

Introduction

The symposium *Poetry – Concrete* took place at the Weserburg in Bremen on June 17 and 18, 2011 in conjunction with the exhibition *Poetry Goes Art & Vice Versa* (May 21 to August 14, 2011) and with the international literature festival *poetry on the road*. It began on the evening of June 16 with a book presentation by Klaus Peter Dencker. The event doubled as the prelaunch for *poetry on the road*, which is organized and realized annually by the University of Applied Sciences Bremen and Radio Bremen.

This Research Centre for Artists' Publications symposium was carried out with support from the German Federal Cultural Foundation and in cooperation with the Institute for Culture Studies in the Arts at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) and the Museu de Arte Contemporânea at the Universidade de São Paulo as well as the Research Association Artists' Publications, in whose publication series this documentation of the symposium lectures is appearing. The Research Association Artists' Publications, which was founded as a cooperative partnership between scholars of the University of Bremen, the Jacobs University, the University of the Arts Bremen, the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen, and the Research Centre for Artists' Publications at the Weserburg as a means of initiating fundamental research in the field of artist publications, was accordingly also involved in the symposium.

The lectures, and with them the texts compiled here, roughly reflect two thematic focuses of the symposium:

The first revolves around the reciprocal international influence among the concrete poets: their interrelationships and joint exhibitions and publications. How did concrete poetry spread internationally? Who made reference to whom? What special characteristics are encountered in the individual countries? Which media and techniques did the artists work with?

The second focus thematizes the theoretical, artistic, cultural, and social foundations. What theoretical implications and interrelationships can be discerned? How are social and political influences to be assessed?

The aim of this symposium was thus to examine national developments and special contexts, as well as individual works, publications, and work complexes. Yet it also endeavored to shed light on the history of their international reception and draw attention to the international connections, relationships, and cooperation between concrete poets as a means of better illuminating the worldwide dissemination and diversification of concrete poetry.

Concrete poetry can be referred to, on the one hand, as the first global literature based on aesthetic principles and, on the other, as an art current spanning from the 1950s to 1980s. In this context, all forms of experimental, visual, auditive, and radiophonic poetry which developed from the 1950s through the end of the Bielefeld Colloquium in 2002 are subsumed under the generic term “concrete poetry.” Transcending artistic boundaries, these works can be ascribed to a realm located somewhere between text, image, and music. Artists from Latin America to Eastern Europe and North America to Asia worked with language as a medium and found a common aesthetic idiom. They networked with one another primarily by way of joint publications, meaning numerous artists’ publications of many different kinds. Concrete poetry is thus conveyed by every medium from artists’ books or magazines, objects, actions, editions, and graphic prints to video, film/television, theater, and radio, particularly in the form of the *Neues Hörspiel* (literally, “new radio play”). On account of their diversity, the involved artists not only defy categorization; they also created extremely extensive and complex oeuvres. In the process, their foremost aim was to experiment with the various possibilities offered by concrete, particularly visual, and auditive poetry.

In the interest of more stringent thematic cohesiveness, the sequence of the texts presented here deviates from that of the corresponding lectures held at the symposium. The first three of the texts appearing in this documentation reflect a comprehensive approach and address general aspects of concrete poetry.

Citing artists’ writings as an example, Anne Thurmann-Jajes investigates the situation of concrete poetry at the time of its emergence, demonstrating the decisive degree to which the numerous manifestos and artist texts contributed to the formation of concrete poetry as an art current, and to the further development of its forms.

In a lecture devoted to so-called optical poetry, Klaus Peter Dencker draw up a formal history of poetry visualizations from antiquity to the present. This category also comprises concrete poetry and the forms that developed from it.

Jacques Donguy retraces the developments of the various forerunners to concrete and visual poetry and describes their importance for the Brazilian Noigandres Group and such French artists as Pierre Garnier, as well as for the development toward three-dimensionality and digital poetry.

The ensuing four texts focus on special developments and contexts as well as prominent works or work complexes in the individual countries.

Sergio Antonio Bessa examines the literary foundations of the concrete poetry of the Noigandres Group in Brazil in the 1950s and, taking texts and individual works by Augusto and Haroldo de Campos as his point of departure, elucidates the significance of Stéphane Mallarmé and Ezra Pound for their work, and the manner in which the two writers influenced the development of the Brazilians’ concrete poetry.

Sabine Hänsgen reconstructs the emergence of concrete poetry in the Russia of the *samizdat* era and—pointing to the great impact of the avant-garde conceptions of poetic language developed at the beginning of the twentieth century—the role played by the Russian vanguard in that process. She substantiates her theories with examples of works by the artists Rea Nikonova and Serge Segay as well as Vilen Barsky, Vsevolod Nekrasov, and Dmitri Prigov.

Fred Andersson directs his attention toward concrete poetry in the Nordic or Scandinavian countries and shows how their political references relate to their experimental form. Within this framework, he provides an overview of the artistic activities in the respective countries in the 1960s and 1970s.

Jesper Olsson in turn investigates the concrete poetry of the 1950s and 1960s in Sweden, taking as his basis the dichotomy between invented codes and natural imagery, which he terms the “algorithmic imagination.” He shows how this double stance in Swedish concrete poetry was present from the start and can be considered its chief distinguishing characteristic.

The participation of the artists Franz Mon, Eugen Gomringer, Gerhard Rühm, and Jean-François Bory lent the symposium a very special flavor. They reported on the beginnings of concrete poetry and presented some of their own works. Their presence, along with that of the two artists Klaus Peter Dencker and Timm Ulrichs, served to give concrete and visual poetry striking vividness and a seal of authenticity for all attending the symposium.

Franz Mon’s lecture text provides an overview of the beginnings of concrete and visual poetry in the German-speaking countries, and also insight into the nuclei of this art current in 1950s Switzerland, Western Germany, and Austria as well as the German Democratic Republic.

Eugen Gomringer begins with a clarification of the term *concrete* and discusses the significance of concrete art for the emergence of concrete poetry. In this context, he points to the spirit of the times – the brevity of time, the brevity of communication – while also showing how the “brevity” of concrete poetry relates to the advent of communication theory and cybernetics.

A description of his own early works from the early 1950s provides a foundation for Gerhard Rühm’s personal remarks on concrete poetry, as does the influence of literary expressionism and surrealism, which played an important role in his activities. He moreover addresses the topic of concrete poetry within the framework of the Vienna Group and goes on to describe his first encounters with Eugen Gomringer and Dieter Roth as well as how, over the course of time, a great number of new artistic friendships formed within the scope of the many international festivals.

Jean-François Bory likewise provides an overview of his concrete poetry activities, for example his editorship of the magazines *Approches*, *Agentzia* (with Jochen Gerz), and *l’Humidité*. First, however, he recounts how concrete poetry took hold in France and how his magazine editing activities put him in contact with the international concrete and visual poetry vanguard.

The final three texts in this book are devoted to the oeuvres of individual artists.

Sabine Gebhardt Fink sheds light on Kurt Marti's concrete poetry works from the 1960s onward. Against the background of the political situation in 1950s Switzerland, she describes the societal moods to which writers and artists were subjected and explains why so many of them left the country.

In highlighting the general division of Carlfriedrich Claus's oeuvre – into his widely known works of visual poetry in the form of handwritten “language sheets” executed from the 1960s onward, on the one hand, and his early experiments with concrete poetry in the 1950s, on the other – Annette Gilbert explicitly focuses on his early poetry in her thematic explorations. She describes the various aspects and forms of his concrete poetry and retraces their development.

Simone Homem de Mello characterizes the concrete poetry oeuvre of Augusto de Campos by describing his methods of omission or reduction, his search for a new form of literary notation, and his striving for new channels and media for dissemination. In the process, she provides an overview of de Campos's concrete poetry from its beginnings in the early 1950s to the present.

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I am especially indebted to the authors and artists for their lectures and their willingness to answer the audience's many questions. Through their presence and lively presentations, they made the symposium a great experience for all attending. For this I would hereby like to express my warmest gratitude.

Anne Thurmann-Jajes