bodies of work.

The Prismatic Page

Categorizing visual poetics, Solt and others distinguish an expressivist form (as in field composition) from a constructivist pursuit of the “object” status of a poem (as in the concretists). Yet another mode might be described as what DuPlessis calls a constellated or prismatic page, one that engages vision as such – often as embodied experience – and takes the page as a site of projection of multiplied, fractured, and/or plural ways of seeing. Indeed, the term is invoked by Mallarmé, who remarks that his “vision of the Page” in *Un coup de dés* embodies “prismatic subdivisions of the idea.”²⁴ Among twentieth-century women poets, this prismatic approach is surreal, often visionary. Not linked to one movement or time period, it reveals ties to any number of aesthetic and/or hermetic traditions. DuPlessis makes a crucial connection when delineating her notion of the prismatic, citing Drucker’s call for “a ‘theory of female pleasure’ that can emerge ‘from production.’”²⁵ DuPlessis asks what form such pleasure might take in “a poetry of imagistic, tonal, linguistic, and textual pleasure. . . from a female subject. . . entering the space of meaning, of the symbolic, and exerting her right to vision, clairvoyance, and agency.”²⁶ Such agency is evident in women poets who claim the space of the page as a place of vision.

As DuPlessis points out, Barbara Guest's spare, short lyrics privilege not breath but sight, not the gestural but the fractured. Guest's interests include not only seeing but also vision as a state of consciousness – both of which can be read as gendered in Guest's work, which DuPlessis argues "multiplies 'the gaze' so that she, as a female poet, can claim some power over the many dimensions of sight and seeing." This "prismatic" or constellated page partakes of a quality DuPlessis calls the "gendered marvelous."²⁷ In the witty minimalism of her short lyrics, Guest consistently resists "meaning" in favor of a sculpted surface of language.

In similar fashion, such later poets as Mei-mei Berssenbrugge practice collage techniques to foster a surreality that multiplies, rather than narrows, perceptual fields. The visionary as such – in both experiential and formal terms – is explored in the long poems of Alice Notley, whose surreal narratives engage with received mythology on the one hand and pop culture on the other. In a page space dense with text, *The Descent of Alette*, which Notley calls a "female epic," quotation marks register as unexplained visual markings, which may delineate dialogue, citation, or shifts of consciousness; each set of phrases in essence becomes a lens through which to see in relation to the surrounding fragmented phrases, altogether contributing nonetheless to the forward thrust of a book-length narrative. In a very different mode, in an exploration of womanist aesthetics and politics, Audre Lorde's symbolic use of surreal imagery invokes West African sacred traditions. Over the course of her career, Lorde created page spaces whose frequently unpunctuated lines leave syntax open to readerly interpretation, while using surreality to embody dream states – for Lorde a *sine qua non* of feminist consciousness.

Utterly distinctive in form, Hannah Weiner was obsessed with both vision as such and its fractured multiples on the page. For the LANGUAGE group, with whom Weiner was associated, the visual became a means of defying the dominance of speech-based lyric. In the first issue of the journal *This*, Robert Grenier famously wrote, "I HATE SPEECH" – a declaration Ron Silliman later called "a new moment in American writing."²⁸ But Weiner was concerned not just with the visual but with *visions*. A conceptual artist who joined ranks with poets, Weiner experienced visions recorded in what she called a "clairvoyant journal." In the 1978 collection of four months of the pages recorded in 1974, Weiner prefaces the work: "I SEE words on my forehead IN THE AIR on other people on the typewriter on the page These appear in the text in CAPITALS or *italics*." This code to reading/seeing *Clairvoyant Journal* allows its polyphony to emerge: text in explosive capitals or emphatic italics

cohabits the page with a more linear narrative of the day's events. Throughout, lines and words overlap and read vertically or diagonally. In this way, Weiner renders her embodied experience of words as visual objects – things both signifying and *seen*. In this multi-voiced rendering of revelations, Weiner created a sui-generis visual poetics – a true hybrid of art and poetry.²⁹ (See Figure 10.)

The thick, layered multi-texts of Weiner's *Clairvoyant Journal* contrast dramatically with prismatic pages whose minimalism suggests not multiple voices but silence. Engaging in forms of extreme fragmentation as acts of witness not to personal but to historical trauma, Myung Mi Kim's many books of poetry develop an aesthetic of brokenness, in which syntactic fragments occupy pages striking for their overwhelming white space – an invocation of silence and loss. In Kim's work, the violent oppression so prevalent in Korean history (invoked in *Under Flag* in the figure of slain activist Young Ok Kim, for example) meets the irretrievable loss of language and identity in diaspora. Kim turns to numerous visual devices to embody this trauma: over-writing of typeset words, idiosyncratic diacritical marks, non-signifying letters and phonemes, and a mix of Korean characters with alphabetic words – all of these create a page whose spare shards of language mark a space of mourning and the inarticulate.

Performance Page

The association between visual poetics and the resistance to narrative progression and metaphors of voice – both time-based and sound-based notions – is complicated by the parallel modes of performance poetics, which, paradoxically, relies as well on visual and textual pages, analogous to scores for varied kinds of performance and/or improvisation. Writing in 1997, Aldon Nielsen argued that the emphasis on orality in the reception of black poetry has obscured poets' attention to the materiality and appearance of poems on the page – what Nathaniel Mackey calls “graphicity.”³⁰ At the same time, Nielson notes that the “speech-based” poetry of the Black Arts movement necessarily involved typographic and other visual elements. Such now-forgotten poets as Julia Fields and Elouise Loftin wrote visual texts (employing drawings, graphic elements, and elaborate wordplay) that have never been anthologized or reprinted.³¹ At the same time, both the better-known poetry of Sonia Sanchez and the under-recognized work of Jayne Cortez are appreciated mainly (if at all) for their aural elements, rather than for complex methods of “scoring” a poem for reading while also creating a visually signifying page.³²

April 17 p 2 *apologize to Rhys* BIG APPLE MODERN ART THURS
 WEAR IMPORTANT
 John Ashberry reads, Ron Padgett NOA'S VOICE: LOW INCOME
 GO TO BOSTON, COUNTING ONCE NOT FRIENDS *big victim not terrible*
girlfriend understand STAY IN THE HOSPI
explain the locks: one fox lock that doesn't work, one slip TAL
 lock easy to break, one police floor NOT USEFUL *bar* FIX THE BAR
 IT ANSWERS
 Then there's a deadbolt the city could put in
 What's the answer to Noa we don't see each other MUCH DONT GO HOME TO
 ENGLAND
Problem money be careful clothes
 RHYS AT SAMADHI LEVEL *witches good for you feel Malcolm*
 Nothing jumps into the bath *too much starch now luck* take it *back*
 MUCH SAFER in cucumber juice thinking of CALCIUM *juice*

THURS

GO TO BED

appreciate it Michael calls early *asleep* call back SO MUCH
 SETBACK the black GO TO SLEEP 1:30 IT'S A SIMPLE AFTERNOON BRAVO
This is Michael NOW TRUTH GO HANNAH a huge one in front of the
 typewriter, where you were setting in the sun not OK GO OUTSIDE
Windowsill but it says NO as you get the jacket *design lingerie* Wondering
 whether to wear the scarf or not, Bernadette calls NO NICK
 SCARF that must be her opinion *BLE SS YOU* she always *anger* wears one
 SIT DOWN smoke a little *an hour goes by you're ok* not simple go to
 HELP *best issue you're kidding ja* wear scarf the museum of mod
 not for you art
 GOOD FOR YOU *Larry jokes* GOOD AFTERNOON *cket scarf* STOP THIS NONSENSE

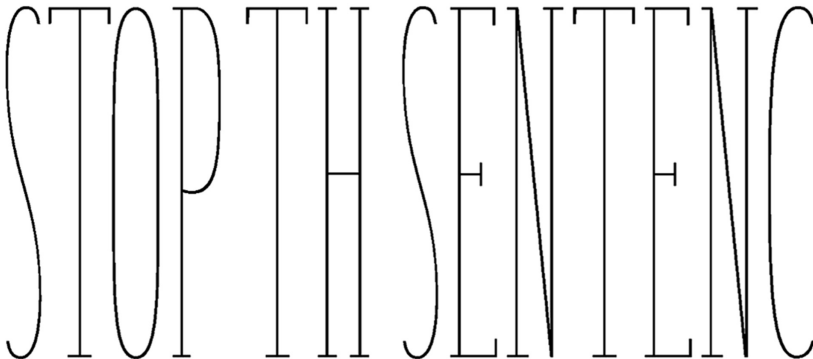


Figure 10 Page spread from *Clairvoyant Journal* 1974 by Hannah Weiner (n. pag.). Copyright 2014 by Bat, Charles Bernstein for Hannah Weiner in trust. Used with permission. *Clairvoyant Journal* 1974. Dijon, France: Bat Editions, 2014. All rights reserved.

date 1 4/18
 DONT PRETEND IT ISNT USUAL LEAVE THE CAR DOOR OPEN BE CAREFUL
negative
 Michael and wine in December Donnie leave to Vermont we get the
 same TUMMY ACHE NOTHING I AM THE Michael you dont believe in samadhi
 level quite a difference FULL OF CHILD BANK BALANCE
 NOTHING IS CURE SPEED in the truck BE CAREFUL NO SMOKING DONT BE OBSOLETE
feel guilty
 DRIVES SAMADHI
 positively kiss Leonard good for you twice NOT THE
 SECOND TIME fee ridiculous STORY ABOUT LUBA DONNIE DRIVES none of this
 is cold hand's words IN THE OVEN GO TO THE DOCTOR
Rhys system got cool
 ed bottle color
 cheap white SAMADHI LEVEN Asti Spumanti CHAMPAGNE
 REACH SAMDHI BEYOND BEST USE SAMADHI LEVER
in a minute
feel the negative below
 whats the diference Michaels VOICE SEE THE OFFICE Across the samadhi
 LOW INCOME DEVELOPMENT BE SURE OF IT popular BIG LITTLE SUNDAY
 DONNIE RETURNS TO VERMONT take aspirin Rhys understands
 3 days best Charlemagne GET DRUNK
single man See fantastic in tub RHYS concentrate on
 GOLDEN no luck hear FANTASTIC BE CAREFUL RETURNS TELL S see danger
 GOOD LUCK MILDRED dont feel quilty confident GO EASY who gets drunk
no good
 THROW UP NOT ON THE SAMDHI LEVEL WHAT YA RETURN full of January
 Just the wrong week best make it plain Micahel came on Thurs
 with Donnie spent the 3 days together UPSET dinner OH GOD CONNECTICUT
 not guilty not the ashram KID NOT THE WINDOW SIS TELEGRAPH PAPER GET ON
 past seven they're KISS NEGATIVE SWEETENED MORE POWERFUL goes to concert
 RHYS COMING HERE TODAY at an angle, a shout Donnie's be careful is
 alright eliminated HIS POWERFUL VOICE SLEEPS WITH ME JUST IDEA
 me hannah go to take ME BIG PIECE OF CHOCOLATE not on the highway
 be careful feel the positive RHYS GO ANGRIER at any level big toast
 EGO toast in Connimicut go there Jesus Christ all these words
victory
 are unerlinings UNDERLINE YOUR OWN THATS THE ANSWER no more words
 enough come in dangle Michael's school children toots big children
 feel UNION the Brooklyn Sunday School Union opposite Michaels old
 apt house where he lived last no underlings year when me BIG got
 UNION all the time underline YOU GET ME BIG POSITIVE DONNIE RETURNS
 YOU SLEEP TOGETHER MORE WIFE HAS CHILDREN ONE BABY JULY DUE FAMILY
 TOO LATE MANY JIMS thats the idea hat took one TAKE A HAT LEFT IN
 TRUCK DONT GOHOME pinkish dont describe negative hat here GO HOME
 Hallelujish Big Rhys meets Donnie returns at Michaels concert
 NICE JOB Michaels Job in Brooklyn ISRETH
Levine blow job
 SEE ME DONNIE RETURNS must
 be REAL see it in wine on chest Samadhi is back GO REST simple

Figure 10 (Cont.)

In a wide range of aesthetics, the visual rendering of speech-based poetics has a lengthy history, ranging from Black Arts poets such as Sanchez through the “choreopoems” of Ntozake Shange, to the interlingual writings of Lorraine Sutton and Gloria Anzaldúa.

Sanchez’s poems merge spoken word with visual statement. *Home Coming* (1969) and *Love Poems* (1973) were among the first to explore a black feminist consciousness – a stance difficult to take in the face of the Black Arts movement’s repressive views of women. Throughout Sanchez’s long career, she has remained aesthetically open, writing poems in both traditional and radically experimental forms. The visually disruptive pages of *We a BaddDDD People* (1970) indicate the primacy of pitch, tone, and duration, even as idiosyncratic uses of capitalization and diacritical marks make it clear that words are sculpted material: there is no exact way to “translate” this visual creation. Among other black women writers who began to publish in the 1970s, a frequent use of a spare, unadorned page – evident in the work of June Jordan and Lucille Clifton – marked resistance to academic formalism, but many of these techniques primarily emphasized transparency and voice.

By contrast, and like Sanchez’s work, Shange’s *for colored girls who’ve considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1977) combines page and performance. A series of twenty monologues, staged with music to form a “choreopoem,” *for colored girls* has a dual existence as theater piece and poetic sequence. The text draws attention to “the field of material being presented,” as Fraser puts it, as “Shange uses the slash mark to temporarily rein in her line, catch her breath” and move toward the next moment of “energetic truth-telling.”³³ Shange has continued to create black feminist work (especially novels and plays); in her often visual, cross-genre books, poems share pages with drawings, reproductions of visual art, and/or photographs.³⁴

Inspired by the Black Arts movement, the Nuyorican poets of the 1970s and 1980s – overwhelmingly male – are celebrated for spoken word and performance poetry; but as in much Black Arts poetry, the page was often a field of composition as well. Notably, Sutton’s under-studied *SAYcred LAYdy* (1975) uses visual and verbal play to explore the problematics of gender, sex, and nation in Puerto Ricans’ experience on the mainland United States. With its ironic allusion to “Lady Liberty” colliding with the “rape” (a “lay”) of Puerto Rican nationhood, *SAYcred LAYdy* employs visual devices – from capitalization to spacing to punning, homophonic wordplay – to stage a “cunt-frontation” with American cultural and political imperialism. Sutton’s code-switching between English and

Spanish occupies a distinctly visual field, in this way drawing attention to the performance of race, gender, linguistic identity, and class.

In another part of the United States, Anzaldúa engages Chicana/Latina identity in one of the most influential and innovative feminist works of the postwar years: the multi-genre (and poly-lingual) *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Combining cultural criticism, theory, memoir, and poetry, Anzaldúa uses the page – whether in prose or in visually-inflected poems – to “perform” border, mestiza, and queer identities through code-switching that is marked both linguistically and visually. A landmark figure in feminist, border, and queer studies, Anzaldúa is still under-acknowledged for the poetry that is the heart of *Borderlands*. Here the book itself – more than either the line or the page – functions as its own complex visual/verbal unit. Dense pages of analytic prose alternate with open, breath-based poetic pages; stanzas range across the page to suggest voicings; and, most significant, continual, quickly paced code-switching serves as both visual statement and visual/aural experience.

In parallel with theater and its contemporary offshoot, performance art, the performative poetic page clearly engages questions of embodiment. In the Beat tradition, the mantra-like chant forms of Anne Waldman’s powerful lyrics take visual/verbal form on a page designed to be experienced as corporeal phenomena. With differing aesthetics and even political orientations, feminist disability poetics, and deaf performance poetry, likewise seeks a means of performing the corporeal through a visual/verbal embodiment.

Photo-Text and “Cinpoetry”

Just as 1960s conceptual art imported language into its forms, so poetry, too, began in this period to forge its own hybrid genres. Even leaving aside collaborations among women poets and artists over the past century – taking into account only single-author works of poetry – the emergence of the photo-text is striking, especially since the advent of digital photography and printing in the 1990s. As in the revival of documentary poetics (which had its origin in WPA-era works by Muriel Rukeyser, among others), photos may serve as evidence, or they may function impressionistically, in a more symbolist mode. Lyric, disjunctive, and narrative examples are all plentiful. Whatever their formal orientations, these works address both reading and seeing, in an image-centric response to visual culture. With Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead* often cited as an influence, such documentary poets as Brenda Coultas, Bhanu Kapil, and Catherine Taylor

reproduce archival materials as evidence, creating a dialogue between poetic text and visual artifact. Pointing to the fictionalized nature of evidence itself, Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004) features photo-collaged images of TV news broadcasts – simulacra of simulacra – to critique a world gone virtual. By contrast, for such poets as Kristin Prevallet and C.D. Wright, photos and other visual representations function elegiacally, at times mimicking the failure of language in the face of trauma and silencing.³⁵

An important early example of such mixed media work, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE* (1982) has proven hugely influential, provoking inquiries into language, culture, and gender; her work included performance art, installation, artist's books, and film. Her only full-length book, *DICTEE* is a poly-lingual collage that includes prose and poetry; archival artifacts such as charts, diagrams, letters, and maps; and uncaptioned photos and drawings. Handwritten passages and calligraphic ideograms large enough to fill a page blur the lines between the discursive and the imagistic, contrasting Eastern and Western epistemologies. Throughout, Cha evokes a traumatic history of cultural, geographical, and linguistic dislocations, embodying post-colonial dispersal in a text composed of what Drucker calls "material words." Cha's resistance to orality in *DICTEE* shows the ways in which visual poetics can become a means of resistance, since – as Mackey and Nielsen show – the reception of works by writers of color is too often defined only in terms of performance and oral tradition.

In a very different orientation toward mixed media writing in general, and photography in particular, Leslie Scalapino used serial form to explore consciousness itself, combining word and image to create an immersion in the experiential moment of the text. From the 1970s onward, Scalapino developed a distinctively visual page, consisting of discrete phrases in repetition and variation, both connected and disrupted by em- or en-dashes in quick succession. Influenced by an early exposure to Zen Buddhism, as well as by the spiritual and writing practices of the Beat poets – Philip Whalen in particular – Scalapino was concerned above all with what she called *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold* (1989), delineating the minute motions of consciousness that cumulatively constitute the social fabric.

Of Scalapino's more than twenty books, most relevant to her visual poetics are the serial works *Crowd and not evening or light* (1992) and *The Tango* (2001). Here Scalapino engages with material and spiritual experience, challenging the Cartesian split on which Western thought depends. In *Crowd and not evening or light*, black-and-white photos of beach scenes with bathers in small groups are juxtaposed with handwritten phrases alluding to economic inequity or injustice ("man who's suffering / pushed out"; "floating on those who

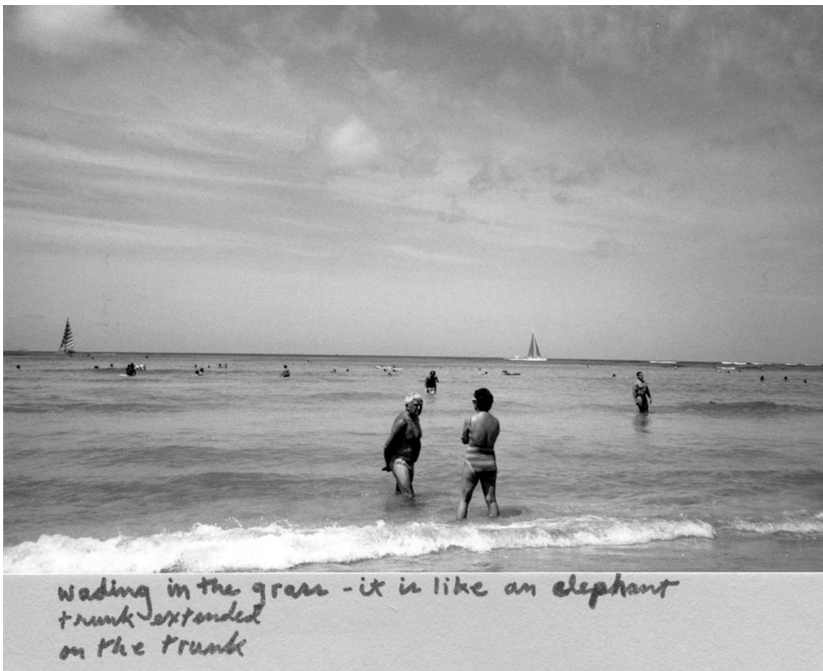


Figure 11 Page from *Crowd and not evening or light* by Leslie Scalapino. Oakland, CA: O Books, 1992, 49. Copyright 1992 by Leslie Scalapino. Used with permission of the Estate of Leslie Scalapino. All rights reserved.

have – nothing”). The juxtaposition creates tension between the rhetoric of the image and that of the elliptical text, yet the spontaneous feel of the snapshots and handwritten fragments creates an immersive, meditative environment (see Figure 11). Similarly, *The Tango* explores embodied spiritual practices, rendered analogous to dance (Piazzola’s “relentless” tango, as Scalapino puts it). Part poem and part artist’s book, the work combines Scalapino’s photographs with serial poems and with reproductions of Marina Adams’s works on paper and collages. Scalapino’s photos are “of monks at the Sera Monastery in Tibet engaging in formal debate”;³⁶ the text alludes to language and childhood memories, and to violence, poverty, imperialism, and war. In such enigmatic visual works, Scalapino sought new forms of awareness to challenge the narrow avenues of thought that lead to oppressive social structures.

Photo-texts and mixed-media books open poetic pages to diverse visualities, but the moving image has a lengthy history with poetry as well. Women poets forging intersections between poetry and film – in theory

and practice – date from H.D.’s film collaborations with Bryher and Kenneth MacPherson, as well as her theoretical writings in *Close Up*. More recently, women poets have created experimental film and video in collaboration or as single-authored works, including Guest, Notley, and Cole.³⁷ Christophe Wall-Romana defines “cinemoetry” as a practice of “envisioning a specific component or aspect of poetry as if it were a specific component of cinema.”³⁸ In the United States, one exponent of such hybrids is Abigail Child, whose published film soundtracks are lined in the manner of free verse, and whose films develop the associative, text-based logic of poetic fragmentation; hers is a feminist practice of disjunctive visuality.³⁹

Such works respond to the theoretical question first raised by Laura Mulvey of how – or whether – a “female gaze” can exist. Many also seek to alter that question to address the queering of such a gaze, especially in work that interrogates not only formal or generic conventions but also gender and racial identities. For poets there remain myriad explorations of the ways in which language might embody such a gaze. From the creation of digital poetics at the end of the twentieth century to the New Conceptualisms in its first decades,⁴⁰ visual poetics is being continually reinvented by women artists who explore both form and the limits of identity.

Notes

1. DuPlessis, from the 1990 edition of *The Pink Guitar*, 154.
2. Drucker, *Figuring the Word*, 59.
3. Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations*, 14.
4. See Pound’s “The Hard and Soft in French Poetry.”
5. DuPlessis, *Blue Studios*, 152.
6. *Ibid.*, 93.
7. Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable*, 176; emphasis in the original.
8. *Ibid.*, 187–88.
9. *Ibid.*, 188.
10. DuPlessis, *Blue Studios*, 212.
11. DuPlessis’s practice has increasingly moved toward visuality and collage. See her *The Collage Poems of Drafts and Graphic Novella*.
12. Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable*, 203–205.
13. “Etruscan Pages” is found in Fraser, *when new time folds up* (1993).
14. *Ibid.*, 55.
15. *Trilogy*, 103, qtd. in Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable*, 55.
16. *Ibid.*, 57.
17. See the separate works collected in *Movable Type*, especially *hi dde violeth I dde violet* (2003) and *Witness* (2007), *Second Language* (2009), and *ii ss* (2011). *WING* can be found in *Il Cuore: The Heart*.

18. The taxonomy is Möckel-Rieke's (291), described by Reed, "'Eden or Ebb of the Sea,'" para 9.
19. Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable*, 196.
20. Frost and Hogue, *Innovative Women Poets*, 159.
21. Solt, *Concrete Poetry*, 7–8.
22. *Ibid.*, 48, 8.
23. This quotation comes from Swenson's note to the poem. The complete note is: "A telephoto of the earth, taken from above the moon by Lunar Orbiter 5 (printed in the *New York Times* August 14, 1967) appeared to show the shadow-image of 'a woman in a square Kimono' between the shapes of the continents. The title is the headline over the photo" (43).
24. Rothenberg and Joris, *Poems for the New Millennium*, 53.
25. Drucker, "Visual Pleasure," 9, quoted in DuPlessis, *Blue Studios*, 185.
26. *Ibid.*
27. DuPlessis, *Blue Studios*, 177.
28. Silliman, *In the American Tree*, xv.
29. The release of *Clairvoyant Journal 1974* (2014), with an afterword by Patrick Durgin, offers a version of the text that is far more accurate to Weiner's typescript than the original book publication, by Angel Hair Books, in 1978.
30. Quoted in Nielsen, *Black Chant*, 22.
31. *Ibid.*, 9, 26–27, 163–64.
32. See Nielsen on Cortez and on Carolyn Rodgers, *Black Chant*, 16off.
33. Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable*, 157.
34. Specifically, *Ridin' the Moon in Texas* mixes poetry, prose, and photographs (including photos of paintings).
35. Canadian-born poets Anne Carson, Lisa Robertson, and M. NourbeSe Philip are noteworthy (and influential) for their works featuring photo-text, typographic experiment, and/or book arts.
36. Scalapino, *Zither & Autobiography*, 43.
37. New York School poets Guest, Notley, and Waldman collaborated on films (the latter two notably with Rudolph Burckhardt). See also Norma Cole's CD *Rom Scout* (Krupskaya, 2005) for one example of recent multi-media poetics.
38. Wall-Romana, *Cinepoetry*, 3.
39. See Child's *This Is Called Moving* and *Mob*. Maya Deren's "Meshes of the Afternoon" (1943) remains a reference point for feminist film and poetics, including Child's.
40. While twenty-first-century examples are beyond the scope of this essay, it is important to note that the advent of digital poetics in the early 2000s provided new aesthetic and technological directions, opening the field as well toward the New Conceptualisms. See Bergvall et al., *I'll Drown My Book*, for a crucial introduction to women's conceptual writing in the twenty-first century, including many examples of visual poetics.