ROLAND
THE MAGAZINE OF THE ICA’S VISUAL ART PROGRAMME
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FEATURING A GUIDE TO
POOR. OLD. TIRED. HORSE.

GALLERY GUIDE 4
EVENTS 18
PUBLICATIONS 21
EDITIONS 22
FUTURE PROJECTS 22
BACKGROUND MATERIAL 26

Exhibiting artists: Vito Acconci, Carl Andre, Anna Barham, Matthew Brannon, Henri Chopin, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Alasdair Gray, Philip Guston, David Hockney, Karl Holmqvist, Dom Sylvester Houéard, Janice Kerbel, Christopher Knowles, Ferdinand Kriwet, Liliane Lijn, Robert Smithson, Frances Stark and Sue Tompkins; curated by Mark Sladen

The ICA is proud to present the second issue of ROLAND, which has been produced to accompany our summer exhibition, entitled *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse*. The first half of the magazine contains a guide to the exhibition and its associated events, while the second half contains a wider range of texts and images, creating a more expansive context for the current project.
Poor. Old. Tired. Horse. is an exhibition of art that verges on poetry. The exhibition starts with work from the 1960s, and with a group of artists who are associated with the Concrete Poetry movement that flourished during that decade. The movement can be taken as a symbol of the cross-pollination between art and literature that was a feature of the 1960s, but the exhibition goes on to look at other artistic practices from this era that explored the intersection of the graphic and the poetic, and concludes with a group of younger artists who place such concerns at the heart of their work.

As a genre, concrete poetry is understood as poetry in which the visual manifestation of words is as important in conveying the intended effect as the more conventional elements in the poem. The genre has ancient roots, and notable examples were created in the early twentieth century by the French writer Guillaume Apollinaire, and by the Dadaists. However, as a movement Concrete Poetry had its roots in the 1950s, in separate initiatives by Swiss and Brazilian writers, and it went on to become an international phenomenon in the 1960s, gaining adherents in many countries and extending out of the literary sphere and into the art world.

The first room in this exhibition concentrates on the work of the Scottish artist and writer Ian Hamilton Finlay, who was a key figure in the Concrete Poetry movement in Britain. Moreover, the exhibition takes its title from a periodical that Finlay ran from 1962 to 1968, and which featured his own graphic and literary experiments alongside those of other artists and poets. Finlay, in one of his aphoristic assertions, maintained that “stupidity reduces language to words.” The current exhibition challenges this reduction and, like Finlay and his collaborators, seeks to demonstrate the rich possibilities of language when manifested not only as poetry but as image.

Mark Sladen
ICA Director of Exhibitions

Ian Hamilton Finlay’s associations with the Concrete Poetry movement begin in the early 1960s, around the time that he founded Poor. Old. Tired. Horse. Finlay would go on to become the most important concrete poet in Britain, with work that paid homage to the Japanese haiku, and to the Carolingian scholar-poets, as well as to the Modernist avant-garde. He would also become one of the key promoters of the Concrete Poetry movement in this country, through his publishing and correspondence.

The exhibition features a display of printed ephemera by Finlay—including copies of Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.—and two of his concrete poems realised as wall paintings. Finlay would come to feel confined by the acceptance of the Concrete Poetry movement by a wider public, and would disassociate himself from it in the later 1960s. His own practice was constantly developing, however, and he continued to experiment with the idea of giving form to syntax. In the early 1960s, Finlay made a number of ‘poem objects’, which frequently took the form of stone pieces, and in 1966 he began to work directly in the landscape at his home in Stonypath, in the hills outside Edinburgh.

Finlay’s most famous creation is his garden, Little Sparta, a fusion of poetic and sculptural elements with the natural landscape, and which employs the classical, revolutionary and martial imagery that would be a feature of his later work.

Ian Hamilton Finlay was born in the Bahamas in 1925, but spent most of his life in Scotland. He published his first volume of short stories in the early 1950s, and in 1961 he founded the Wild Hawthorn Press, which printed his prolific output of poems, cards and booklets as well as Poor. Old. Tired. Horse. His career was long and varied, and included a solo exhibition at the ICA in 1992. Finlay died in 2006.

1. In his later career, Finlay often chose to realise texts as wall paintings, recreating his older poems or creating new pieces. The wall paintings were often made in partnership with Les Edge, who has executed the installations at the ICA. One of the works at the ICA is Sea Poppy I, which is based on a concrete poem from 1968 that uses the codes of shipping boats.
ROOM TWO

The second room in the exhibition contains work by a number of artists who, like Finlay, were associated with the Concrete Poetry movement, demonstrating some of the range of positions that it embraced. This room also features other artists who emerged in the 1960s and 70s and who—though sometimes known for very different affiliations—created work that offers interesting parallels to that of the concrete poets. We now associate the deployment of text in 1960s art with the use of written instructions or records within Conceptual practice, or of advertising language within Pop, but these artists, just like the concrete poets, sought to explore the poetic or expressive possibilities of language.

DOM SYLVESTER HOUÉDARD

Dom Sylvester Houédard—or ‘dsh’ as he called himself—is, with Ian Hamilton Finlay, one of the two principle founders of the Concrete Poetry movement in Britain. Houédard began experimenting with what he called ‘typestracts’ in the 1940s, and developed a highly distinctive style of typewritten visual poetry, using coloured typewriter ribbons and carbon papers. When Concrete Poetry emerged as an international movement in the early 1960s, Houédard became—through his legendary letter-writing—one of its most active participants, advocates and theorists.

The work of Houédard is notable for its extraordinary formal discipline, for its exploration of the multiple combinations of letterforms and words, and for its examination of the spatial possibilities of the page. He saw Concrete Poetry as an extension of an ancient tradition of shaped verse, and his works are allied to notions of mystical contemplation. His interest in mysticism also encouraged him to explore Buddhism and Hinduism, and some of his works echo the mystic-psychedelic imagery of the hippy era.

Dom Sylvester Houédard was born in 1924 on Guernsey, and studied at Jesus College, Oxford, and at St Anselmo, Rome. In 1949, after serving in British Army intelligence he became a monk at Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire, and was ordained as a priest in 1959. Houédard made many contributions to religious life, becoming a champion of the ecumenical movement in the 1960s, and working as a theologian and as a translator of the Bible and other religious texts. Houédard died in 1992.

HENRI CHOPIN

Henri Chopin is a key figure within experimental art and literature in the post-war years, as an artist and writer, but also as a highly active curator, editor, designer and publisher. In 1958, Chopin founded the review Cinquième Saison, which became OU in 1964 and ran until 1974. Over the course of its life, this journal brought together figures associated with Dada, Surrealism, Lettrisme, Fluxus and Beat Poetry, as well as innovators of Concrete Poetry—including Ian Hamilton Finlay.

Chopin was an advocate of interdisciplinary production and multi-sensory art, echoing Raoul Hausmann’s view that “We are able to speak and write, because we hear with our eyes and we see with our ears.” OU was notable for its inclusion of recordings of sound poetry—the area in which Chopin himself is probably most famous as an artist. This exhibition includes a number of Chopin’s typewriter poems’ from the 1960s and 70s, which reflect another key aspect of the artist’s work: a fascination with the relationship between order and disorder, a preoccupation deeply rooted in his experience of war.


FERDINAND KRIWET

Ferdinand Kriwet is a multimedia artist who has engaged with text, language and concrete poetry since the 1960s. Kriwet’s Text Signs, 1968, a set of which are shown in the ICA’s Lower Gallery, are made from stamped aluminium. The format implies a commercial function, and the pieces resonate with advertising culture. However, Kriwet’s circular use of text also has strong associations with the mandala, an Indian form imbued with spiritual significance in Buddhism and Hinduism. Moreover, it has the function of disrupting the linear process of writing, as words and names join together or are juxtaposed to suggest a clashing and fusing of ideas.

Kriwet’s signs, like Finlay’s landscape pieces and wall paintings, were an attempt to move concrete poetry quite literally into the world. The use of the sign form to contest subjects such as militarism and sexuality, and to co-opt the public inscription of power, is also an interesting precedent for the work of Jenny Holzer and other artists in the 1980s. The circular form is further explored in Kriwet’s Text Días and Text Sails, 1970, giant signs printed on PVC, a group of which are displayed in the ICA’s Concourse.

Ferdinand Kriwet was born in Düsseldorf in 1942, and lives in Dresden. As well as his text works, the artist has also produced ‘sound-picture-collages’ and experiments in radio, television and publishing. Kriwet was included in the seminal concrete poetry exhibition at the ICA, Between Poetry and Painting, curated by Jasja Reichardt in 1965; more recently, he had a solo show at The Modern Institute, Glasgow, in 2008.

Dom Sylvester Houédard

FOR THE 5 VOWELS (‘) 1976

1. Houédard, like Finlay, was galvanised by a letter celebrating the movement written by the Portuguese poet de Melo e Castro to the TLS in 1962. The two British poets would share a long correspondence.

LILIANE LIJN

In a text from 1968, Liliane Lijn wrote, "WORDS = VIBRATIONS = ENERGY". Over the past forty years, Lijn has explored this idea through numerous kinetic artworks. In the early 1960s, she began experimenting with painting horizontal lines on revolving cylinders. Having decided to put words on the cylinders, she collaborated with the poet and filmmaker Nazli Nour, who had asked Lijn if she could "make her poems move". Lijn extracted words and phrases from Nour’s poems and used Letraset to apply them to her cylinders.

Around this same time, Lijn also began to experiment with truncated cone shapes inscribed with words in rhythmic circles and ellipses that visually recalled the sound of the text. The cones were placed on revolving record turntables. Lijn first showed her Poem Machines in La Librairie Anglaise in Paris, a popular spot for Beat artists and writers. In 1968, she was commissioned by the ICA to make a work for the exhibition Guillaume Apollinaire 1880–1918: A Celebration. The result, exhibited again here, is Poemkon=D=Open=Apollinaire. The cone has remained an important formal consideration for Lijn throughout her career, and she continues to investigate the notion of words, sub-atomic particles and reality in flux.

Liliane Lijn was born in New York in 1939. After studying Archaeology at the Sorbonne and Art History at the Ecole du Louvre in Paris, she has spent periods of time in Greece before eventually settling in the UK. In 2005, Lijn became the first artist in residence at the Space Sciences Laboratory, University of California, Berkeley, where she experimented with Aerogel, a material developed by NASA.

VITO ACCONCI

Vito Acconci began his artistic career as a writer and a poet, concerned less with the meaning of words than with the way in which they could be arranged across a page. Seeking to demolish the functionality of the word, in the late 1960s he made a series of works using pre-existing text. Sourced from a variety of material, Acconci’s ‘found poetry’ was relocated to the left or right margin of the page, thus disconnecting the words from a context that could establish meaning. Taken from Four Book, 1968, the pages on display at the ICA constitute one graphic collage poem, each page juxtaposing a photocopied image of a page of the Manhattan phone book with a column of phrases or words.

Acconci’s objectification of language echoed the anti-referential principles of Minimalism, which began to dominate the New York art scene in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As Acconci cut, spliced, moved and displaced words, he performed many of the principle actions of the new sculpture. These actions became increasingly performative, as Acconci asked himself: "If I’m so interested in this question of space and movement over a page, why am I confining this movement to an 8 x 11 inch piece of paper?" From here, he began to operate in a variety of media, exploring the real space of human interactions, and creating some of the foundational works of performance art.

Vito Acconci was born in the Bronx, New York, in 1940. He studied literature at Holy Cross College, Worcester, Massachusetts, and received an MFA in creative writing from the Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa in 1964. In the early 1970s his performances were supplemented by film and video; thereafter his practice became centred on installation; and at the end of the 1980s he moved into design and architecture and formed Acconci Studio.

CARL ANDRE

Carl Andre is today best known as one of the founders of Minimalism, but he has also engaged in a parallel practice as a poet. Andre’s poems are characterised by the way in which they isolate words from syntax, and from larger sets of words (often derived from a particular historical source). These isolated units are subjected to repetition, gridding and other arrangements, emphasising their materiality; Andre is especially drawn to nouns and proper names, words that emphasise their properties as ‘things’. There is a clear relationship between Andre’s poetry and his sculpture of the mid-to-late 1960s, the period in which he was developing his material language of stacked, gridded and nodular structures.

Shown here are five pages from a seventeen-page poem by Andre entitled Shooting a Script, a project he began in the mid-1970s. In Andre’s words, "The main event of Shooting a Script is a mutiny fatal gunshot that took place in Waco, Texas on April Fool’s Day, 1898. From a text presenting 17 eyewitness accounts of the bloody encounter, I have created a clastic reweaving of voices. The result is a Cubist-fugue rendition of the homicidal episode that reduces the orderly recollections of the witness to the panic and chaos of the event itself."

Carl Andre was born in 1935 in Quincy, MA. He studied art at Phillips Academy, Andover, MA, and moved to New York in 1956. Andre first showed his sculpture publicly in 1965, and in 1966 his work was included in the seminal show of Minimalist art at the Jewish Museum in New York, entitled Primary Structures. Andre’s poems became widely exhibited only later, and were the subject of an exhibition at Lisson Gallery, London, and the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, in 1977.

ROOM THREE

The exhibition’s exploration of artistic practices from the 1960s and 70s, and the ways in which they were allied with poetry, is concluded in this room. However, unlike those in the Lower Gallery, these bodies of work use images in addition to words—or are purely illustrational, in the case of David Hockney’s etchings. The mid-century avant-garde often denigrated the pictorial or illustrative possibilities of art, but the four artists in this room all showed themselves capable of flying in the face of such opinion.

2. Reproduced on p. 52–53 of this publication.

ROBERT SMITHSON

Robert Smithson had a special interest in language, and at the start of his career he created a group of drawings that explore its pictorial possibilities, including the two works exhibited here, Untitled (Moth) and Untitled (Encycle), from 1962. These drawings combine nude and mythological figures with rows of apparently random words, numbers and phrases. They correspond to Smithson’s recollection of “phantasimagorical drawings of cosmological worlds somewhere between Blake and…oh, a kind of Boschian imagery”.

Smithson’s development of words as compositional elements on the page reflects his interest in William Blake and the idea of the painter-poet, but also offers a parallel with the way in which language is treated in concrete poetry. Smithson’s idea of the radical properties of words—once freed from the usual systems by which they are contained, and including the idea of words as architectonic material or as ritualistic incantation—would be developed in a text entitled ‘Language to be LOOKED at and/or THINGS to be READ’, from 1967.

Robert Smithson was born in Passaic, New Jersey, in 1938. He had wide-ranging interests that took in science, natural history, anthropology and science fiction, and his complex ideas were manifested in a variety of ways. He is best known as a pioneer of the Earthworks movement, and for his association with Minimalism, but as well as being an environmental artist and sculptor he was also a filmmaker and writer. Smithson died in a plane crash in 1973, at the age of thirty-five.

CHRISTOPHER KNOWLES

Christopher Knowles is best known for his ‘typings’ of the 1970s and 80s, text-based pieces that were developed as a private pastime. The exceptional ability in mathematical organisation revealed in these works is a characteristic by-product of autism, with which Knowles was diagnosed as a child. His work also reveals affinities with the structure of serial art and music, and has a strong relationship to performance (the artist has also made live and recorded performances of his texts).

Knowles’ typings employ lists of words and phrases, including those derived from pop charts as well as other words and phrases from the artist’s life. Additional features include geometrical patterns, carefully built up using the artist’s initial, ‘C’. The works were created on an electric typewriter, using red, black and green inks, and the pieces exhibited here were made in 1980 on scrolls of rice paper.

Christopher Knowles was born 1959 in New York, where he still lives. His wider public exposure dates from his meeting, in 1973 at the age of fourteen, with the theatre director Robert Wilson. The latter had heard an audio recording by Knowles, and asked him to collaborate and perform with his company, a partnership that continues today. Knowles first exhibited in 1974, and had two solo exhibitions at Holly Solomon Gallery in 1978 and 1979.

1. Reproduced on p. 52–53 of this publication.
Philip Guston was a leading figure within Abstract Expressionism. However, between 1967 and 1968 he abandoned abstraction in favour of a new style of painting, which featured everyday objects realised in a cartoon-like fashion. The critical reception to his work was highly negative. A new image—words and images feeding off each other in unpredictable ways. Naturally, there is no ‘illustration’ of text, yet I am fascinated by how text and image bounce into and off each other.

From the late 1940s through to the mid-1960s, Philip Guston was a leading figure within Abstract Expressionism. However, between 1967 and 1968 he abandoned abstraction in favour of a new style of painting, which featured everyday objects realised in a cartoon-like fashion. The critical reception to his work was highly negative. A new image—words and images feeding off each other in unpredictable ways. Naturally, there is no ‘illustration’ of text, yet I am fascinated by how text and image bounce into and off each other. At the ICA, Guston is represented by a group of Poem-Pictures made in collaboration with Clark Coolidge.

Philip Guston was born in 1913, in Montreal, but moved with his family to Los Angeles in 1919. As a painter in New York, he rose to prominence alongside Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko. He has been the subject of solo exhibitions at institutions around the world. Guston died in Woodstock in 1980.

Alasdair Gray’s best-known productions as a visual artist are his graphic illustrations for his own books, and he is interested in a tradition of writers who have also illustrated their own work, including William Blake and Rudyard Kipling. In this exhibition, Gray is represented by two groups of prints: one is from a set of illuminated versions of his own poems, made between 1967 and 1971; the other is based on the illustrations for his celebrated novel Lanark, published in 1981.

Both groups of prints were created from originals made with scraperboard and ink, and feature the combination of precise line and phantasmagorical subject matter that are characteristic of Gray’s illustrations (as well as of his murals). They also contain motifs that have recurred within the artist’s work; as he has observed, “on inventing a figure of the sort I call ‘a moral emblem’ I keep using it again and again”. The poems that Gray has illustrated are from a cycle entitled In a Cold Room, 1952–57, written in response to the death of the artist’s mother. The illustrations for Lanark are in fact a set of frontispieces produced for the different parts of the novel, a postmodern portrait of the author and his native city, which Gray began to write in the 1950s.

Alasdair Gray was born in 1932 in Glasgow, where he still lives. He obtained a Diploma in Design and Mural Painting from Glasgow School of Art in 1957, and since that time has been producing mural commissions as well as portraits and illustrations. Gray established a parallel career as a writer, producing plays for radio and television in the 1960s and 70s, and has published many novels and other works since the international success of Lanark.


The exhibition concludes with the work of six younger artists. Several are represented by text-based pieces, others use combinations of text and image, and in some instances their gallery-based works are allied to a wider poetic or performative practice. In recent years, the art world has been dominated by Conceptualism. However, artists are now turning beyond the constraints of linguistic and graphic systems, reflecting the true complexity of communication and creating meaning that cannot be pinned down.

Much of Anna Barham’s work centres on poetic texts, created using a self-prescribed set of rules, and in particular, the rules of the anagram. Inspired by the story of the archaeological discovery of Leptis Magna, an ancient Roman city east of Tripoli, in 2007 Barham created a series of drawings charting anagrams of the city’s name. In 1816, some fragments of the ruins of Leptis Magna were given to King George IV, and used to build an artificial ruin at Windsor Great Park. Just as the excavated stones formed the foundations of an imaginary ruin, so in Barham’s work the letters in the city’s name become the building blocks of new poetry and prose.

In recent works, Barham has added B, E, E and D to her existing pool of letters, thereby generating further anagrams. At the ICA, the artist is exhibiting the video *Magenta, Emerald, Lapis*, 2009, in which she uses a tangram (a square cut into seven pieces that can be re-formed in various ways) to create letterforms, eventually building up words into a text. The tangram pieces are shuffled and reshuffled at the moment they become recognisable as letters, illustrating how symbols are transformed by the reordering of their parts. Barham’s interest in anagrams stems from the idea of revealing an unconscious meaning of a word, and exploring its associative potential.

Anna Barham was born in the UK in 1974. She graduated from the Slade School of Fine Art, London, in 2001. She works in a variety of media, including sculpture, performance, video and drawing. Barham has exhibited internationally and within the UK, and is currently showing in the exhibition *Stutter*, in Tate Modern’s Level 2 Gallery until 16 August 2009.

Janice Kerbel works with a range of materials, including drawing, text, audio and print, to explore the indefinite space between reality and fiction, and between abstraction and representation. Her work frequently involves extensive research, and takes the forms of plans, proposals, scripts or announcements for imaginative scenarios that cannot or will not actually happen. In conveying these imagined events, Kerbel draws upon the potentiality of language and text.

In this exhibition, Kerbel is showing two works from the *Remarkable* series. Originally commissioned for Frieze Projects (for the 2007 Frieze Art Fair), the posters use precisely fanciful language to describe the appearance of a number of elusive and otherworldly characters. Borrowing from the hyperbolic language of fairground announcements, figures introduced in the series include: The Human Firefly, Faintinggirl, One-Eyed Soothsayer and World’s Shyest Person, The Regurgitating Lady and Temperamental Barometric Contortionist. The large-format silk-screen posters were created digitally using typefaces inspired by the nineteenth-century letterpress. Each letter was set manually into the page in a laborious process that creates subtle variations in the uniformity of each work.

Janice Kerbel was born in Toronto in 1969, and studied at Emily Carr College of Art and Design, Vancouver and Goldsmith’s College, London. She now lives and works in London. The artist has had a number of solo exhibitions at institutions across the UK, including Norwich Gallery of Art, 2003, and Arnolfini, Bristol, 2000. Kerbel will be showing at greengrassi, London, in the autumn.

While Sue Tompkins’ work owes much to various literary and art-historical movements, such as Concrete Poetry, the Beat poets and typewriter art, she frequently emerges as the rebellious offspring rather than as a clear descendent of these genres. Her performances usually involve three items: a stool, a microphone and a ring-binder full of hundreds of sheets of paper. She reads from these at a hyperactive pace, developing her rhythm. In a previous incarnation, she was a singer in the now defunct post-punk band, Life Without Buildings.

Tompkins’s typewritten works are not residues of her performances, but a parallel practice, often using broadsheets that have been folded to fit into a typewriter, and that still bear the creases of this process. She presents segments of language, often de-contextualised snatches of everyday conversations. Words are given emphasis through repetition, juxtaposition, misspellings and uneven spacing.

Sue Tompkins was born in Glasgow in 1971, graduated from the Glasgow School of Art in 1994, and is still based in the city. She has had solo exhibitions in numerous venues, including the Showroom, London, in 2007. Tompkins has also performed at institutions and events around the world, notably the Scottish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2005, and Tate Britain in 2006.
KARL HOLMQVIST

Karl Holmqvist is an artist and poet whose output has included performance, recorded sound, printed matter, video, collage and installation. His work is characterised by its social and political activism, albeit manifested in a highly personal and eccentric characterised by its social and political activism, albeit manifested in a highly personal and eccentric form. Filtered through a collage of cultural references, it takes in a lineage of figures associated with or appropriated by alternative culture, from Jesus and William Blake to William Burroughs and Patti Smith.

Holmqvist’s readings are distinguished by their hypnotic, anti-spectacular quality, and his visual work is often deliberately functional, employing the tools and aesthetics of self-publishing, and extending the notion of reading and performance into the gallery space. The artist’s installation at the ICA includes a copy of his photocopied book, ONELOVEWORLD, published in 2008, as well as a wall of posters that have been enlarged from it. ONELOVEWORLD demonstrates Holmqvist’s particular interest in repetition and patterning, and features concrete and other poems, interspersed with appropriated images that include Op Art paintings and photographs of underground pin-up Arthur Rimbaud.


MATTHEW BRANNON

Matthew Brannon explores the potential of words to communicate, illustrate, misrepresent and confound. His work sometimes recalls the aesthetic language of advertising and posters, particularly from 1950s America. With hindsight, the 1950s has emerged as a decade in which the US presented a thin veneer of strength and unity that barely concealed a bored and disillusioned population, a situation that would result in profound social changes in the following decade. In many ways, this duplicity resonates in Brannon’s work, which is frequently comprised of images that would not look out of place in a cookbook, juxtaposed with unsettling or inappropriate snippets of text.

Brannon’s work suggests a complex relationship between image and text. Sometimes, the text is printed so small that it can be difficult to read. At other times, it is nonsensical, or at least a non sequitur, and on further occasions it presents a literal, deadpan explanation of the image. Brannon has explored text in a number of forms, from micro-stories to concrete poetry. In the creation of his work, he uses letterpress, an outdated printing technique. In the exhibition, Brannon shows a number of works featuring text spewing from a typewriter, an important device in the artistic positioning of words in society and another reference to a bygone era.

Matthew Brannon was born in St Maries, Idaho, in 1971. He received an MFA from Columbia University, and lives and works in New York. His solo exhibitions include a recent show at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Altairia, New York, 2007, and he will have a solo exhibition at The Approach, London, in the autumn.

FRANCES STARK

Frances Stark is exhibiting four works that adapt the writings of other authors. Having an Experience, 1995, traces a reader’s underlinings in a copy of Art as Experience, 1934, a book on aesthetics by the American philosopher John Dewey. The other three works employ quotations from novels: Robert Musil’s The Man Without Qualities, 1930–42 (The Quantity of the Effect and the Effect of Quantity, 1997); Witold Gombrowicz’s Feliksducz, 1937 (I must explain, specify, rationalise, classify, etc., 2008); and Samuel Beckett’s Watt, 1944 (Untitled (Drop Out), 2003).

Stark often draws on book culture within her work, and she seems especially interested in the self-reflexivity that is a feature of modernist writing. Such self-reflexivity is echoed in the visual strategies that her work employs, which include repetition, fragmentation and collage (and her graphic treatment of text can create parallels with concrete poetry). However, Stark’s quotations from literary culture are more playful than didactic. They are also part of a wider interrogation of the creative act, and of authorial uncertainty, that has a pronounced autobiographical aspect for the artist, who often, as in I must explain, specify, rationalise, classify, etc., appears in her own work.

Frances Stark was born in 1967 in Newport Beach, California, and lives and works in Los Angeles. She studied at Art Centre, Pasadena, and at San Francisco State University, graduating in 1991. Recent exhibitions include A Torment of Follies, at Secession, Vienna, and Greengrassi, London, in 2008; and in autumn 2009 the artist will have an exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary.

Texts by Charlotte Bonham-Carter and Mark Sladen
EVENTS

Some exhibition-related events require booking. Please call the ICA Box Office on 020 7930 3647 for more information. Please visit www.ica.org.uk/poth for details.

STEVEN BANN
TUESDAY 23 JUNE 7PM
Nash Room / free / booking required

Art critic, curator and art historian Stephen Bann is recognised as the pre-eminent commentator on Ian Hamilton Finlay’s work. Bann delivers a lecture on Finlay’s vast and varied artistic output.

LILIANE LIJN:
THE POWER GAME
TUESDAY 28 JULY 7PM
ICA / free

Set in an imaginary casino, The Power Game is principally concerned with the power of words. It is both a game and a live performance, which investigates the politics of identity and power. The Power Game is the brainchild of Liliane Lijn, one of the exhibitors in Poor, Old, Tired, Horse, and was originally staged by her at The Royal College of Art in 1974. This event is unconfirmed at the time of going to print. Please check the ICA website or call the Box Office for more information.

MARK SLADEN
THURSDAY 25 JUNE 7PM
Meet in the Lower Gallery / free

Director of Exhibitions at the ICA, Mark Sladen delivers a talk on the exhibition.

WHAT WAS / IS CONCRETE POETRY?
WEDNESDAY 1 JULY 7PM
Nash Room / free / booking required

A panel discussion looking at the original Concrete Poetry movement of the 50s and 60s, and examining its legacy. With Arnaud Desjardin, artist and publisher of the The Everyday Press; Chris McCabe, poet and joint librarian at the Poetry Library; and other participants to be announced (please check the website for details). Chaired by Mark Sladen, Director of Exhibitions, ICA.

ANNA BARHAM AT
THE PORT ELIOT LITERARY FESTIVAL
FRIDAY 24—SUNDAY 26 JULY

Anna Barham, one of the exhibitors in Poor, Old, Tired, Horse, will be staging a new performance of shapes and letters into a live arena, presenting language as a form of choreography. For details visit www.porteliotfestival.com

XPRMTNL PTRY
THURSDAY 30 JULY 7PM
ICA Theatre / £4 (£3 concessions, free to ICA members)

The Concrete Poetry movement helped to open up the field of poetry, and visual poetry is now practised by many poets at some stage of their career. But is there still a dedicated group of experimentalists in visual poetry, and how does the shape on the page translate into live performance and sound? Poet Chris McCabe organises an evening of avant-garde and experimental poets, including Peter Finch and Jeremy Reed as part of The Ginger Light.

MICHELLE COTTON
THURSDAY 6 AUGUST 7PM
Meet in the Lower Gallery / free

Curator of Cubitt, London and freelance art critic, Michelle Cotton delivers a talk on the exhibition.

DAN GRIFFITHS IN CONVERSATION WITH
ANNA LOVATT
TUESDAY 7 JULY 7PM
Nash Room / free / booking required

The celebrated artist Dan Griffiths will be in conversation with Anna Lovatt, Lecturer in Art History, University of Nottingham. The event will take in the linguistic turn in 1960s art, with special reference to the drawings of Robert Smithson. The evening is co-hosted by the ICA and Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, on the occasion of mima’s purchase of two Smithson drawings, exhibited in Poor, Old, Tired, Horse.

ANNABELLE WILLIAMS
TUESDAY 13 JULY 7PM
ICA / free

Set in an imaginary casino, Williams’ performance is the brainchild of Pauline Boty, one of the exhibitors in Poor, Old, Tired, Horse, and was originally staged by her at The Royal College of Art in 1974. This event is unconfirmed at the time of going to print. Please check the ICA website or call the Box Office for more information.

MICHICLE COTTON
THURSDAY 6 AUGUST 7PM
Meet in the Lower Gallery / free

Curator of Cubitt, London and freelance art critic, Michelle Cotton delivers a talk on the exhibition.
The following is a selection of the exhibition-related publications that are available in the ICA Bookshop.

ICA Members receive 10% off all books, ICA branded gifts and ICA films and DVDs.

www.ica.org.uk/bookshop

LILIANE LIJN
Works: 1959—1980
By David Mellor
Mead Gallery, University of Warwick, 2005
£20.00
This book accompanied the first major retrospective exhibition of Liliane Lijn’s work and concentrates on the development of her work from the 1960s and 70s. The illustrations feature not only Lijn’s early surrealist drawings, kinetic sculptures and light works but contemporary photographs that document and illuminate this era.

WALTERS TO BE LOOKED AT
Language in 1960s Art
By Liz Kotz
MIT Press, 2006
£19.99
This is a critical study of the use of language and the proliferation of text in 1960s art and experimental music, with close examinations of works by Vito Acconci, Carl Andre, John Cage, Douglas Huebler, Andy Warhol, Lawrence Weiner, La Monte Young, and others.

LANARK
A Life in Four Books
By Alasdair Gray
Canongate Books, 1981
£9.99

Nature Over Again
The Garden Art of Ian Hamilton Finlay
By John Dixon Hunt
Reaktion Books, 2008
£29.95
Nature Over Again is the first book to examine all the garden designs and ‘interventions’ of Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925—2006), best known for the garden of Little Sparta he created for himself in the Lowlands of Scotland.

TO SAY THE VERY LEAST
By Matthew Brannon
Art Gallery of York University, 2008
£50.00
Published in conjunction with the exhibition Matthew Brannon: Try & Be Grateful, To Say the Very Least is the first comprehensive publication on the print works and installations of Matthew Brannon.

A TORMENT OF FOLLIES
Edited by Annette Südebeck
Secession, Vienna, 2008
£16.00
Secession is published on the occasion of A Torment of Follies, an exhibition of twenty-two new large-format paper works by Frances Stark. The catalogue includes an essay by Martin Prinzhorn.

WHAT’S MY NAME?
By Karl Holmqvist
£12.00
Artist and poet Karl Holmqvist is interested in language, both as performance and as text. What’s My Name? is a new publication of the artist’s writings.
EDITIONS

To accompany Poor. Old. Tired. Horse, Frances Stark has generously created a special limited edition print which will be available to purchase from Wednesday 17 June. We offer ICA Members and Patrons priority purchase and a 10% discount on this edition and 20% discount on all previous ICA limited editions. For more information contact Vicky Steer, Editions Manager, on 020 7766 1425 or email vicky.steer@ica.org.uk.

The ICA regularly publishes limited edition prints by internationally acclaimed artists involved in its exhibition programme—recent contributors include Fia Backström, Mark Leckey and Enrico David. To view all ICA editions visit www.ica.org.uk/editions. Proceeds from the sale of these editions provide vital support for the ICA, directly contributing towards the ICA’s future exhibition programme.

FUTURE PROJECTS

ROSALIND NASHASHIBI
10 SEPTEMBER—8 NOVEMBER 2009

London-based artist Rosalind Nashashibi has established a strong international reputation for her 16mm film works, which are presented as gallery-based installations. Nashashibi’s work is influenced by cinematic history, including the legacy of ethnographic film, and pursues an interest in myth, voyeurism and portraiture, using intuitive and experimental filmic structures. This autumn the ICA is staging the first major survey exhibition of Nashashibi’s work, including an ambitious new commission and a group of films from the last four years.

The first part of the exhibition will set out a number of recurring motifs within the artist’s work, and what she describes as a “family tree” of symbols and signs. One featured work will be Eyeball-ing (2005), which was shot in New York, and which literally finds ‘faces’ within the architecture and landscape of the city. Another featured work will be Bachelor Machines Part 2 (2007), a double projection piece, which includes excerpts from a film by German director Alexander Kluge, along with footage of Nashashibi’s own restaging of Kluge’s scenes using the artist Thomas Bayrle and his wife Helga.

The second part of the exhibition will include The Prisoner (2008), which is based on a work by Chantal Akerman, and extends Nashashibi’s exploration of vision and control. In this piece Nashashibi’s camera follows a woman through an anonymous interior and out onto the streets of London. It will also include a new 16mm film commission that will be ambitious in scope. The latter is set on Hampstead Heath in North London, and features scenes of men roaming in the park, as well as a sequence of a film crew shooting in the woods at night. The work enacts the theatrical space of desire, as well as the dream space of cinema.

Nashashibi’s exhibition will be accompanied by the first retrospective publication on the artist’s work, which will include texts by Dieter Roelstraete and Martin Herbert. The exhibition is a collaboration with Bergen Kunsthall in Norway, where it will be shown later in the year.
The second half of the magazine includes a collage of texts and illustrations, including new essays by Michelle Cotton and Charlotte Bonham-Carter, and previously unpublished artistic contributions by Giles Round, Frances Stark, Karl Holmqvist, Tris Vonna-Michell and Anna Barham. The publication also includes poems by Lewis Carroll, Augusto de Campos, Eugen Gomringer and George Herbert and texts and statements by Liliane Lijn, Joseph Kosuth, Robert Smithson and Carl Andre, as well as a section from the first chapter of Alasdair Gray’s forthcoming autobiography, *A Life in Pictures*. 
In his seminal work of 1593, Iconologia, Cesare Risa declared: “an image is a definition”. And certainly, the post-Renaissance trend towards representational painting suggested as much. The relationship between language and image is dense, and it comes as no surprise that the impulse to combine one’s literary and visual experiences is a clear trajectory in the history of culture. From the origins of language as pictographic forms such as hieroglyphics, to the use of imagery in language, it is evident that the visual and the linguistic are interrelated. Take, for example, the word ‘Revolution’ in a political sense: the word derives from medieval pictures of the ‘Rota Fortunae’ (the wheel of fortune), which spun unpopular monarchs out of power and lowly people into good fortune. This image, amongst millions of others, has infiltrated language.

One of the most influential examples of visual-literary conjunctions is the ‘emblem book’, a popular form across most European lands by the sixteenth century. These books containing pictures and mottoes were used to embody an abstraction, a concept, a nation or occasionally, a person (though usually one of great social or regal standing). The emblem almost always had a subtle religious message, either protestant or Catholic. In the eighteenth century, emblems began to be taken less seriously—a movement instigated by John Bunyan’s moralistic book of poems for children, Divine Emblems; or Temporal Things Spiritualized, 1724, which popularized the form amongst children’s literature. In 1978, Ian Hamilton Finlay published a booklet called Heroic Emblems. It contained a series of emblematic forms that borrowed from the Classical, the Renaissance and the Modern era. According to Finlay scholar Yves Abrioux, for Finlay, “the form of the emblem generates … ‘a free-floating metaphor’, formed from the conjunction of motto and image, setting it apart from more conventional methods of established meaning”. Finlay’s employment of the emblem was recurrent throughout his life’s work; it surfaces in many of his early prints from the 1960s and 70s, and continues later on, as he began to explore neoclassical forms through sculpture and works in the landscape. Although, in Finlay’s work, one thing can often be seen in terms of another, his use of analogy and metaphor is so complex and richly circuitous that one thing never definitively stands for another. Instead, he creates a new syntax, established by a network of visual and literal correspondences.

The tradition of the emblem is continued in a more illustrative sense by the few writers/artists that have managed to carve out a unified position in what can often be two mutually exclusive roles. Works in this category include, among others, Ben Jonson’s writings, Robert Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy, much of William Blake’s work and the illustrated poems and texts of the septuagenarian Glaswegian, Alasdair Gray. Gray’s most famous illustrated novel is Lanark, published in 1982. Each book of the novel is richly introduced by an emblematic frontispiece. Gray juxtaposes realistic and antiquated phantasmagorical

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3. Ian Hamilton Finlay and Ron Costley, p. 10.
4. Portions of the booklet are reproduced in this publication, on p. 44–50.
or allegorical illustrations with excerpts of contemporary discourse to create an intricate web of meanings, associations and references.

It is the possibility of establishing new systems of interpretation that has propelled the consideration of form in writing. And for Finlay, as the progenitor of the Concrete Poetry movement in the UK, it was using words as objects, at first on the page and then in real space, that spurred his continual development as an artist. In the catalogue for an exhibition at Tate St Ives in 2002, Finlay remarked, “There is always a distance between a name and what it names.”

In giving words a power beyond that of mere signifiers of a remote signified, Finlay imbued language with a level of autonomy and authenticity that was not otherwise possible. In the same vein, he often worked with abbreviations, words that had a ‘found poetry’ to them and that offered no actual means of deciphering meaning. Words were deliberately distanced from their referents in order to stand alone as objects on the page or in the landscape.

One of Finlay’s most important found poetry works is a series of four poems from 1966, Sea Poppy (see page 38) and Sea I, II and III. The works are comprised of fishing boats’ names (the abbreviation of the port they come from, followed by a number) arranged in concentric circles. Thus the works in the Sea Poppy series adopt the shape and style of another historically significant visual-linguistic form, the mandala. The mandala is a geometric design enclosed within a circle and imbued with mystical significance in Buddhism and Hinduism. It is often used as a spiritual training device, to focus attention or to embody an imaginary place that is contemplated during meditation. It is comprised of different layers of symbolism, from the outer edge to the inner core. As a whole, the mandala is often understood to be a representation of the cosmos, or the universe.

Possibly connected to a resurgent interest in Buddhism during the 1950s Beat generation and the 1960s Hippie era that followed it, a number of Concrete poets experimented with the form of the mandala, including, amongst others, the German artist, Ferdinand Kriwet. In works such as his Rundscheiben series of 1960–63, Text Signs 1968, and Text Sails and Text Dias, both 1970, Kriwet gave the spiritual symbol a contemporary Pop twist. Liliane Lijn’s poem machines bear a strong resemblance to another spiritual device, the Tibetan prayer wheel. A spinning drum inscribed with prayers or mantras, the prayer wheel is used to visualise the dissemination of the mantra, and as a means of purification. It is interesting to note affinities between Concrete poetry, which sought to circumvent conventional systems of interpretation, and spiritual practices that share a similar aim.

In Finlay’s web of metaphors, analogies and associations—realised through poems, prints, sculptures and work in the landscape—he established a methodology of interpretation that is endlessly coded and infinite. Understanding and the means to an understanding are one and the same. This kind of interpretational conundrum is played out in Plutarch’s dialogue On the E at Delphi. The essay, which is constructed as a dialogue revealing a number of opinions on the meaning of the large, enigmatic ‘E’ inscribed on a stone fragment near the shrine of Apollo, was an important influence on Finlay. Fascinated by the relationships between things, he discovered that the Enterprise, a World War II battleship and a recurring motif in Finlay’s work, was nicknamed ‘the big E’.

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6. Tom Lubbock, Ian Hamilton Finlay
Maritime Works, exh. cat., Tate St. Ives, 2002.
7. A practice common to other artists in the exhibition Poor. Old. Tired. Horse., such as Vito Acconci, Carl Andre and Sue Tompkins.
8. Stephen Bann, Ian Hamilton Finlay,
9. Ibid.
In Plutarch’s dialogue, there are several explanations offered for the significance of the ‘E’, ranging from its position as the fifth letter in the alphabet (the number five was important for its association with the five sages) to its meaning, in one sense, as the Greek word for ‘if’, and in another, for ‘thou art’. The latter would offer the most intriguing hypothesis for the purposes of understanding Finlay’s work, and the Concrete Poetry movement in general. Read this way, the letter exists as pure being, and it is both the provocation of, and resistance to, interpretation that reifies its existence.

George Herbert, *Easter wings*, 1633

Lord, who createth man in wealth and fire,

Though foolishly he left the flames,

Let me ride.

Let me ride.

Let me ride.
Some light can hit some rain at an angle of X degrees. I was thinking "Is this relevant?" indulge me if you please accept my puerile format and relentless appetite for undivided attention and text that’s fueled by spite

But that is immaterial, the text’s for text’s sake too the thing that it’s in spite of doesn’t matter—even if it’s true So what I’m getting at is simply (or complexly actually) that the rainbow which is beautiful is simultaneous proof that light is but a falsehood assisting that the rainbow which is beautiful

To grow as green as others seem

A rainbow can astound with its ethereal appeal or fill a head with science facts because it is so real Believe me I’m not trying to tell you how I feel nor am I describing what I intended you to think I wondered if you wondered that I wonder as I dare to loiter in publicity, suck in thin air

I was born at the end of 1934 in Riddrie which with Knightswood was one of the earliest, best designed and poshest of Glasgow housing schemes. Houses in Riddrie were allocated to teachers, shopkeepers, clerks, nurses, postmen and men like my dad who had factory jobs during the depression years when nearly a quarter of Glasgow was unemployed. Like many British folk I assumed for years that I was Upper Middle Class. Apart from politicians mentioned in BBC news broadcasts I knew of nobody socially superior to my dad, whose hobbies included unpaid work for the Scottish Youth Hostel Association, a local branch of the Camping Club of Great Britain and the Holiday Fellowship. Through one of these organisations he knew Glasgow’s deputy town clerk who lived in a semi-detached corporation house, just like my grandfathers nearby, but a bit higher up the Cumbernauld Road. Like most of our neighbours I was a snob, one of a superior class to the proles of Blackhill, widely known as a slum clearance scheme divided from Riddrie by the Monkland Canal: now the Monkland motorway.

At least two years before attending Riddrie Primary School my parents gave me coloured pencils and paper and liked me to use them. I enjoyed using them and was so lucky with my primary and secondary school teachers that they liked instead of discouraging my

Some rebelliousness is bubbling up to posit

Impossible the grassy maxim’s dream

The world becomes a private world and shines like a rainbow

It would be better to give a song

A butterfly’s now butter Rip a body from the wing

But rebel bubble I can’t sing

Toloify’s in The Hobbit. The worlds in these pictures had fantastic historical and geographical scope that chimed perfectly with Walt Disney and Wizard of Oz films, and

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Public though the world is becoming what it is not is its best feature, amplified —a private after-thought

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Picture-making. My first art exemplars had been book illustrations, mainly illustrations by authors who had written the books—Rudyard Kipling’s in the Just So Stories, Hugh Lofting’s in the Doctor Dolittle books, Tolkien’s in The Hobbit. The worlds in these pictures had fantastic historical and geographical scope that chimed perfectly with Walt Disney and Wizard of Oz films, and

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with eczema of the face and joints and bouts of asthma. I also worried about passing the Latin and Maths exams that would get me into Glasgow University. I hated these subjects—thought it harmful for anyone to live well by studying what they did not enjoy—but my mum, dad and teachers were sure that a working class Scot (yes, I had at last accepted I belonged to the working class) could only win the freedom to write and paint by first earning a secure income by doing something else. Bodily health made manual labour and factory work impossible for me. A university degree would allow a library or civil service job. That prospect struck me as equally loathsome. Meanwhile, despite Britain having been on the winning side of a war that would have made all Europe a hell had Hitler won, wars were still being fought and nuclear wars industriously prepared by all the biggest, civilised nations whose governments, while building huge nuclear bunkers for themselves, were telling their populations that this was nothing to worry about. The world was obviously in as bad a state as I was. Both of us seemed heading for an even worse future.

Graham’s self-identification as a poet suggests the extent to which poetry appeared, in the 1960s art world, as a potential field for investigating language as such and, in particular for exploring the behaviour of words on the page. In this context, language is increasingly understood not just as a material but as a kind of ‘site.’ The page is a visual, physical container—an 8½ x 11 inch white rectangle analogous to the white cube of the gallery—and also a place for action and a publication context. This site is implicitly relational and dynamic: words on a page operate in relation to other texts and statements, since language as a system is perpetually in circulation. Viewed in this way, conventional poetic forms, and especially individual lyric utterances, are but a small part of a much wider field. Understood in its most general sense, as ‘language art,’ poetry is a form that explores the aesthetics, structures, and operations of language as much as any specific content. In the postwar era, various types of concrete and visual poetry, in particular, promised to probe the space of the typographic page and link contemporary literature with the visual arts. Yet a reliance on rather quaint illustrational or pictorial modes—as in poems that take on the shape of their subjects—left much concrete poetry out of touch with changing paradigms in the visual arts and the wider conditions of language in modernity. In their turn to compositional procedures...
that sampled existing texts and fractured syntax, John Ashberry and Jackson Mac Low generated works whose extreme fragmentation of language seemed to divorce the utterance from the expression of any single speaker. Their collage-based treatment of words as found objects opened the door to much wider investigations of non-literate uses of language, yet ultimately, their works tended to recontain these experiments back into something all-too-recognisable as poetic form. If Ashbery’s work rejoined a high-modernist lyric revitalised with the resources of nonliterary language, and Mac Low’s poems ultimately reconventionalised Cagean procedures within traditional models of oral performance, what other possibilities might one envision for work with language emerging out of poetry?

Alongside Graham, whose involvement with poetry was relatively short-lived, the crucial figures here are Carl Andre and Vito Acconci, two artists far better known for their work in other forms: sculpture for Andre; performance, video, and later architecture for Acconci. For both Andre and Acconci, their work with language is foundational for their larger projects: Acconci, as is well-known, began as a poet before he took up work in performance, and Andre produced much of his early poetry during the crucial period, 1960–1965, when he developed the core sculptural strategies that produced landmark works of Minimal art.
POEM MACHINES = VISION OF SOUND

LILIANE LIJN

SEE SOUND AS MOVING LINES OF LIGHT

The words we utter travel in sound waves vibrating through the air into our inner ear.

When we see the written word we forget these letters are symbols of vibrations.

WORDS = VIBRATIONS = ENERGY

When I put words on cylinders and cones and make Poem Machines, I want the word to be seen in movement splitting itself into a pure vibration until it becomes the energy of sound.

First Poem Machine—1962—3
Action—Words—Power—Words
The Word Becomes Energy

1964–65 Poem Machine takes on shape, becomes Poemkon.
Conic shape bends itself to the dematerialisation of the word. At the narrowest point of the cone the words may still be readable whereas at the base they become a vibration pattern.

The word accelerated loses its identity and becomes a pattern pregnant with energy. It is pregnant with the energy of its potential meaning should it once again become a word.

Invisible Poemkon: the cone becomes transparent.
Words float on its almost invisible skin and spin into space.
I make Poem Machines to transform words into energy patterns.
In the Poem Machines the words we use are sublimated and become pure energy.

DISSOLVE THE IMAGES CREATED BY WORDS SEE SOUND

Giles Round creates text out of his own uniquely designed fonts. Here, inset within the text, are two images which depict structures in the everyday environment that resemble letters in the Latin alphabet; they are also examples of 'found concrete poetry' and haphazard encounters with text and language in the world around us.

Giles Round, Font Especial Mirrored Tessellation, 2009 and inset Letters are things not pictures of things: O.T, 2009


SIGNS OF THE TIMES
CONCRETE POETRY IN RETROSPECT

STEPHEN SCOBIE

As concrete poetry recedes into retrospect, then, it is in some ways easier to describe its properties, and to situ-
ate it within the cultural and intellectual history of the twenty-first century. I wish to propose some very broad
publications along these lines: namely, that concrete poetry in its classical phase can be described in terms of
modernism, structuralism and metonymy.

In The Banquet Years, Roger Shattuck characterises
the art of high modernism under the headings of self-
reflexiveness, juxtaposition and simultanist. A self-reflex-
ive art is one that ‘endlessly studies its own behaviors’. Among the Cubist painters, Shattuck writes, “Juan Gris
was the most exclusively concerned with this aesthetic …
Gris painted by watching himself paint, and his immaculate
compositions of tables and chessboards convey the
impression of intense observation directed inward rather
than outward.” The degree to which concrete poetry is
about its own modes of existence and communication
is obvious: every concrete poem demands a re-think-
ing of the ways in which a poem is written, or is read.

“Juxtaposition” Shattuck defines as “setting one thing beside another without connective”, and he contrasts
modernist art to the traditional art of transition. Again,
concrete poetry is an example even purer than the Apol-
loinaire ‘conversation poems’ cited by Shattuck, since
the essence of concrete poetry lies in its suppression (or
modification or substitution) of syntax, the most funda-
mental connective in language. For Shattuck, “juxtaposi-
tion” ultimately proves inadequate, since it still “implies
succession”, whereas Shattuck is trying to define an art
form in which the elements “are to be conceived not suc-
cessively but simultaneously, to converge in our minds
as contemporaneous events”. So Shattuck adopts, prin-
cipally from Robert Delaunay, the term “simultanism”.
Admittedly, there are visual concrete poems that extend
for more than one page (and sound poetry significantly
diverges from visual poetry at this point), but by far the
majority of the concrete poems collected in the three
definitive anthologies are ‘single-image’ constructions,
deployed spatially across the page (or poster, photo-
graph, wall, field) in a manner that invites the analogy to
the way in which one perceives a painting.

Indeed, the analogy to painting is in itself the most
telling indication of the modernism of concrete poetry,
since the evolution of modern painting (from, say, the
Salon des Refusés in 1863 to the Dada soirées in 1916)
presents the exemplary paradigm of modernism: paint-
ing, not music, became for that period the art towards
whose condition all other arts aspired. Thus Shattuck
takes his ultimate term for the aesthetic phenomenon
he wishes to describe—simultanism—from a painter,
Delaunay. Attempts to describe tendencies within con-

One of Panofsky’s most justly
celebrated essays in iconology
(the term he takes directly from
Cesare Ripa) is concerned
with Poussin’s painting Et in Arcadia
Ego. Contemporary disputes
about the significance of this
enigmatic work lead him back
to Greek pastoral poetry and
the progressive formation of the
cultural concept of ‘Arcady’, with
its almost infinite tissue of poetic
references converging upon the
point that even here, in the ideal
pastoral world, death is present.
But Panofsky has not checked the
calculation about the inner mean-
ing of Poussin’s picture, which
may indeed be bound up with a
hermetic interpretation of the
golden section and might even lead
(it has been suggested) to the redis-
covery of the lost treasure of the
Albigensian heretics in a particular
part of southwestern France.

The metaphorical presentation
of the tank as Poussin’s inscribed
monument, within the Arcadian
setting, offers us not so much an
emblem as an enigma. Estienne
describes the role of Enigma as
that of serving ‘as a Rind or Bark
to conserve all the mysteries of
our Ancestors wisdom’. We are
not immediately tempted to
generalise or extend the implica-
tions that we see, as in the ‘moral’
emblem. The treasure, such as it
is, is necessarily remote from us,
concrete poetry have frequently used vocabulary drawn from the history of modern painting: the most frequently used pairing is ‘expressionist’ and ‘constructivist’, while Finlay at one time used ‘fauve’ and suprematist. Even more strikingly, a 1982 study of inter-artistic analogy, Wendy Steiner’s The Colors of Rhetoric, concludes with the “bold hypothesis” (which indeed it is) that Cubism is “the master current of our age in painting and literature and—why not?—criticism itself.” From there it is only a short step for Steiner to argue that “There is no clearer working out of a cubist ideology than concrete poetry.”

Steiner’s argument is largely a theoretical one. She points to the balance, in Cubist painting, between the self-reflexive exploration of painting’s own modes of existence and communication, and its concern to represent an external world, its refusal to move into total abstraction. Such a balance is also maintained, Steiner rightly observes, in concrete poetry, which is inhibited from complete abstraction by its very existence in language. Steiner’s theoretical argument could have been considerably bolstered by pointing to Ian Hamilton Finlay’s explicit avowals of the debt to Cubism, especially in the widely quoted letter to Pierre Gamier, in which Finlay explains the “huge uncertainty” with which he came to concrete poetry by recalling that “One of the Cubists … said that it was after all difficult for THEM to make cubism because they did not have, as we have, the example of cubism to help them.”

Finlay’s closest affinities with Cubism are with the painter also singled out by Shattuck, Juan Gris, and with the exposition of Gris’ theories in the most dogmatic statement of Cubism’s high-modernist aesthetic, Daniel Henry Kahnweiler’s Juan Gris: His Life and Work. I have already written in some detail about Kahnweiler’s importance in Finlay’s work; here, I wish only to recapitulate briefly a couple of points from that essay. Kahnweiler defined painting as the “representation of thought by means of graphic signs—writing”, and insisted that such writing had to be legible, i.e. that it convey to the informed reader information about the external word (hence his outright rejection of ‘abstract’ painting). “There is a kinship between poetry and painting”, Kahnweiler continues, “for both are writing”; but whereas “the very existence of painting is bound up with its signs, which in consequence have a value of their own”, for the poet “graphic signs only serve to transcribe vocal signs”.

(Briefly anticipating the argument, let us note here, despite Kahnweiler’s insistence on writing, the classical assumption of the priority of speech, which was to be the focus of Jacques Derrida’s attack.) In my previous article, I noted the various points in Kahnweiler’s book at which he seems to lead up to a theoretical basis for concrete poetry, and I tried to suggest what the culminating steps would have been. I also noted that Kahnweiler’s description of the way Gris used “emblems” and “rhyming shapes” accounts exactly for similar features in Finlay’s work. The point of these techniques, I concluded, “for Finlay as for Gris is the establishment of metaphoric identity between the various elements… Finlay’s view of nature as a unity, a network of correspondences finds its fullest expression in the garden at Stonypath”.

Metaphor is the central literary technique of Finlay’s work, even though the terms of the metaphor are usually established by non-literary, visual means. From the

The crucial events that were to determine the outcome of the Pacific War are celebrated in this image. Under the emblematic cover of a Renaissance pastoral, we see enacted the conflict of 4 June 1942, when the four ships of Admiral Naguno’s i Carrier Striking Force were destroyed by dive-bombers from their American counterparts, Enterprise and Hornet (Yorktown being the major American casualty). The dramatic success of this action depended on the fact that the American planes were able to engage the Japanese fleet at its most vulnerable—whilst each of the carriers bore a full deckload of armed and fuelled aircraft. The effect of American bombing was therefore to ignite petrol tanks, bombs and torpedoes, causing unquenchable conflagration. The analogy of the Renaissance garden shows us the carriers as hives, the American attack planes as swarming bees and the conflagration of overspill-honey. Formal trees in tubs fill out the pastoral conception, while signifying at the same time the ocean, in whose lush distances the opposing carriers were concealed from each other.

At Stonypath, Ian Hamilton Finlay’s home in Lanarkshire, there is an interaction and inter-penetration of the Garden and...
finlay's poetics. A series of stretches of water of greater and less magnitude is juxtaposed with the enclosed (the ‘inland’) garden. But even within the garden, poem inscriptions pick up the distant murmur of the sea. The axis of this opposition, which can hardly explained more fully in this context, has perhaps become the base structure of finlay’s poetics.

fishing-boat as circus pony to aircraft carrier as the four elements, Finlay bases his work on a system of metaphoric connections. Metaphor is also a central characteristic of modernism in literature; it works as a vertical system of correspondences, identifying, for instance, Leopold Bloom with Ulysses. It depends upon highly structured and relatively stable works; it is a spatial rather than temporal relationship; it is (in structuralist terms) synchronic rather than diachronic. Thus the whole of cultural history becomes simultaneously present and accessible, as Eliot proclaimed in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’. Eliot and Pound redefined the usable past, demanding that their readers acquaint themselves with, say, Sextus Propertius, Arnaut Daniel, or Sigismundo Malatesta. Similarly, readers of Ian Hamilton Finlay have found themselves called upon to pre-Socratic philosophers, the revolutionary writings of Saint-Just, and the Spanday diaries of Albert Speer. Concrete poetry, or at least Finlay’s version of it, is simultaneously Classical and avant-garde, a blend of innovative form and traditional sensibility (as indeed was the Cubism of Braque and Gris, if not always of Picasso). What unites these disparate elements is the controlling structure of metaphor.

Concrete poetry, as a synchronic structure creating metaphors out of the relationships between spatially distributed elements, can therefore be related to structuralism, and it is perhaps no accident that its period of greatest activity (1955–79) roughly coincides with the ascendency of structuralist thought. Finlay’s critics (especially Stephen Bann and myself) have frequently resorted to the work of the structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, with particular reference to his notion of the ‘small-scale model’, in order to comment on Finlay. In Ian Hamilton Finlay: an illustrated essay, the catalogue to the 1972 exhibition of Finlay’s work at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Bann wrote that “the contemporary inquiry undertaken in the fields of linguistics, anthropology and biology promises a new Classicism based on the constant relational figures that may be extrapolated from the operations of the human mind”. Bann linked the work of Lévi-Strauss with that of Noam Chomsky in linguistics and François Jacob in biology, and stated that Finlay’s work “relates intimately to the ‘new Classicism’, since it has ‘an exemplary value for the notion of linguistic constants underlying visual structure’. Bann is here re-stating, in structuralist terminology. Kahnweiler’s notion of painting as writing.

The confidence of Bann’s structuralist faith in “constant relational figures” was already, in 1972, under severe attack. Indeed, a major part of Jacques Derrida’s Of Grammatology (1967; trans. 1976) is devoted to a deconstruction of Claude Lévi-Strauss. The structuralist study of the relations between signs requires that the signs themselves remain stable; what Derrida did was to question and undermine the very possibility of a “linguistic constant”. “There is not a single signified that escapes”, he wrote, “the play of signifying references that constitute language”. Saussure’s synchronic system of difference is invaded by the endless recession of Derrida’s difference; the word, far from being the sign of meaning’s presence, becomes the trace of its absence. Every sign is put “under erasure”, simultaneously present (since we cannot do without it) and crossed out (since we cannot ever define it): sign becomes sign.
LETTER TO PIERRE GARNIER 1963

IAN HAMILTON FINLAY

I feel that the main use of theory may well be that of concentrating the attention in a certain area—of providing a context which is favourable to the actual work. I like G. Vantongerloo’s remark: “Things must be approached through sensitivity rather than understanding ...”; this being especially acceptable from Vantongerloo since he is far from being against understanding (it seems to me)—his “must” I take to mean “must” because the world is such and we are so ... An understanding (theoretical explanation) of concrete (in general) poetry is, for me, an attempt to find a non-concrete prose parallel to, or secular expression of, the kind of feeling, or even more basically, “being,” which says, if one listens carefully to the time, and if one is not sequestered in society, that such-and-such a mode of using words—this kind of syntax, this sort of construction—is “honest” and “true.” ...

One of the Cubists—I forget who—said that it was after all difficult for THEM to make cubism because they did not have, as we have, the example of cubism to help them. I wonder if we are not all a little in the dark, still as to the real significance of “concrete.” ...

For myself I cannot derive from the poems I have written any “method” which can be applied to the writing of the next poem; it comes back, after each poem, to a level of “being,” to an almost physical intuition of the time, or of a form ... to which I try, with huge uncertainty, to be “true.” Just so, “concrete” began for me with the extraordinary (since wholly unexpected) sense that the syntax I had been using, the movement of language in me, at a physical level, was no longer there—so it had to be replaced with something else, with a syntax and movement that would be true of the new feeling (which existed in only the vaguest way, since I had, then, no form for it ...). So that I see the theory as a very essential (because we are people, and people think, or should think, or should TRY to think) part of our life and art; and yet I also feel that it is a construction, very haphazard, uncertain, and by no means as yet to be taken as definitive. And indeed, when people come together, for whatever purpose, the good is often a by-product ... it comes as the unexpected thing. For myself, on the question of “naming,” I call my poems “fauve” or “suprematist,” this to indicate their relation to “reality” ... (and you see, one of the difficulties of theory for me is that I find myself using a word like “reality” while knowing that if I was asked, “What do you mean by reality?,” I would simply answer, “I don’t know ...”). I approve of Malevich’s statement, “Man distinguished himself as a thinking being and removed himself from the perfection of God’s creation. Having left the non-thinking state, he strives by means of his perfected objects, to be again embodied in the perfection of absolute, nonthinking life ...” That is, this seems to me, to describe, approximately, my own need to make poems ... though I don’t know what is meant by “God.” And it also raises the question that, though the objects might “make it,” possibly, into a state of perfection, the poet and painter will not. I think any pilot-plan should distinguish, in its optimism, between what man can construct and what he actually is. I mean, new thought does not make a new man; in any photograph of an aircrash one can see how terribly far man stretches—from angel to animal; and one does not want a glittering perfection which forgets that the world is, after all, also to be made by man into his home. I should say—however hard I would find it to justify this in theory—that “concrete” by its very limitations offers a tangible image of goodness and sanity; it is very far from the now-fashionable poetry of anguish and self ... It is a model, of order, even if set in a space which is full of doubt. (Whereas non-concrete might be said to be set in society, rather than space, and its “satire,” its “revolt,” are only disguised symptoms of social dishonesty. This, I realise) goes too far; I do not mean to say that society is “bad.” ...

I would like, if I could, to bring into this, somewhere the unfashionable notion of “Beauty,” which I find compelling and immediate, however theoretically inadequate. I mean this in the simplest way—that if I was asked, “Why do you like concrete poetry?” I could truthfully answer “Because it is beautiful.”
LANGUAGE TO BE LOOKED AT
AND/OR THINGS TO BE READ (1967)

ROBERT SMITHSON

Language operates between literal and metaphorical signification. The power of a word lies in the very inadequacy of the context it is placed, in the unresolved or partially resolved tension of disparates. A word fixed or a statement isolated without any decorative or “cubist” visual format, becomes a perception of similarity in dissimilars—in short a paradox. Congruity could be disrupted by a metaphorical complexity within a literal system. Literal usage becomes incantory when all metaphors are suppressed. Here language is built, not written. Yet, discursive literalness is apt to be a container for a radical metaphor. Literal statements often conceal violent analogies. The mind resists the false identity of such circumambient suggestions, only to accept an equally false logical surface. Banal words function as a feeble phenomena that fall into their own mental bogs of meaning. An emotion is suggested and demolished in one glance by certain words. Other words constantly shift or invert themselves without ending, these could be called “suspended words.” Simple statements are often based on language fears, and sometimes result in dogma or a non-sense. Words for mental processes are all derived from physical things. References are often reversed so that the “object” takes the place of the “word”. A is A is never A is A, but rather X is A. The misunderstood notion of a metaphor has it that A is X—that is wrong. The scale of a letter in a word changes one’s visual meaning of the word. Language thus becomes monumental because of the mutations of advertising. A word outside of the mind is a set of “dead letters”. The mania for literalness relates to the breakdown in the rational belief in reality. Books entomb words in a synthetic rigor mortis, perhaps that is why “print” is thought to have entered obsolescence. The mind of this death, however, is unrelentingly awake.

Eton Corrasable

This text was originally the press release for Language to be looked at and/or Things to be read at the Dwan Gallery in June 1967.
THE CHOSEN FEW
THE WHO IS WHO?
THE YOUNG WILL BE OLD
TALK TO ME
BOUGHT WILL BE SOLD
BATTY BOY
BOOM BOOM BABY
BOOM

THE WORD MADE FLESH
BATTY BOY
HOPE IS THE LAST THING
THAT LEAVES
U WENT BACK 2 WHAT
U KNEW
& U DEAD HAND STRETCHING
PAYBACK THE GREEN
& U DEAD HAND STRETCHING
U WENT BACK 2 WHAT
U KNEW
SO FAR REMOVED FROM
ALL THAT WE HAD BEEN
THRU
FINAL UNFETTERING
& U DEAD HAND STRETCHING
PAYBACK THE REAL DEAL
BIRDS & THE BEES
PAYBACK THE TREES

THOUSHALTNOTKILL
THOUHASTDNOWILL

CORPORATE CANNIBAL
TREAT U LIKE AN ANIMAL
LIKE A HANNIBAL
LIKE A PLANT
BATTY BOY
BOOM BOOM BATTY
VEGETABLES R PEOPLE TOO
NEED 2 STAY AWAY FROM
WE
THE CHOSEN FEW
THE WHO IS WHO?
THE YOUNG WILL BE OLD
TALK TO ME
BOUGHT WILL BE SOLD
BATTY BOY
BOOM BOOM BABY
BOOM

THE CHOSEN FEW
LIKE ME & U
WHO SAID SENDING OFF
PEOPLE 2 PRISON WAS
NORMAL?

CORPORATE CANNIBAL
TREAT U LIKE A CRIMINAL
LIKE A HANNIBAL
SLAVE 2 THE RHYTHM
OF YR CORPORATE PRISON
PRAY FOR ME
CAN'T GET ENOUGH PREY
PRAY FOR ME
BATTY BOY
PRAY FOR ME
BOOM BATTY
BATTY BOY
BOOM BOOM BATTY
NEED 2 STAY AWAY FROM
WE
HOPE IS THE LAST THING
THAT LEAVES
WHAT U NEED I DON'T WANT
WHAT U HAVE I CAN'T USE
GOSPELS OF GREED
SOMALI PIRATES
& PONZI SCHEMES
PRIMITIVIST HIT LIST
ANTI-MATERIALIST BLISS
TELEVANGELIST HOT TIPS
HOW COME WE CAN'T ALL
JUST GET ALONG?
FIRST WILL BE LAST
FUTURE WILL BE PAST
NEED 2 STAY AWAY FROM
WE
TREAT OTHERS THE WAY
YOU WOULD LIKE 2
BE TREATED

CORPORATE CANNIBAL
TREAT U LIKE AN ANIMAL
LIKE A HANNIBAL
LIKE A PLANT
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WE
TREAT OTHERS THE WAY
YOU WOULD LIKE 2
BE TREATED

THE CHOSEN FEW
LIKE ME & U
WHO SAID SENDING OFF
PEOPLE 2 PRISON WAS
NORMAL?
ALL THAT WE HAD BEEN
THRU
LES MAÎTRES FOUS
THE WHO IS WHO?
THE WITCHES’ BREW
PAYBACK THE REAL DEAL
U STOLE 4 YR MONEY
SLAPSTICK MYSTICS WITH STICKS
THE STATION MASTER
PAYBACK THE TREES
VEGETABLES R PEOPLE TOO
THE WHO IS WHO?
IF IT’S 4 FREE IT’S NOT 4 ME
LAST NITE ON THE WAY 2 THE POW-WOW
THE POW-WOW
CALLING PEOPLE NAMES
MURDER HAS ITS SEXUAL SIDE
WHAT ABOUT HUMAN SACRIFICE?
ASSISTED SUICIDE?
CALLING PEOPLE NAMES
RITES OF PASSAGE
TREAT OTHERS THE WAY U YOURSELF WOULD LIKE 2 BE TREATED
CALLING PEOPLE NAMES
PRIMITIVIST HIT LIST
ANTI-MATERIALIST BLISS
THE DUDETUBE
WHEN THE PUSH COMES 2 SHOVE
WATER 2 WINE
PEARLS 2 THE SWINE
WEATHER UNDERGROUND
VAMPIRE LESBIANS OF SODOM
SECRET SERVICE
BOOMERANG EFFECT
U AIN’T SEEN NOTHING, YET
GENDER BENDERS
BEGGARS’ BANQUET
LAZY LADY
LYDIA LUNCH
GOO-GOO-GA-JOOB
CALLING PEOPLE NAMES
PEEN-PEN-PENNY ARCADE
ARISTOTLE’S MISTAKE
GIVING THE ROBOT HAND A HAND
REDRUM RIVER RUN
BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN
SLEEPING IN A CASKET

ALL THAT WE HAD BEEN
THRU
LES MAÎTRES FOUS
THE WHO IS WHO?
THE WITCHES’ BREW
PAYBACK THE REAL DEAL
U STOLE 4 YR MONEY
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PAYBACK THE TREES
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PEEN-PEN-PENNY ARCADE
ARISTOTLE’S MISTAKE
GIVING THE ROBOT HAND A HAND
REDRUM RIVER RUN
BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN
SLEEPING IN A CASKET
THE DUDE TUBE
DISCOVERY CHANNEL
CALLING PEOPLE NAMES
A HANDSOME RANSOM
I’D RATHER GO BLIND
LE PAIN QUOTIDIEN
SONGS 4 DRELLA
AT THE END OF THE BREAD-LINE
FROM THE BOTTOMS UP
TREAT U LIKE AN ANIMAL
SLAPSTICK MYSTICS
WITH STICKS
CALLING PEOPLE NAMES
THE BOOK OF LOVE
BOOK OF BOOKS
S P R E A D I N G THE WORD
MAKING YOURSELF HEARD
IT’S THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING
AS ABOVE SO BELOW
TIME OF THE ASSASSINS
FUZZY WUZZIES
WITH UZIS
PULL UP 2 THE BUMP: BABY
THE BABY BUMP: BABY
BABY BUMP: BABY LADY BUMP: THE BABY BUMP: PUMP & BUMP IT
DRIVE IT IN BETWEEN
IN YR BIG BLACK STRETCH LIMO
WHO SAID SENDING OFF PEOPLE 2 PRISON WAS NORMAL?
MORE COURAGE, LESS OIL
STOP, REPAIR PREPARE
IT’S A WAR
BETWEEN THE SEXES
EVERYWHERE IS WAR
ALL THE EXES
& YR NEED 4 MORE
ALWAYS MORE AMORE
PEOPLE R MAKING TOO MUCH LOVE, THEY OUGHT 2 B HAVING SEX
WAR 2 END ALL WARS
ALWAYS MORE & MORE
LA MORT C’EST LA MORT
PEOPLE R MAKING TOO MUCH LOVE, THEY OUGHT 2 B HAVING SEX
STOP, REPAIR PREPARE
COFFEE GENIE
SPILL THE BEANS
IT’S NOT WHAT IT SEEMS
LOVERS+HATERS UNITE
DON’T GIVE UP
THE FIGHT
THE FIGHT, DON’T GIVE UP
THE FIGHT
THE GHOST SCRIBE
I’M LIKE REALLY BAD AT REMEMBERING NAMES
I’M LIKE REALLY BAD AT REMEMBERING NAMES
ALLA BARN SKA HA RATT TILL
EN MAMMA OCH PAPPAPA
I’M LIKE REALLY BAD AT REMEMBERING NAMES
DJINNS, JEDIS & UFOS
I’M LIKE REALLY BAD AT REMEMBERING NAMES
DJINNS, JEDIS & UFOS
U GO BACK 2 HER
I’M LIKE REALLY BAD AT REMEMBERING NAMES
DJINNS, JEDIS & UFOS
U GO BACK 2 HER
NURSE MILDRED RATCHED THE MEDICINE MAN
CAN AS CAN CAN
U WENT BACK 2 WHAT U KNEW
SO FAR REMOVED FROM ALL THAT WE HAD BEEN THRU
& I TREAD A TROUBLED TRACK
MY ODDS R STACKED
WE ONLY SAID GOODBYE WITH WORDS
I DIED A HUNDRED TIMES
U GO BACK 2 HER
& I GO BLACK 2 BACK DJINNS, JEDIS & UFOS
MORE COURAGE, LESS OIL
IT’S A WAR
WAR 2 END ALL WARS
U GO BACK 2 HER
& I GO BLACK 2 BACK DJINNS, JEDIS & UFOS
COFFEE GENIE
THE GHOST SCRIBE
RUN & HIDE
GOO-GOO-GA-JOOB
BIRDS & THE BEES
FROM ALL YR HEART
EGO WARRIORS 2 THE STARS
TRAIPSING WALL INSIDE US ALL
WE SHALL OVERCOME
WE SHALL FIND LOVE
4 EVERYONE
1 AM HE AS U R WE & HE & SHE & US & THEM
HE IS HER & SHE & WHAT?
& WHO R U & WHODUNNIT?
GOO-GOO-GA-JOOB
THE WHO IS WHO?
CALLING PEOPLE NAMES
SEPARATION OF CHURCH & STATE
PLAYBACK THE REAL DEAL
U STOLE 4 YR MONEY
IT’S CALLED BY INVITATION
BY INVITATION, DAHLING
MUTUAL CONSENT
2 YR HEART’S CONTENT
BIRDS & THE BEES
PAYBACK THRU YR TEETH

Last summer in Vancouver I attended a screening of the cult documentary Helvetica—a biography of the classic sans-serif font designed in 1957. All 950 seats of the Ridge Theatre were filled, and I hadn’t felt as much energy in an audience since attending the 1993 taping of Nirvana’s MTV Unplugged at Sony Studios in New York. Had it been possible to buy tickets last summer in Vancouver I would have read: MEDIUM!

At Sony Studios in New York it was a tough crowd. Those who held up their hands as audience members used Macs, not PCs, and many were writers, artists and architects. Directed by Gary Hustwit, the documentary “Mac Users” by Mervyn Kurlansky and Cynthia Cosley, was a biog of this assumption, let me provide an answer. I’m beginning to think that being a visual thinker isn’t like being right-handed or red-haired; it was all decided the moment the sperm hit the egg. And just to be clear, being a visual thinker isn’t a preference like Country and Western music or romantically assumed that writing precluded the making of visual art. Wrong. To illustrate the result of this assumption, let me provide a generic reconstruction of an interview with me in, say, 1999, just before I figured things out:

INTERVIEWER: So, I read your book and, uh, you’re a visual thinker, aren’t you?

ME: Uh … yes.

INTERVIEWER: (pained silence).

ME: (pained silence).

INTERVIEWER: Yes, your work is so (insert loaded sigh here) visual.

ME (in my head): What is it with this person?

ME (out loud): Well, isn’t everybody a visual thinker? We all have eyes and we all see. How can people not be visual thinkers?

INTERVIEWER: (another sigh).

And there’s the gist of it. I tried for a decade to be a part of the book universe, and the harder I tried, the more I encountered that same feeling that might have been experienced, say, by a black musician walking into a Baltimore country club circa 1955, sitting down at a dinner table and expecting to be served. This is not a very good fit, is it?

And so, around 2000, I began to rethink my relationship with words. I looked back on the origins of my relationship with text to the first time I ever remember getting an almost erotic charge from words. This would have been from reproductions of Pop art in elementary school encyclopaedias: Roy Lichtenstein’s Whoa! or Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s Soup Cans. They were words, but they were something else, too. It was those words that landed me in art school in 1980, where I received my next dose of words that made me warm and tingly: the work of US artist Jenny Holzer. Holzer came to prominence in New York in the late 1970s. She generated truisms wherein she went through the great classics and reduced them down to sentences or fragments of sentences, a body of work referred to as Truisms. For example, Maviachelli’s The Prince boils down to abuse of power comes as no surprise. These truisms were then collected together in extensive lists and wheat-pasted on to the hoarding boards surrounding SoHo construction sites. These lists were in turn ripped from the walls by classmaters doing the art-student pilgrimage to New York and shown to me back in Vancouver. When I saw these ripped papers with their columns of hundreds of truisms, my brain popped like a popcorn kernel. Words were simply what they connoted: they were art objects and art supplies in themselves.

There is a eureka moment that most visual artists have at some point early in their career and, once the moment has happened, they take their first steps across the great divide between visual art and literary art, two camps to whom words mean totally different things. Once sensitised to text as an art object, the visual artist must, in way, learn his or her own language all over again from scratch. One looks at the shape of words and the texture of the paper they rest on. One looks not just at the book, but at its cover. Visual culture is a very free and permissive place; high culture, low culture, pop culture, all source material is permitted if it’s a part of your world.

Literary students, however, don’t relinquish their language from a visual and material standpoint. They are, if ‘anything, actively encouraged to consider the process infra dig, and are certainly never allowed to fetishise the physical, typographical form of a word. In France there exists the convention of standardised unemotional text-only book covers, basically a Salinger-like belief that a book (excuse me, a text) ought to speak for itself and not be compromised by such vulgarities as cover art, non-standardised fonts or author photos. Words exist only inasmuch as they denote something individually and collectively, but that is all they are. They’re merely little freight containers of meaning, devoid of any importance on their own. To see words as art on their own is hereesy.

This inflexibility makes sense to a non-visual thinker, but to visual thinkers such dogma is depressing and sad, like forcing ballerinas to wear suits of armour. Here’s a personal anecdote. Someone recently asked me what the most beautiful word I know is. I thought about it and the answer came quickly: my father used to have a floatplane with those call letters on the tailfin, ZRF—Zulu Romeo Foxtrot. The way these words looked on paper is gorgeous; the images they conjure are fleeting, rich, colourful and unexpected. To savour the look of Zulu Romeo Foxtrot on a page is almost the sound of one hand clapping. The letterforms mean something beyond themselves, but the meaning is not empirical—and it’s pretty hard for me to imagine discussing this at a literary festival. Doug, there’s no verb.

Here’s another question I was recently asked when I see words in my mind, what font are they in? The answer: Helvetica. What font do you think in? It’s a strange question, but you know what I’m getting at: how do you see actual words in your head as you think? Or do you see words at all? Is it a voice in your head? Do you see subtitles?

I think that an inevitable and necessary step for written culture over the next few decades is going to be the introduction of a détente between visual and literary worlds—so at the very least, an agreement to agree that they’re not mutually exclusive and that each feeds the other. The notion that literary experimentation ended with the publication of Finnegan’s Wake doesn’t leave much hope or inspiration for citizens on a digital planet a century later. Acknowledging the present and contemplating the future doesn’t mean discarding the past, and to be interested in print’s visual dimension isn’t the same as being anti-literary. People in the art world do a split-take when they hear that James Joyce is called ‘modern’. The literary world has the aura of a vast museum filled with floral watercolours and alpine landscapes, a space where pickled sharks will never be contemplated or allowed. Ten-year-olds now discuss fonts, leading and flush-righting paragraphs. Words are built of RGB pixels projected directly onto the retina for hours a day. Machines automatically translate spoken words into Japanese. Medium and message are melting into each other unlike ever before. Zulu Romeo Foxtrot.
TEXT EXCERPT FROM AN ONGOING NARRATIVE

TRIS VONNA-MICHELL

Recently while installing Finding Chopin I placed a sheet of paper on a shelving structure. It was an invitation flyer printed in the 1980s, depicting a collection of cassette tapes from various artists. It never made sense in terms of an overall picture nor as a sub-pass-over or sub-plot. A few hours later I took it back to the hotel room, and tried once again to find a better place for it to reside. In fact I took the entire material installation to the hotel, but also a special TeleX projector too. With difficulty I hobble across every thirty metres from a bridge with a bag full of small cable ties in search of anything that might welcome any new visual motifs. I knew that at 7pm the following night... I remember finding a base easily found, place it on the floor or the coffee table, position, open and keep ajar. Studio lights to the left and right of the arena. Soft-boxes made instantly by slipping ladies’ underwear on. Unroll the left and attach to the interior division buttons. Slab of opaque foil wrapped postcard holders to supply any additional radiance. Reflectors positioned accordingly to welcome any new visual motifs. The best way I knew how to rehearse had been with a screwdriver, mini-portable studio analogue camera. By dismantling the interior solitary spaces that accommodated the soon-to-be-spoken-words; and then capturing them in the most salient manner possible using a metal 1970s airline suitcase, suitable padded and rigid: a base easily found, place it on the floor or the coffee table, position, open and keep ajar. Studio lights to the left and right of the arena. Soft-boxes made instantly by slipping ladies’ underwear on. Unroll the left and attach to the interior division buttons. Slab of opaque plastic inserted upon the baseline of the lower case. Small battery-powered fluorescent tubes underfoowered and adorned by a variety of colours. Frivolous chocolate boxes with a golden gift and tin-foil wrapped postcard holders to supply any additional radiance. Reflectors positioned accordingly and the object soon to belong in an endless sequence of hotel vocabulary, for a hermetic syntax. Two wooden tape measuring sticks expanded and lodged into both undersides of the suitcase cushioning. Brilliant white, jet-black and grey long sleeve shirts, all 100% cotton and fresh to drape over the spectacle and twist intrinsically around the upright measuring sticks. Light weight tripod and 35mm analogue SLR camera with a healthy quantity of out-of-date film stock.

Wake-up call for 8am confirmed. Finding Chopin visual sequence still to be loaded in the carousel and ready for an early morning rehearsal. All other related original slides to be selected and dispatched for immediate duplication. Plastic archive boxes detached and further displaced from sought-after sequences: plants trees fungi and flora once contained... Categories of mounted and usurped slides followed my carbon footsteps. The same slides being used since the beginning, still surpassing yet erroneously passing by. Yes—passing my eye-view at an irregular pace; in buoyance to my hotel-image-acquisition-routine... Many more minutes pressed by and all within selected and contained moments many more words entered, found and left images wailing. Why so many words, ushered swiftly away from an attentive ear when so few remain stoic? When excited Chopin spoke French, I attempted to understand but often didn’t. When excited I spoke fast, he attempted to understand but probably didn’t. I drank two cups of coffee. He drank three glasses of red wine. Neither ate breakfast. Before leaving he asked me to photograph him, I obliged. Light box still on; archive boxes almost full inside a relatively spacious hotel room, located directly opposite an abandoned hair dressing salon.

Henri Chopin archive / Tris Vonna-Michell, installation at Museum im Kulturspeicher, Würzburg, 2008
The constellation, the word-group, replaces the verse. Instead of syntax it is sufficient to allow two, three or more words to achieve their full effect. They seem on the surface without interrelation and sprinkled at random by a careless hand, but looked at more closely, they become the centre of a field of force and define a certain scope. In finding, selecting and putting down these words [the poet] creates ‘thought objects’ and leaves the task of association to the reader, who becomes a collaborator and, in a sense, the completer of the poem.

Augusto de Campos
Tensão, 1956

HAROLDO DE CAMPOS

“Concrete poetry: tension of things-words in space time.” This phrase from one of Augusto de Campos’ theoretical texts, later incorporated into the ‘Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry’, explains the process of this poem. Its reading is open: you may depart from wherever you wish.

EUGEN GOMRINGER

The constellations, the word-group, replaces the verse. Instead of syntax it is sufficient to allow two, three or more words to achieve their full effect. They seem on the surface without interrelation and sprinkled at random by a careless hand, but looked at more closely, they become the centre of a field of force and define a certain scope. In finding, selecting and putting down these words [the poet] creates ‘thought objects’ and leaves the task of association to the reader, who becomes a collaborator and, in a sense, the completer of the poem.

Eugen Gomringer
flow grow show blow, 1954
NO IDEAS BUT IN THINGS

MICHELLE COTTON

“It began with a heart attack”, he said to the student from the city. “I had lived for sports like any other kid. They let me go to school. But no more baseball. No more running. I didn’t mind the running too much … there was a boy up the street I never could beat. But the rest. Not being with the others after school. I was forced back on myself. I had to think about myself. And I began to read.”

The student was visiting William Carlos Williams at his home in Rutherford, New Jersey, sometime in the mid-1950s; she had asked him how he began to write poetry. Williams’s response is characteristically diagnostic: the short statements, the medical verdict; there is even a (self-prescribed) treatment. The townspeople knew him as Doc Williams, the local physician and paediatrician, and from 1913 until 1951, the ground floor of his house in Rutherford had held his private practice. Poems were sometimes jotted down between appointments, on the spare prescription pads he kept in his car or at the office. There was a studio in the attic with a typewriter for more concentrated work. His college friend Ezra Pound moved to Europe, but Williams remained in Rutherford, finding all the material he needed in the life observed from his attic window or the patients he visited during the day. Medicine, he said, far from interfering, was ‘the very thing which made it possible for me to write … it was giving me terms, basic terms with which I could spell out matters as profound as I cared to think of’.

5. Williams, I Wanted to Write a Poem, p. 12.
New Jersey. His pastoral consisted in an idea of locality, reflecting his immediate situation in the subject and form of his writing. He drew on the American ‘idiom’ to structure his verse; this term, he said, was ‘better ... than language, less academic, more identified with speech.’

For Williams, idiom was not limited to something oral; it took on the increasing presence of the printed word in the home and on the street. The typographic design of the poems, their metrical arrangement, tone and phrase, and their collaged sense of reality referred to the way in which language was encountered at the diner or the general store. A poem describing the view from his studio is centred by the word ‘SODA’, the letters printed vertically down the page with a border of asterisks to represent the ‘running lights’ around the neon. Similarly, Brilliant Sad Sun (1927) begins with a menu:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LUNCH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spaghetti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a Speciality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and April (1930) quotes an entire list of ice-cream flavours, with their prices laid out in a column opposite. The same poem includes a pair of arrows and a skull-and-cross-bones amongst the words and symbols appropriated from signage.

Williams dealt with the objectness of words. He responded to how language was being reorganised by industry and technology; the way in which newspapers, advertising, packaging and other printed ephemera were communicating their message. The Imagist direct treatment of the ‘thing’ becomes translated, in Williams’s own terms, to a phrase that opens his epic Paterson (1946–1958): “No ideas but in things.” This objectness does away with commonplaces of opacity and ambiguity in the writing; complexity is everywhere—it doesn’t need to be invented. In contradistinction to Stéphane Mallarmé’s belief that ‘to name a thing is to destroy three-quarters of the poem’, things are named and presented on the page exactly as they appear in life, and yet they remain just as unfathomable. These words, clipped from a magazine or a programme on the radio, always remain so, part of a register or a specialised parlance, rather than a single voice.

Subjectivity, then, emerges from the way in which these word-objects are gathered together, assembled and apprehended subvoically, or audibly, by a human voice.

Sue Tompkins’s spoken-word performances, for instance, often involve pop songs, beginning from the middle and cut before the end. More Cola Wars includes a fragment from ‘I’m a Believer’, recorded by The Monkees in 1966 (via Robert Wyatt’s 1974 version) and finishes with ‘God Only Knows’, released by the Beach Boys the same year. Grease (2006) ends similarly with Frankie Valli’s title song from the 1978 film soundtrack. They sound different from the original versions, but unlike many of Tompkins’s citations, the words remain intact and the tune remains the same; they are direct quotations. Like Williams’s SODA sign or the fragment from the menu, they sit adjunct to the

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7. Williams, I Wanted to Write a Poem, p. 65.
10. Sue Tompkins, More Cola Wars, 2004
11. Williams, Paterson, W. W. Norton & Co, New York, 1995, p. 9. Williams use of this phrase in his poems pre-dates Paterson (e.g. A Song of Song, 1944) however its coinage is more often linked to Book 1 of Paterson.
You would “kill me with kindness”.
I love you too, but I love you too—
Thus, in that light and in that light only can I say—
Winter: Spring
abandoned to you. The world lost—in you
Is not that devastating enough
for one century?

I believe
Spumoni $1.00
French Vanilla .70
Chocolate .70
Strawberry .70
Maple Walnut .70
Coffee .70
Tutti Frutti .70
Pistachio .70
Cherry Special .70
Orange Ice .70
Biscuit Tortoni

25c per portion

trees—seeming dead:
the long years—
tactus eruditus

Maple, I see you have
a squirrel in your crotch—
And you have a woodpecker
in your hole, Sycamore
—a fat blonde, in purple
(no trucking on this street)

body of the writing, peripheral as opposed to core.

Apart from the prescription pads, Williams composed
his poetry and prose on a fold-up electric typewriter. In the
introduction to The Wedge (1944) he spoke of the poem as
a ‘machine made of words … its movement is intrinsic,
undulant, a physical more than literary character’. He was
fond of talking about writing in a way that expressed an
affinity with the practice of painting (having once consid-
ered being a visual artist himself), he went on to say:

When a man makes a poem, makes it, mind you, he
takes words as he finds them interrelated about him
and composes them—without distortion which would
mar their exact significances … It isn’t what he says
that counts as a work of art, it’s what he makes.

Objectness then, often involves a collection of words
that effectively constitute a unit: a song, a list, a phrase
taken piece-for-piece.

In the abstract compositions of Christopher Know-
les, optical patterns mapped out by typed characters
neighbour inventories of peoples’ names, song titles, sin-
gles charts etc. In Knowles’s work, it is language itself
that becomes adjunct. The text is ornamental, graphic,
arranged according to visual principles, but the scheme is
entirely limited by the typewriter. The colours are always
black, red and green, the paper is always of a certain
size and shape. The forms
that i at least can understand
in this mortal wind
wildly toss—

13. William Carlos Williams, The Wedge,
The Cummington Press, Massachusetts,
1944, p. 8.
15. Williams, I Wanted to Write a Poem,
p. 81.
16. Allen Ginsberg, ‘Notes After an Evening
with William Carlos Williams’, Poems,

The Cummington press, massachusetts,
1919.

The Wedge
83

Portents
17

Woman’s Ward

The soul, my God, shall rise up
—a tree
But who are You?

The forms
of the emotions are crystalline,
geometric-faceted. So we recog-

ized
only in the white heat of
understanding, when a flame
runs through the gap made
by learning, the shapes of things—
the ovoid sun, the pointed trees

to go and prowl around all those quar-
ries. And of course, they figured strongly in Pat-
erson. When I read the poems I was interested in that,
especially this one part of Paterson where it showed
all the strata levels under Paterson. Sort of a proto-

conceptual art, you might say.
Smithson ends the account with a reference to his 1967 *Artforum* essay, *The Monuments of Passaic*, which, he had suggested in a previous interview, ‘might be conceived of as a kind of appendix’ to *Paterson*. Smithson’s essay bears some stylistic resemblances to Williams’s writing, particularly in the textual fragments (from a newspaper, labels, signs, etc) that are fixed within the narrative of the essay. There is also a shared sense of the landscape and its merged material assemblage of geology and industry. Ultimately, though, *The Monuments of Passaic* presents the character of locality as we know it from Williams. Rutherford and the surrounding area become the subject of a work of Conceptual art and implied as a subject for Smithson’s work in general. Williams has become part of the idiom, and Passaic, an amalgation of past and future, Smithson asks if it has ‘replaced Rome as The Eternal City?’

Passaic center loomed like a dull adjective. Each ‘store’ in it was an adjective unto the next, a chain of adjectives disguised as stores … Actually, Passaic center was no center—it was instead a typical abyss or an ordinary void. What a great place for a gallery! Or maybe an ‘outdoor sculpture show’.


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Front cover: Anna Barham, Magnene, Emerald, Lago, 2009
Back cover: Frances Stark, I must explain, specify, rationalize, classify, etc., 2008

We lived beneath the mat, Warm and snug and fat, But one woe, and that Was the Cat!

To our joys a clog, In our eyes a fog, On our hearts a log, Was the Dog!

When the Cat’s away, Then The mice will play. But alas! one day, (So they say) Came the Dog and Cat, hunting for a Rat, Crushed the mice all flat. Each one at last. Under the mat, there lay the Cat.

The Mouse’s Tail
From Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, 1865

POOR. OLD. TIRED. HORSE. / CARROLL
Another preface... without a preface I cannot possibly go on. I must explain, specify, rationalize, classify, bring out the root idea underlying all other ideas in the book, demonstrate and make plain the essential griefs and hierarchy of ideas which are here isolated and exposed... thus enabling the reader to find the work's head, legs, nose, fingers and to prevent him from coming and telling me that I don't know what I'm driving at and that instead of marching forward straight and erect like the great writers of all ages, I am foolishly revolving ridiculously on my own axe. Then shall the fundamental overall anguish, there art thou great-grandmother of all. The deeper I dig, the more I explore and the more clearly do I see that in reality, the primary, the fundamental grief is purely and simply, in my opinion, the agony of bad form, defective appearance, phraseology, grimaces, faces... yes, this original, the source, the fount from which all flow harmoniously all the other griefs, follies, and afflictions without any exception whatsoever. Or perhaps it would be as well for me to realize that the primary and fundamental griefs are that born of the constraint of man by man, from the fact that we suffocate and squeeze the narrow and rigid idea of ourselves that others have of us.