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VISUAL POETRY
MAIL-ART PROJECT BY LUC FIERENS
From Concrete to Visual Poetry, with a Glance into the Electronic Future.
by Klaus Peter Dencker

Since the 1960s I have established myself in the middle ground between literature, visual art, and film, practically and theoretically; what has been especially exciting has been investigating the origin and history of these border zones. (1)

Thus, beginning with the origins of writing, the picture alphabets, we have examples of the mixing of image & text from the Greek magical papyri to the early figure poems of the Greek bucolic poets, Porfiry's Latin gris poems, the variants of the successors to the Carolingian Renaissance, the Baroque text figures, the scrolls of the sixteenth century and their predecessors up to the free text-pictures of the turn of the century somewhat as in Mallarmé and Apollinaire, which the experiments of the futurists and dadaists followed, continued, and expanded, to entirely unique forms brought through by the artists of concrete and visual poetry of the second half of the twentieth century.

Concrete poetry got its name at the beginning of the 1950s. It is a language form that is closed, international, and non-mimetic, proceeding from the material qualities of language: from the verbal, sound, and visual materiality of words. The graphic forms of single letters, the white space of the book page, the constellation of letters vis-à-vis one another, the change of reading habits, the combinatory possibilities of letters and words on a surface, the ignoring of syntax and metaphor, the free play with language material that simultaneously goes against the literalness of language-this calls for a whole new reception attitude on the reader's part. No customary left-right reading will work, no usual sentences, no given sequencing, not even words that had once been complete-the reader must himself become productive, discover constellations, determine double meanings of words, develop his own history with the language material being offered.

The term concrete poetry emerged in 1953 in a manifesto by the Swedish artist Ödvin Fahlström. In 1954 Eugen Gomringer defines and describes concrete poetry in his manifesto "Vom Vers zur Konstellationen" (From Verse to Constellation), without using the term. This he first uses in 1956, after which he met the representatives of the Brazilian Noigandres group at the Ulm Hochschule (Ulm College). There Gomringer was secretary to the Swiss constructivist Max Bill; this line of connection shows the closeness of concrete art and concrete poetry.

The term concrete poetry, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, was often used synonymously with visual poetry. But this description merely refers to the visual/ form of appearance of concrete poetry. This visual realization of concrete poetry texts must be strictly differentiated based on different qualities, predomiance, and functions of elements foreign to art-from works of international visual poetry that have been developing in parallel. (2)

Put otherwise, only by force do the visual components of concrete poetry emerge from this poetry's already inevitable organization of text- and letter-material. Thus, the end product appears not as picture but as constellation, of whose necessary space and surfaces we become conscious.

The internally orderly constellation of concrete poetry was in principle an artistic form in the best of cases had a representational character. The words were investigated as words and were not seen with their regard to their environmental function. Concrete poetry understood the word as material word, as sign.

Visual poetry can make use of the word always only in context, in connection with its source or origin, its environment (poster, advertisement, catalogue, letter, and so on). The source must be recognizable; only then is it worth it to place this word in its entire special context function, so that aspects result that are critical, humorous, or even theoretically recognizable. In this way, several tasks come together-language criticism, social criticism, criticism of more complex or more primitive language communication, and so on.

Visual poetry:
It doesn't limit itself to a definite culture area of language condition: visual poetry is international, found on all continents, and has existed for centuries.
It is intermediate and interdisciplinary; that is, it is not limitable to a definite artistic discipline like literature, visual art, film, photography, computers, and so on: it is found among all the arts and therefore among all the media. (3)

JOHN M. BENNETT (USA)

& LUC FIERENS (BELGIUM)
It is not the object of science, yet at the same time is the object of many disciplines; literature, art, typography, advertising, media, and so on. It seemingly possesses no history, yet at the same time ties together many lines of development and influences, not the least being a paradigm shift from the culture marked as literary to that of the visual and of media of this century.

It seems to be absent from the awareness of publishers and gallery owners, or it is regarded as out of date, but at the same time it is present in many of the world's great collections and museums; it is regarded as not "marketable" by big presses or known galleries, but continues with an unbroken power of production to be exhibited in a plethora of subversive exhibition spaces and goes on being published by small presses. It possesses no single form of appearance and does not allow itself to be frozen on certain techniques, materials, formal or content programs: its versatility is its program.

Finally, visual poetry can be seen as a possible form of expression in the development of our information- and communications society. Visual poetry can react to the new forms of media (video, computer, holography, laser, and so on), is a form of expression independent of a certain medium, which can enter creatively and innovatively into interactive communications models. (5)

Or plain and simple in a sentence:

If concrete poetry has been made to serve against the wearing out of language and for the discovery of a new literality, a new material and language awareness, the chief service of visual poetry lies in the discovery of a new context awareness and new language reference systems, whereby language no longer means alphabetic language. (...) 

Paradigmatically, a genre like visual poetry itself could now innovatively embrace the audiovisual media and with them become interactively productive for recipients (and vice versa), to counter the danger of increasing reproductivity that is able through a flood of pictures, the exhaustion of language, and word reduction to work against the ominous leveling of reception ability being driven by the rapid development of technology. (6)

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"found" each other in this linguistic laboratory, from which technological society has taken ideas and suggestions of all kinds.

(4)
in this exhibition we show examples of all these new forms:
- video / performance: Akenoton, C. Podin, B. Ferrando, Julien Blaine etc.
- computer / webpoetry etc: Eduardo Koc, Loss Pequeno Flouzier, R. Summers, Burgaud, Phil. Menezes ....
- holography: Eduardo Koc

in his essay "Digital longu(im)oge " Jim Andrews explains the connections between visual poetry, mail-art & web art.
"Another of the reasons for long (im-age reoltes to the international dimension of communication on the Web, and can be glimpsed in relation to an important predecessor of Web art : Mail Art. The parallels between the two are interesting: both involve close communication between the makers of the art, through the larger audience is more easily included via Web art... both are quite widely international in their scope and audience, and offer maker and audience alike knowledge of and solidarity with the actions and spirit of a gobol, participatory art.... The Web is a natural progression from Mail Art in spirit and media. ....

- you can find the complete essay (1998) on http://www.vispo.com

(6)
I odd some personal statements of mail-artists concerning visual poetry: Dave Baptist Chirot & Alfredo Torres on the work of Clemente Padin.

* Visual poetry establishes a paradoxical possibility. It must be read, but that reading, by itself is useless, absolutely unconductive. It can be seen, but this vision, by itself, is equally useless and unconductive. It can be seen-read, intertwining meanings, playing very seriously with the imagination, with the disregarded active capacity of creation that is the essential condition of the contemplative act.
- from the text “Subversions and paradoxical discourses” by Alfredo Torres, Montevideo (Uruguay) july 2000

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I Love and Hate You,
    Tenderly and Cruelly . . .

I miss you and wish you were still with me now.

I remember you fondly and foolishly, and fondly, foolishly wish you were still with me now.

Foolishly, I fondly recall your voice and things you said to me, and foolishly, fondly, wish we were still together. Often I think I've seen you at the edge of my vision, quickly turn, but too late; you are gone.

Or I think something funny, sad, puzzling, or strange, and, fondly, foolishly call out to you, to share it, foolishly forgetting you're not with me now.

Then, oh, how I hate you, tenderly and cruelly, and fondly, foolishly, miss you, and wish you were still with me now.

#   #   #

--Cyril A. Dostal

The Poet as Lawyer

I enter with the defendant, beam the jury a smile, press flesh with His Honor, joke and joust with the prosecutor, but in the end put my client into the place he dreads most to be.

The chair.

#   #   #

--Cyril A. Dostal

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MINE DEMO HAKE PION
NESC OISE AKED ONAG
CENT ELLE DOWN NAGE
GALL LEVE LICE EVAN
ALLI EVER CENT VANE
LIVA ERAG TIAT NESC
VANT RAGE IATE CENT

hugo PONTES
Brasil

HUGO PONTES (BRASIL)
Nawoord

Met dit project wil ik aandacht vestigen op de "Visual Poetry beweging" binnen het MAIL-ARTNetwork en de kruisbestuiving tussen beiden.

Een drietal jaren heb ik research gedaan naar de pioniers en de activisten binnen beide bewegingen, de poesia visiva binnen de "Visual Poetry" verwijst naar mijn visie "in the spirit of mailart as a social spirit"(D.B.Chirot). MAIL-ART is SOCIAL ART.

Mail-art is en blijft een open beweging met een niet-hierarchische structuur. Het blijft een nieuw medium en de beweging herbront zich steeds.

Mail-art is de breedste avant-gardebeweging sinds 1962 en maakt nog steeds "echte" communicatieve connecties in allerlei kunst, sociale, politieke en maatschappelijke gebieden over de hele (anti-)globale wereld via alle mogelijke "inter"media (internet, klassiek postsysteem, performance, installaties, polipoëzie, hedendaagse dans, postfluxisme, enz.).

I want to thank, first of all, the more than 300 contributors (from 40 countries) and people who helped me in my three years of research: Linda Pelati, Philippe Castellin, Dmitry Bulatov, Michel Leclerc, K.P.Dencker, D.B.Chirot, C.Padin, Karl Young, Michael Basinski, Catharina De Vos & my wife Annino Van Sebroeck and the mail-artists who published & distributed my mail-artcall: Guido Vermeulen, Alexis Bracho & Judith A.Hoffberg.

I also want to share with all of you my enthousiasm and energy to spread the democratic "virus" of MAIL ART in these witchhunting times since Sept. 11.2001

I will continue to show our mail-art projects for a wider public:
We have shown our "Social art" m.a.coll. in the City Museum Oud Hospitaal of Aalst last summer during the retrospective: "Artgalleries in Aalst from '68 till today" (curator L.Lambrecht)- with the help of gallery c. de vos.

we fight on in spirit

Luc Fierens
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P.S.: I prefer old-fashioned snail-mail but use my e-mail for quick answers and our new internetsite is being updated in the following months so ....

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