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THE CONCRETE POETRY MOVEMENT IN BRITAIN AND AVANT-GARDISM

BY

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ABSTRACT

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The Concrete poetry movement was an international movement of visual and sound poetry during the nineteen sixties. This thesis is an account of the Concrete poetry movement's history in Britain and its relationship to the concept of avant-gardism. It presents Britain's contribution towards the movement and an account about an aspect of Britain's own literary history which has otherwise remained neglected. This account of the Concrete poetry movement in Britain is presented through the concept of the avant-garde, meaning an arts movement which challenges cultural and social tradition. The primary research question of the thesis is: in what way did the Concrete poetry movement behave as an avant-garde? The thesis argues that the Concrete poetry movement in Britain was a post-modern avant-garde through its existence as a decentred group and through the way that its poetry was formally innovative; a challenge to the realist convention of the author; and on the side of libertarian politics.

The first chapter addresses the notion of an avant-garde as a historical movement and introduces the Concrete poetry movement in Britain as reflective of a post-modern kind of radical arts group. The remainder of the chapters address the notion of avant-gardism as a challenge to cultural and social tradition in relation to Concrete poetry and its post-modern context. The second chapter considers Concrete poetry's relationship to the concept of the new; the third chapter considers Concrete poetry's relationship to the concept of the author; and the fourth chapter concludes the thesis by considering Concrete poetry's relationship to libertarian politics.

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Acknowledgements

The Concrete Poetry Movement in Britain and Avant-Gardism

Introduction

The Concrete poetry movement was an international movement of visual and sound poetry during the nineteen sixties. The movement was launched at the 1956 'National Exposition of Concrete Art' at the Sao Paulo Museum of Modern Art around the poetry of the Noigandres group from Brazil and the Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer (b. 1924).[1] By the nineteen sixties the movement represented a host of intermedial experiments between the verbal, the visual, and the aural, and the term 'Concrete poetry' will be used in this thesis as a general term referring to this wide range of intermedial experiments. The movement in Britain spanned approximately a decade from 1960 to 1970. The main poets of the movement in Britain were Bob Cobbing (1920-2002), Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925-2007) and Dom Sylvester Houédard (1924-1992). Other Concrete poets involved in the movement in Britain included Paula Claire, Thomas A. Clark (b. 1944), Kenelm Cox (1927-1968), Simon Cutts (b. 1944), Henri Chopin (1922-2008), Brion Gysin (1916-1986), Tom Edmonds (1944-1971), John Furnival (b. 1933), Michael Gibbs (b. 1949), Andrew Lloyd (b. 1943), Hansjörg Mayer (b. 1943), Peter Mayer, Neil Mills, Edwin Morgan (b. 1920), Cavan McCarthy (b. 1943), Tom Phillips (b. 1937), Dieter Rot (1930-1998), John Sharkey (b. 1936), and Charles Verey (b. 1940). In Britain and elsewhere the Concrete poetry movement existed outside of the literary and artistic establishment and was mostly ignored by literary criticism. This thesis is an account of this movement's submerged history in Britain and its relationship to the concept of avant-gardism. Britain serves as a geographical limit for this study with the work of British Concrete poets as well as

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[1] The dates of authors associated with the concrete arts are not given in this thesis when they are unknown.

Concrete poetry that took place within Britain. By limiting the study to Britain I aim to give a means of grasping a nation's contribution towards the movement and of giving an account about an aspect of Britain's own literary history which has otherwise remained neglected. By limiting the study to Britain this study also seeks to further knowledge about the international Concrete poetry movement and of post-war literature in Britain.

The primary research question of the thesis is: in what way did the Concrete poetry movement behave as an avant-garde? The term avant-garde was originally a French military term to describe troops in the front line of battle and was used in the early decades of the 1800s by anarchists such as Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier to designate the politically revolutionary. Around 1848 when Gabriel-Desire Lavendant wrote his essay 'The Mission of Art and the Role of Artists' the term was used to describe art's role in advancing a new socio-political world and by 1909 under the Futurists the term has come to be associated almost exclusively with innovative arts. What are known as the avant-gardes, however, refers typically to literary and artistic movements in the twentieth century whose work is considered to be aesthetically and politically advanced for their time and which shock the bourgeois classes through their innovation. This thesis understands the term avant-garde to mean an arts movement which is aesthetically and politically radical and argues that the Concrete poetry movement in Britain was a post-modern avant-garde which challenged dominant cultural and social ideology through the way it existed as a decentred group and through the way that its poetry was formally innovative; a challenge to the realist convention of the author; and on the side of libertarian politics.

The first chapter addresses the notion of an avant-garde as a historical movement and introduces the Concrete poetry movement in Britain as reflective of a new kind of

radical arts group in the post-modern, or post-war, period which I understand as the period after the Second World War. The remainder of the chapters address the notion of avant-gardism as a challenge to cultural and social tradition in relation to Concrete poetry and its post-modern context. The second chapter considers Concrete poetry's relationship to the concept of the new; the third chapter considers Concrete poetry's relationship to the concept of the author; and the fourth chapter concludes the thesis by considering Concrete poetry's relationship to libertarian politics.

This thesis attempts to show in what way the Concrete poetry movement in Britain behaved as an avant-garde in terms of being a group and a group of poetries. The last three chapters present what this thesis finds to be the three major aspects of how the poetry was understood by the movement to be avant-garde and which reflects how the movement was avant-garde in a post-modern way. These three aspects are substantiated by drawing on theory but it is with these three aspects that the ideological, analytical, and historicising aspects of the movement's poetics are engaged and which this thesis discusses the avant-gardism of Concrete poetry in relation to. What emerges is a movement with a submerged understanding of itself as an avant-garde and which the first chapter will account as reflective of a new type of avant-garde movement for the post-war period.

Chapter One: The Concrete Poetry Movement as Post-Modern

1.0 The Movement as Decentred

This chapter describes the Concrete poetry movement in Britain as an avant-garde group and suggests that it existed as a new kind of avant-garde group in the post-modern period. The use of the term 'post-modern' to describe the Concrete poetry movement as an avant-garde should be distinguished from the common use of the term 'neo avant-garde' to describe the arts in the post-war period. This latter term will be discussed in the course of this thesis but both its meaning, together with that of the term 'post-modern', is used to indicate the post-war arts as a stylistically more extreme continuation of the modernist period. The former term is specifically used in this chapter to describe the avant-garde nature of the Concrete poetry movement as a group in that this term when it is used as a cultural concept is associated with the notion of the decentred. The critic Monika Kilian defines the difference between modernity and post-modernity when she writes: 'Debating the merits of universality and transcendence on the one hand and particularity and contingency on the other thus defines the relation between modern and postmodern discourse.'[2] Given this characterisation of the concept of the post-modern as decentred in comparison to the concept of the modern, this chapter understands the Concrete poetry movement in Britain as a post-modern group. I suggest that the Concrete poetry movement in Britain was a post-modern avant-garde in the way that it existed as a non-elitist and transitory group and in its relationship to the concept of marginality.

I will now describe how the Concrete poetry movement in Britain was different to the traditional avant-garde group. An avant-garde is traditionally thought of as what the critic Harold Rosenberg describes in his essay, 'Collective, Ideological,

Combative', as an 'ideological community'[3] which is a tightly-knit group of artists centred around a leader and producing work that is considered new and reflective of some central belief disseminated in manifestos which has given that group its identity. The Concrete poetry movement in Britain was not a conventional avant-garde movement in that it was not an ideological community. In an interview with Zurbrugg, Guattari describes the sound poetry he witnessed at the international Polyphonix festivals in France during the nineteen eighties as comprising of poets in 'open or fragmented coalitions of fellow artists, rather than as more systematic, programmatic movements.'[4] He argues that with this dissolution of the original avant-garde group comes about an existential function where there is a 're-individualis[ing]' of 'subjectivity and creativity'.[5] Evidence of a re-invigoration of Concrete poetry will be discussed in the next chapter as a hybrid between itself and other genres of poetry rather than a consequence of group dynamics, although I would suggest that the Concrete poetry movement of the nineteen sixties was not a closed group of individuals united by a body of theory but rather an open group manifested largely through the action of publishing and performing.

Unlike the original avant-gardes, the Concrete poetry movement in Britain did not have a strong sense of group identity and poets could contribute to the movement without necessarily belonging to it. Two groups of concrete poets did emerge in Britain which are represented in the 1974 anthology *Gloup and Woup* and existed as a loose affiliation and parody of the original avant-garde group as seen by their comic names. 'GLOUP' (Gloucestershire Group) was a name given by the U.S. poet

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[2] Monika Kilian, *Modern and Postmodern Strategies: Gaming and the Question of Morality* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), pp. 1-2.
[3] Harold Rosenberg, 'Collective, Ideological, Combative', *Arts News Annual XXXIV*, ed. by Thomas B. Hess and John Ashbery (1968), pp. 75-79 (p. 75).
[4] Felix Guattari, 'Postmodernism and Ethical Abdication: An Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg', *The Guattari Reader*, ed. by Gary Genosko (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 114-117 (p. 116).

Jonathan Williams to the Concrete poets who lived in the West of England which included Houédard, and the visual artists Furnival and Cox. 'WOUP' (Westminster Group), was a name given by Cobbing and the poet Peter Mayer to a London group in 1969 which came to include poets, painters, sculptors, and photographers. These were Chopin, Cobbing, Jennifer Cobbing, Edmonds, Ossie James, Keith Martin, Peter Mayer, Hansjörg Mayer, Sharkey, Alan Riddell, Stefan Themerson, and Edmund Wright.

Concrete poetry reached Britain in late 1960 when the U.S. writer William Burroughs (1914-1997) and the British-U.S. poet and artist Brion Gysin visited England to disseminate their radical techniques for literary composition known as the cut-up and the permutation poem. An exhibition of visual poetry from British and U.S. poets took place at the Richard Demarco Gallery in Edinburgh called 'Experimental Poetry' between 30th October and 22nd November 1969 which included work from the U.S. by Burroughs, Michael McClure, and Aram Saroyan. It was not until 1962 when the Portuguese poet E. M. de Melo e Castro published a letter in the 25th May issue of *The Times Literary Supplement* (*TLS*) about Concrete poetry in response to a previous article in the *TLS* called 'Poetry, Prose and the Machine'[6] that British poets first became aware of the movement and which they became engaged with by 1963. Some of the first Concrete poetry published in Britain is in the pop artist Richard Hamilton's essay on the ideogrammatic books of Dieter Rot in issue five of *Typographica* magazine in June 1961. Concrete poetry is what the theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari would call a 'minor literature' in that individuals do not distinguish themselves in the sense of possessing exceptional technical skills, for, as Deleuze and Guattari write, 'talent isn't abundant in minor literature, there are no

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[5] Ibid.

possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that "master" and that could be separated from a collective enunciation.'[7] Cobbing, Finlay, and Houédard were the main poets of the movement in Britain only in that they contributed the most to the movement's critical and creative activities and were also the most involved with the movement internationally. All of them during the movement were either in communication or collaboration with Concrete poets abroad.

These poets had also been producing visual poems before the nineteen sixties. Whilst working for the military intelligence service in India in 1945, Houédard started experimenting with the use of full-stops to make graphic patterns which he called 'latinesques' because of their similarity to the Arabic alphabet. In 1954 Cobbing made his first visual and sound poem called 'Worm.' These examples, however, did not belong to the Concrete poetry movement because they did not lead to any sustained period of related activity and did not contribute or reciprocate any larger aim beyond the private for which a group identity was needed. In an interview with the critic Eric Mottram, Houédard describes the way in which some sense of group identity was important to the movement in Britain and how that it was only when he knew about the Concrete poetry movement that he felt that he could produce work, explaining that 'unless you know there are other people doing the same thing, you can't communicate and when you can't communicate, you can't really produce things.'[8] It was for a sense of group activity which would aid creativity that the letter from Castro was significant for the British Concrete poets. As Houédard says, Castro's letter meant the 'beginning

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[6] Special Correspondent, 'Poetry, Prose and the Machine', *Times Literary Supplement* (4th May 1962), p. 310.
[7] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 17.
[8] Dom Sylvester Houédard, Interview with Eric Mottram at the Poetry Society (Unpublished, 9th April 1973), 1-53 (p. 13). Eric Mottram Archive, Special Collections Library, King's College, The University of London. Ref. 5/115/1-14.

of an awareness of what was happening in so many parts of the world.'[9] For the theorist Pierre Bourdieu the proper names which designate various categories of avant-garde art 'produce existence', as he says, 'in a world in which the only way to *be* is to be *different*, to 'make one's name', either personally or as a group.'[10] The naming of 'poesia concreta' by Castro in the *TLS*, however, played another role in producing recognition of British poets in a direction to which they were already inclined towards. The naming of Concrete poetry was productive not only at a conceptual classifying level, in helping to mark off and think about a set of texts differently from others, but also practically in that its appearance in the correspondence section of a newspaper opened up a discursive channel for poets to find eventual contact necessary for participation as a group. The significance of this letter for the Concrete poetry movement in Britain was made public at the 'Arlington Quadro' international exhibition of Concrete poetry from 3rd August to 15th September 1968. This was organised by De Melo e Castro and Verey and displayed the work of British and Portuguese poets as a homage to De Melo e Castro's letter.

A reaction against a closed group in the Concrete poetry movement can be seen in Sharkey's response to Garnier's 1963 manifesto, 'Position I of the International Movement', which had tried to consolidate the movement as an international one and which had been signed by twenty-five poets from fourteen countries that included Finlay, Houédard, Furnival, Anselm Hollo, Morgan, and the art critic Herbert Read. This manifesto was first published in Britain in *Link* arts magazine with an English translation by Houédard. Sharkey rejected this manifesto which set out a number of stylistic categories for trying to recuperate stylistic differences in a semblance of a

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[9] Ibid.
[10] Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods' (1986), *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. by Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), pp. 74-111 (p. 106).

united movement. He writes in his essay, 'An Explanation of Poesie-Concrete in a 1000 Words? In One Word? The WORD': 'i reject this idea of a "movement", this comingtogetherness for the sake of massed values, massed strength & apparent solidity. (sic)'[11]

I would suggest that transitory collaborations replaced the closed group and were indicative of the nature of the open group for the Concrete poetry movement in Britain. Concrete poetry was able to develop in Britain partly through the art colleges in the West of England in which the poet could realise technically more ambitious work that had not been possible in the nineteen fifties, and it was Houédard, as Bann suggests in a lecture at a 1967 exhibition of Concrete poetry, who was instrumental in this development through his publicizing the aims of the Concrete poem.[12] In 1963 Houédard met Furnival who had already been applying words to canvases and introduced him to the Concrete poem. From this meeting they established the Openings Press at the Bath Academy of Art in Corsham where Furnival taught. Edward Wright who was head of graphics at Chelsea School of Art would become the typographical editor of the press. In 1965 Jasia Reichardt who was director of the ICA recommended that Furnival and Hansjörg Mayer become members of staff in the Graphic Design Department at the Bath Academy of Art and at the same time Tom Phillips became a member of the Painting Department. Openings Press was organised around collaboration. It began in 1964 and produced works largely designed to be mailed. Its first series of publications from 1965 to 1967 was called 'Openings' which consisted of nine folded works that had been made jointly by printers, typographers, artists, and poets and featured poems by Louis Zukofsky, Augusto de Campos (b.

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[11] John Sharkey, 'An Explanation of Posie-Concrete in a 1000 Words? In One Word? The WORD', *Poetmeat*, No. 6 (1964), unpaginated, p. 3 of 3.
[12] Stephan Bann, 'Introduction', *An Exhibition of Concrete poetry* (East Kent & Folkestone Arts Centre, 25th November – 5th December, 1967), p. 1 of 2.

1931), Finlay, Themerson, Houédard, Finlay, Ronald Johnson, Mayer, and Phillips. 'Plakats' was a series of ten Concrete poems and graphics on card which ran from 1965 to 1969 and featured poems by Houédard, Loncraine, Furnival, Nichol, Finlay, Jiri Valoch, Blaine, Phillips, Philip Ward, and Dowden. 'Card Series' was a series of eight poems and graphics on card, smaller than the 'Plakats' which ran in 1969 and featured poems by Patrick Bridgewater, Houédard, Phillips, Valoch, Richard Kostelanetz, Furnival, and Houédard. The 'Freewheel' exhibition that took place between the 5th and 20th May 1967 at the Midland Group Gallery in Nottingham was meant to show the work made between poets and graphic artists at the Bath Academy of Art which involved the production and conception of visual poems. The project was initiated and supervised by Furnival with Finlay and Houédard working on independent ideas in collaboration with a student artist. The exhibition 'Arlington-Two' from 13th to 14th July 1967 was also based around collaboration in which Furnival, Finlay, and Houédard suggested concepts for verbal projects to art students at the School of Audio-Visual Communications at the Bath Academy of Art and which were published as part of the 'folder' series by Openings Press. The exhibition space was divided into three rooms with one allocated for each of the poet's collaborative efforts. Finlay's project was called *Headlines: Eavelines* and had involved sending thirteen sheets of pretend headlines in as many days to typographic students in order for them to interpret and produce a folio of graphic prints which used letterpress, lithography and silk-screen printing methods. Furnival's work was centred on the seven Greek vowels and their connected colours and planets whilst Houédard had wanted responses to be made to the Sanskrit word 'ta' meaning 'to expand' which were then painted on the structures around the building of the mill where the exhibition took place as a form of environmental art. By working alongside

an educational department the poets had found a means with which to develop Concrete poetry in unexpected directions relevant to the context of the circumstances of that specific exhibition.

It was through the collaboration necessitated by craftsmanship in British Concrete poetry that this poetry came close to moving art into production as it had been under Constructivism. For the Russian Constructivists abstract art was for the service of the historical materialism of the Communist Party. The emergence of Concrete art registered the transition of Constructivist art from the East to the West where having contributed to the environment of a socialist state it became more of an aestheticism. Chopin, who had witnessed in France during the riots of May 1968 the weaknesses of both right and left-wing political forces, suggests in his essay, *Poesie Sonore*, that the Concrete poetry movement evolved outside of the hierarchy of the traditional avant-garde group in that none of its electronic sound poets were 'concerned', as he says, 'with AN OLD DICTATORIAL SPIRIT WHICH WOULD MAKE IT NECESSARY TO CONDUCT THE POTENCY OF A MESSAGE, and NONE OF THEM HAS DIRECTED A GROUP (sic)'.[13] The breakdown to the elite and dogmatic avant-garde group leading humanity was reflective of a wide-spread change amongst political revolutionaries in the post-war period. The Marxist theorist Herbert Marcuse describes in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* how 'organizations of self-determination, self-government' had come about in post-war society as successors to the old powerful parties of the masses in order to find 'new adequate sources of initiative, organization, and leadership.'[14]

With the breakdown of the traditional avant-garde group, Concrete poetry discovered transitory collaboration as a way of organising itself as an avant-garde

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[13] Henri Chopin, 'Poesie Sonore' (extracts), trans. by Ulises Carrion & Michael Gibbs, *Kontexts*, No. 8 (Spring, 1976), pp. 4-5 (p. 4).

group. Houédard's introduction in the catalogue, however, for the 'Freewheel' exhibition suggests that there was an implicit underlying social activism behind the craft aesthetic of Concrete poetry in Britain because of the collaboration it involved. Collaborations between different disciplines had been one of the outcomes of the Constructivist movement in Russia after the 1917 socialist revolution and a radical political context behind collaboration in the Concrete poetry movement is described by Houédard when he writes in the introduction to the catalogue for the exhibition 'Freewheel' that social collaboration had been central to the aim of the Concrete poetry movement. He writes that a 'concern for collaboration – for an authentically human model & working anarchist society of poet & poet of poet & painter of poet & printer of poet & public &c always was a basic motivation populating the concrete scene – identifying it as a poetry of where we really are at – a poetry of cool but well on the total side of heatwave revolution'.[15] It was the objective Concrete poem beyond the authority of the individual poet which could necessitate an autonomous social situation and it was the output of the Openings Press for Houédard which showed this. The policy of collaboration between poet, painter, typographer and printer which these publications demanded in order to produce works of a strict standard of quality aligns them for Houédard with a socialist politics whilst in themselves they potentially conformed to the conservatism of a formal aesthetic.

I have described how the Concrete poetry movement as an avant-garde in Britain was characterised as an open and non-elitist group. I will now discuss how this transitory identity of the movement was also contributed to by a lack of critical activity in comparison to the traditional avant-garde group. The critic Paul Mann

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[14] Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (London: Allen Lane, 1972), p. 44.

[15] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Introduction', *Freewheel*, (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1967), unpaginated, p. 1 of 2.

argues that it is discourse which is the 'mode of avant-garde consciousness'[16] in that it is the essays and manifestos surrounding an avant-garde which significantly contribute to the interpretative construction of its art-works. Garnier's magazine, *Les Lettres*, was the central magazine for the Concrete poetry movement internationally, and in comparison the magazines in Britain contain far less critical discourse. *Stereo Headphones* offered the most criticism and after its first issue it was organised according to critical themes. The second and third issue in Spring 1970 was called 'The New French Poetries – The Death of Concrete'; the fourth issue in Spring 1971 was called 'The Poetry of Sound/ The Sound of Poetry'; the fifth issue in Winter 1972 was called 'The New Visual & Photo Poetries of Japan'; the sixth issue in summer 1974 was called 'Treated Text'; and the eighth, ninth, and tenth issue in 1982 was called 'Space and Time Fictions'. Most of the critical work contributed by *Stereo Headphones*, however, was beginning to appear in retrospect to the Concrete poetry movement. The arts magazines *Image* and *Form* also made significant critical contributions to the Concrete poetry movement in Britain. Issue thirteen of *Image* in November 1964 published Finlay's letter to Garnier and translations of the manifestos 'Manifesto for a New Poetry, Visual and Phonic' (1962) by Garnier and 'From Line to Constellation' (1954) by Gomringer. Issue three of *Form* in December 1966 published manifestos on sound poetry by Garnier, Ernst Jandl (1925-2000), Paul de Vree, Kenneth Robinson, and Schwitters. The Concrete poetry movement was also covered in the 4th August and 3rd September 1964 issues of the *TLS* entitled 'The Changing Guard'. The first issue which focuses on Britain and the U.S. was organised by Houédard and includes Concrete, Beat and Pop poetry by Finlay, Michael Horovitz, Houédard, Morgan, Sharkey, Adrian Henri, Anselm Hollo, Christopher

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[16] Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 6.

Middleton, Graham Reynolds, and the U.S. poets Jackson Mac Low and Emmett Williams (1925-2007). There are essays by Ginsberg, Burroughs, Margaret Masterman, Houédard, Robert Creeley, Marshall McLuhan, John Arden, Maurice Girodias, and Horovitz. The second issue covered the arts in Europe and South America with Concrete poems by Gomringer, Pignatari, Dufrêne, Franz Mon, Ronaldo Azeredo (b. 1937), Augusto de Campos, and Jose Paulo Paes, and essays by Rot, Mon, Pignatari, Isou, Konrad Bayer of the Vienna Group, and Otto Piene of Group Zero.

A lack of critical discourse had the disadvantage of not consolidating the movement in Britain and so not attracting financial funding according to Houédard who writes in his essay, 'The Flip Side of Language', the following:

> The lack of a critical journal of the calibre of eg NOIGANDRES or LES
>
> LETTRES in this country has certainly put GB at a disadvantage abroad – only
>
> its disastrous insularity can account for the Arts Council of England refusing to
>
> support such a periodical that wld have been a critical focus' (sic).[17]

For Houédard, poetics could still exist as an insubstantial response in the mind of the creator. In his introduction to the first issue of *Kroklok* which was intended to address the shortage of critical and historical attention about sound poetry he writes: 'Every art generates its own critical literature just as it generates its own critical attitude in the artist during the actual moments of creativity'.[18] Finlay attributes this insubstantial poetics of the creative mind to poetics in general in a letter responding to Garnier's 1963 manifesto when he says that although he can see the benefit of theory for the artist who is working in an area which has not been explored before, he also finds theory to be 'a construction, very haphazard, uncertain, and by no means as yet to be

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[17] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'The Flip Side of Language', *Isis* (February, 1966), pp. 13-14 (p. 13).

[18] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Introduction', *Kroklok*, No. 1, (1971), pp. 1-2 (p. 1).

taken as definitive.'[19] This scepticism towards theory was reflected in the lack of a substantial body of poetics by the Concrete poetry movement in Britain which otherwise remains submerged in correspondence, statements, and essays.

The theorist Theodore Adorno criticised Surrealism for its over reliance on theory, suggesting that one of the weaknesses of the movement was the way it invited itself to be seen as 'nothing but a collection of literary and graphic illustrations of [. . .] psychological dream theory' which would thereby threaten to renegate the movement to 'the ignominy of something official' and dissipate 'the scandal that is Surrealism's intention'.[20] For Adorno, Surrealism is more a representation of theory rather than an enactment of the unconscious truth it claims to reveal. The Concrete poetry movement in Britain was by contrast without any consistent or substantial theoretical legitimisation and so at the advantage of not being contrived according to theory. Rigorous theoretical critique was absent from the Concrete poetry movement in Britain which reflected its anarchist tendencies of refusing any totalizing critical position.

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[19] Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'Letter to Pierre Garnier' (17th September, 1963) *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, ed. by Mary Ellen Solt (London: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 84.
[20] Theodore Adorno, 'Looking Back on Surrealism', trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen, *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, (1954) 1991), pp. 86-90, (p. 86).

1.1 The Marginality of the Movement

In the previous section I described the Concrete poetry movement in Britain as a post-modern avant-garde group in that it was decentred and in this section I will continue this description by discussing how the movement in Britain was characterised by the condition of marginality. Concrete poetry was marginal in the sense that it was outside of the mainstream literary apparatus and outside of the mainstream literary tradition, the latter sense generally being the cause of the former. In this section of the chapter I describe how the Concrete poetry movement in Britain was engaged in a struggle against its material marginality but suggest that marginality is also a necessary condition for avant-gardism and which was partially understood by the Concrete poetry movement itself.

In the previous section of this chapter it was said that theory was lacking in any coherent and substantial way from the Concrete poetry movement in Britain in comparison to what one might usually expect from an avant-garde. I would suggest, though, that it was of less significance in comparison to the politics involved in Concrete poetry trying to materially exist and be published and performed. As part of what was known during the nineteen sixties as underground poetry, which I refer to generally as post-modern poetry and which the critic Eric Mottram has called the Modernist poetry revival in Britain, the Concrete poetry movement stood outside, as Mottram says, 'the big controlling presses, the universities, and schools, and the reviewing fraternity'[21] which otherwise supported traditional poetry. The Concrete poetry movement in Britain was also outside the visual art establishment and was exhibited in smaller and less commercially orientated galleries such as Gallery Number Ten in London.

Being marginal from the literary tradition meant that the Concrete poetry movement in Britain was marginalized from the cultural mainstream apparatus and so it had to struggle against this and rely on its own publishing and distribution through what were known as the small press and the little magazine. In a review of the Poetry Society's exhibition of visual poetry in 1969, Bob Cobbing says that the Concrete poetry movement itself was 'brought about largely by the little presses'.[22]

The small press and the little magazine grew considerably in number throughout the nineteen sixties. According to the critic Martin Booth there appeared in Britain over six hundred little magazines between 1964 and 1972, and in 1975 there were around 200 small press publishers. This was largely due to the fact that since the late nineteen fifties it had become a less expensive and a less specialist activity to run a small press. Print technology was being made available on a larger scale and was cheaper and easier to use due to automatic setting machines that did not require the expensive handsetting of type, offset lithography machines which meant photoplates could print books, and the advances made with the production of duplicators.[23] The rise of the small press and the little magazine in Britain during the post-war period enabled the post-modern poet more than ever before to potentially circumvent any editorial filters that might be encountered in the larger, more commercial presses, and have a greater control over the means of poetry's production and distribution.

The movement was supported in Britain by a number of little magazines, of which those dedicated to the movement were *And* (eleven issues, 1954 – 2001) edited by Cobbing and Rowan, *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.* (twenty five issues, 1961 – 1969)

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[21] Eric Mottram, 'The British Poetry Revival, 1969-75', *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, ed. by Peter Barry and Robert Hampson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 16-50, (p. 16).
[22] Bob Cobbing, 'The Poetry Society's Gala Exhibition, London', *The Journal of Typographic Research*, (July, 1969), pp. 301-305 (p. 305).
[23] Martin Booth, *British Poetry 1964-84: Driving through the Barricades* (London: Routledge

edited by Finlay, *Tlaloc* (twenty two issues, 1964 – 1970) edited by McCarthy and

Lloyd, *Tarasque* (twelve issues, 1965 – 1971) edited by Mills and Cutts, *Bo Heem E*

Um (five issues, 1967 – 1968) edited by Clark, *Kontexts* (ten issues, 1967 – 1977)

edited by Gibbs, *Stereo Headphones* (ten issues, 1969 – 1982) edited by Zurbrugg and

Kroklok (four issues, 1971 – 1973) edited by Houédard. Other British magazines

which supported the Concrete poetry movement included *Akros, Aggie Weston's,*

Aylsford Review, Black Eggs, Broadsheet: Poetry Prose and Graphics, Converse,

Cosmos, Crabgrass, Exit, Extra Verse, Form, How, ICA Bulletin, Ikon, Image, It's,

Lon Chaney, Link, London Magazine, New Departures, No Walls, Pages, Poetry

Review, Second Aeon, Tzarad, Schmuck, and *Strange Faeces.* The principle presses

behind the Concrete poetry movement in Britain were the Wild Hawthorn Press in

Edinburgh run by Finlay, Writers Forum in London run by Cobbing, Tarasque Press

in Nottingham run by the poets Martin Parnall and Stuart Mills and Openings Press

run by Furnival and Houédard. Ceolfrith Press published anthologies of work by

Cobbing, Furnival, Houédard, Finlay, and Chopin. Such presses used a variety of

printing techniques such as lithograph, letterpress, and silk-screen and often used

different kinds of paper and card in a variety of sizes. The restriction on finance

through non-commercial sales, though, often meant that most of the editions of books

and magazines did not exceed copies in the hundreds and were printed on low-quality

paper with paper-covers and staple-binding. Several anthologies of British Concrete

poetry did appear nevertheless as the movement was coming to an end. These were

Test Tube: An Anthology of Experimental Poetry in 1969 edited by William Parfitt,

Mindplay in 1971 edited by Sharkey, *Typewriter Poems* in 1972 edited by Peter

Finch, and *Concerning Concrete Poetry* in 1972 edited by Cobbing and Mayer.

& Kegan Paul, 1985), pp. 36-37.

Cobbing also tried to publish a Penguin anthology called 'The Other Tradition' in 1972.

Concrete poetry as a movement in Britain existed as a fragmented group that was in conflict with the literary status-quo over its material existence. Because the modern poetry revival was on the fringe of the literary mainstream meant that poets found themselves involved in the politics of having to challenge their material marginalization. It is the cultural policy of capitalism which creates this situation of marginality within the arts because as Lyotard says in his essay, 'For a Cultural Nonpolicy', it 'selects the activities of the mind according to the criteria of good performance'[24] so that for instance 'the value of a book is judged by its sales figures'.[25] Because the proper cultural policy for the arts according to Lyotard was to be experimental it did not mean that in order to fight this cultural policy one should not encourage financial investment in an activity and Cobbing was the principle figure in Britain who tried to do this for underground poetry. Cobbing's policy for publishing underground poetry was the opposite of the commercial press. The magazine *And* was started out by a group of artists and writers called Group H in Hendon; this magazine was the first of a kind in Britain to represent experimental poetry after 1945 and the editorial by Cobbing and Rowan in the third issue (February 1963) describes the magazine as a reaction to a lack of contemporary poetry being published in Britain. They write:

> The poems and other writings that interest us most are unacceptable to
>
> publishers, editors and programme planners. And at least some of the writing in
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> this magazine is utterly unacceptable to almost everybody. That is why we put
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> it in. It seems to us that one of the functions of a magazine that doesn't reckon

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[24] Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'For a Cultural Nonpolicy' (1981), *Political Writings* (London: UCL Press, 1993), pp. 11-13 (p. 11).

to make a profit is to print stuff which is incomplete, tentative, naïve,

idiosyncratic and thoroughly irritating.[26]

This publishing criteria which reverses traditional publishing criteria by accepting work which otherwise would be deemed to have failed was continued by Writers Forum that was set up in July 1963 by Cobbing, Rowan and the poet Jeff Nuttall and had emerged out of the writers group that formed within Group H in December 1952.

Cobbing also wanted to create a publishing network which would allow such radical editorial policy to exist, and he contributed significantly to the growth of the small press and the little magazine when in 1966 he, along with the poet and publisher of Fulcrum Press, Stuart Montgomery, set up the 'Association of Little Presses' (ALP). This brought out a regular catalogue in an attempt to provide definite information about small presses and their publications and to encourage a marketing network. This was the first time in Britain that such an attempt on this scale had been made to chronicle the output of the little presses and was of particular benefit to post-modern poetry which did not rely on established means of distribution. Cobbing's motivation to set up the ALP had been the realisation that he wanted to make a living from poetry in 1965 having published his first book of sound poetry composed in 1964 called *An ABC in Sound* but for which there was no literary institution through which the Arts Council could make funds available to the small presses and only very minimal financial subsidy to literature in general.

In July 1970, at the instigation of Cobbing and along with Montgomery, Asa Benveniste, William Plomer, Jennifer Couzyn, and George MacBeth, the Poets Conference was founded which was the closest British poets had to a trade union supporting the welfare of professional poets by setting up a minimum fee for readings,

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Bob Cobbing and John Rowan, *And*, No. 3 (February 1963), p. 2.

a National Poetry Secretariat in August 1973 based at the Poetry Society, and a National Poetry Centre in London's Earls Court with its own library and publishing co-operative. At the Poets Conference meetings poets were able to take control of their own activities and work to help develop the institutions into which the Arts Council could potentially direct its funding. A number of contemporary poets led by Cobbing also tried to reform the already established institution of the Poetry Society. Cobbing and Montgomery were elected to the society's council in 1967 and became members in 1968. Houédard became the society's vice-president in 1974, and by the mid-seventies a number of other contemporary poets also became council members, all hoping to influence institutional policy. Mottram was editor of the society's magazine called *The Poetry Review* between 1970 and 1977 and abruptly put an end to the periodical's conservatism by only accepting post-modern work. Cobbing and other post-modern poets who had infiltrated the Poetry Society felt that this institution was not promoting poetry as a vital element in British culture. Not only did they want post-modern poetry to be represented by the society rather than traditional poetry but they also wanted to change the society's elitist attitude which was against open participation and saw the proper role of the poet as isolated from humanity with poetry reduced to a pursuit of status. The post-modern poets reformed the society so that it was not organised around a select few and supported the work of many poets through communal events and by changing membership policy so that all of the society's council members stood for election each year and with each member having the right to choose to vote.

I have described how the Concrete poetry movement in Britain was a poetry outside of the mainstream literary apparatus and how part of its activity as an avant-garde was spent in struggling against the negative economic impact of its marginality.

The small press and the little magazine enabled an underground arts scene to exist and one of Cobbing's achievements was to create a publishing and distribution network that was autonomous of the mainstream literary apparatus. Cobbing's efforts to support post-modern poetry, though, through the ALP, the Poets Conference, and the Poetry Society, were also seen as potentially institutionalising post-modern poetry. The attempt to reform a traditional institution such as the Poetry Society was seen by the poet Adrian Mitchell as going beyond the struggle to keep post-modern poetry in readership and compromising its integrity. In a letter to Cobbing in 1970 he writes that 'a Poetry Society is not a first priority. Might turn into a poetry museum. There are Poetry Centres already, like the Morden Tower, and I think we should work through the existing network, aiming to expand it.'[27]

A disadvantage in struggling to publish post-modern poetry in Britain was that the institutional structure needed for publishing could itself begin to restrict the development of such poetry. The weaknesses of the ALP according to Verey in a letter to Houédard in 1970 were its 'all most efficient middle (class?) – middleroad amateurism', its 'over-londonarity' and 'its tendency to institutionalize itself' with the end result of actually 'DISCOURAGING a proliferation of small presses (sic)'.[28] To fight against the marginalization of post-modern poetry required open organisations and I would suggest that Verey's complaint was reflective of a trend within the arts of the nineteen sixties. An article in the *TLS* in 1964 entitled 'Far Out or Sell Out' speaks of the contemporary arts having become institutionalized in the nineteen sixties by its own system of 'art galleries and publishers' as well as 'government support, festivals

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[27] Adrian Mitchell, Letter to Bob Cobbing (Unpublished, 16th June, 1970), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1. Bob Cobbing Papers. British Library: Correspondence 2; Box 3; Envelope 1-3 1970s.

[28] Charles Verey, Letter to Dom Sylvester Houédard (17th January, 1970, unpublished), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1. dsh Archive, Collection of Modern Literary Archives, The John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester.

and fellowships at universities'[29] which prevented it from influencing the broader cultural landscape. The struggle to publish Concrete poetry in Britain through an autonomous publishing network potentially meant, then, that it could become too isolated within culture which could potentially compromise its publication but also its effectiveness as an avant-garde trying to change culture.

I have described how the Concrete poetry movement in Britain as an avant-garde was involved in a struggle against its material marginalization by the literary establishment. I now want to suggest, though, that marginality from the literary tradition could be artistically and politically advantageous for an avant-garde. Marginality from the cultural tradition was the necessary condition for authentically experimental work. For Lyotard the avant-gardist is an experimenter in the words of the U.S. artist and composer John Cage (1912-1992) who defines experimental art as 'an action the outcome of which is not foreseen'.[30] Art experiments for Lyotard when it challenges the sense of a metanarrative in what he calls a 'subject of history'[31] which makes it marginal with no readily identifiable audience. For Cage experimental art meant an unknown outcome because the art he had in mind involved chance procedures. For Lyotard experimental art meant an unknown outcome because it did not represent any pre-existing artistic norm or cultural identity. In *Just Gaming*, Lyotard writes that for the experimenter '[o]ne cannot work telling oneself that yes there are values that arranged in a specific way form a subject. This is the subject to whom I speak: I communicate what I have to say in its name' because '[t]o presuppose such an addressee or tutor, is to admit that all the actions that form history, including those of the works in question, find their ultimate meaning in the

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[29] Ken Baynes, 'Far Out or Sell Out', *Time Literary Supplement* (6th August, 1964), p. 694.
[30] John Cage, *Silence* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press: (1961) 1967), p. 69.
[31] Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thebaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. by Wlad Godzich

accomplishments of a universal subject' and '[i]t is the idea of such a subject that modern artists refuse.'[32] The post-modern avant-gardist, then, is by necessity culturally alienated as a consequence of the condition of experiment which is to upset the presupposition of a common reality grounding communication.

It is for this reason of wanting to serve authentic experiment that not belonging to a literary establishment was felt to be beneficial to Concrete poetry in Britain. McCarthy suggests that the transitoriness he finds in the little magazine is appropriate for supporting such poetry in Britain. He describes the poetry magazines during the Concrete poetry movement 'as a workshop for experimental and commercially impossible poetry, as group and information centres and as lines of contact between small clusters of individual poets'.[33] This would suggest that such magazines brought with them a creative dynamic to the poetry, but it was the fact that they did not become established which was evidence of their involvement in the successful experiment of Concrete poetry. As McCaffery goes on to say '[a]n artistic position gained can only be of value if it opens up new possibilities which render it anachronistic; therefore small magazines do not live for long.'[34] To be marginal meant that creative activity was not just outside of an establishment but that it could prevent itself from becoming established and could sustain itself as authentically open to experiment.

Since the nineteen sixties the notion of marginality has been seen as something politically significant from the perspective of critical theory. With the rise of the counter-culture movement in the nineteen sixties came a realisation that marginalization was a potential source of empowerment. In his account of its history

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(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 10.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Cavan McCarthy, 'Trad/Kin Kon: The Poetry Magazine Scene', *Ikon*, No. 3 (January, 1966), pp. 30-34, (p. 30).

in Britain, Nuttall describes the underground scene of the nineteen sixties counter-culture as a moment 'when disaffiliation from the original majority is discovered to constitute affiliation to an international minority holding more internal understanding and cultural power than any government or group of governments.'[35] George Yudice distinguishes the modern and the post-modern according to the function of the marginal whereby it was something to be absorbed in the former and used to subvert in the latter. He writes that where it used to be seen that the marginal was something that was to be overcome because it meant being forgotten and excluded, '[c]ontemporary poststructuralist thought has apotheistically reclaimed "marginality" as a liberating force', and '[b]y demonstrating that the "marginal" constitutes the condition of possibility of all social, scientific, and cultural entities, a new "ethics of marginality" has emerged that is necessarily decentred and plural, and that constitutes the basis for a new, neo-Nietzschean "freedom" from major injunctions.'[36]

Marginality is the condition of the post-modern period according to Lyotard in that there are a number of different and minor versions of truth and it is the means by which to subvert the hegemony of a system. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard writes: 'I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.'[37] The notion of a truth foundation as grandnarrative which can explain history lacks legitimacy in the contemporary world. The grandnarrative is the foundation for a belief in something to be true. It is any totalizing system of thought, such as Christianity, Freudianism, Marxism, or any common value, which denies the difference of the minor narrative. Being culturally marginal means for Lyotard the

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[34] *Ibid.*

[35] Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture* (New York: Delacote Press, 1968), p. 155.

[36] Georges Yudice, 'Marginality and the Ethics of Survival', *Social Text*, No. 21 (1989), pp. 214-236 (p. 214).

[37] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1977), trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. xxiv.

right to narration which the theorist David Carroll describes as 'the basic, "inalienable" right of alterity: that is, not the right of the individual subject to be and express him/ herself, but rather the right of the other to be the other, of the alien to differ from the norm' through which they could 'challenge all systems and theories that would try to contain, repress, or even theorize the fore of the other – that is assign it a specific place within a metanarrative.'[38] Marginality as theorised here serves the avant-garde criteria of opposing cultural and social tradition and was a function of the Concrete poetry movement in Britain.

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[38] David Carroll, *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida* (New York & London: Routledge, 1987, repr; 1989), p. 159.

1.2 The End of the Movement

As an avant-garde, Concrete poetry was a historical movement and in this section of the chapter I describe the end of the Concrete poetry movement in Britain and suggest that it was brought about through a number of factors. Just as for any arts movement, the end of the Concrete poetry movement should be understood as coming about in two ways, which are as a change to aesthetic value and as a decline in material production and I shall now describe both of these in turn.

The Concrete poetry movement comes to an end due to a decline in its production. The Concrete poetry movement internationally was in decline by the end of the nineteen sixties in that its poetry was no longer exhibited, published, or performed to the extent that it had been and nor was there the communication with poets from other countries. The last major exhibition of the movement was the Stedelijk Museum touring exposition from November 1970 to March 1972. The last exposition of the movement in Britain was 'Eurovispo '73' from 9th July to 29th July 1973 in Burleighfield printing house in Buckinghamshire which showed the work of Furnival, Houédard, Mayer, and the Italian poet Donalo Cinicolo. The last exhibition of Concrete poetry in Britain was from the 5th April to 2nd May 1975 called 'Begin Again' at the LYC Museum gallery in Cumbria which showed Houédard's reversal visual poems where a word could be read from another word if turned back to front or upside down. According to Furnival, the death of Kenelm Cox in 1968 and that of Tom Edmonds in 1971 also contributed to decline of Concrete poetry in Britain.[39] Houédard and Finlay had moved on from Concrete poetry by the mid-seventies with the former dedicating more time to theology and the latter to Conceptual art.

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[39] John Furnival, 'Openings', *Baseline*, No. 18 (1994), pp. 34-38 (p. 38).

Sound poetry had become the dominant poetry of the Concrete poetry movement towards the latter half of the nineteen sixties in what I would suggest was a reaction in Britain against the ideology of the autonomous text which otherwise partly underpinned the Concrete poem. Throughout the nineteen sixties there were public performances of sound poetry and Cobbing in particular performed at a number of arts festivals which included King's Lynn Festival, August 1968; Lancaster Arts Festival, January 1969; Guildford Festival, March 1969, which hosted a Poetry International of readings, films, and lectures; Avery Hill Arts Festival, March 1969; Camden Festival, 1969; Newport Arts Festival 1970, New Universities Festival, Canterbury, June 1969, and Wellington Arts Festival, March 1970. Sound poetry was also present in the mainstream media. On 2nd June 1967 Macbeth and Cobbing discuss sound poetry for the Third Programme on British Broadcasting Corporation (B.B.C.) radio and on 16th February 1968 Cobbing, Macbeth, Mottram, and the poets Adrian Henri, Edward Lucie-Smith, and Peter Porter held an hour-long conversation on poetry and sound for the Third Programme. In 1969 on B.B.C. radio Cobbing introduced a programme on sound poetry and a programme in May on Swedish electronic sound poetry called 'Stockholm All-Electric Sound'. In May 1970 the B.B.C. made a film of Cobbing giving a reading of his poem 'And' at the opening of the Northern Open Workshop in Halifax and in 1972 it made a pilot Omnibus programme about one of his live performances. In August 1971 Cobbing gave a programme for B.B.C. radio about experimental poetry and the use of the tape-recorder.

Cobbing continued with sound poetry after the movement, forming in the nineteen seventies and eighties the performance groups AbAna, Konkrete Canticle, Australian Dancers, Birdyak, Oral Complex, and Random Access and helped to run the London

Musicians Collective. Cobbing's occasional performance partner, Paula Claire, formed Roundscore with the electronic musician and composer Peter Stacey and performed with the Paxton Group. The first international festival of sound poetry, or of Text-Ljud-Kompositioner (text-sound-composition), took place in Stockholm in April 1968 and was organised by the Fylkingen group and Sveriges Radio. Those present were Sten Hanson, Ake Hodell, Bengt Emil Johnson, Bernard Heidsieck, Cobbing, and Dufrêne. Cobbing performed at all the other subsequent international festivals in London, Glasgow, Paris, Vienna, Toronto, and New York through the nineteen seventies and eighties. Claire and Cobbing also participated at the International Dada Festivals at Berlin (September 1977) and London (January 1982), and at the Venice Biennale in 1978. Cobbing also performed at the ICES-72 experimental sound and multi-media event between 13th and 26th August 1972 in London and at the International Audio and Visual Mail Art Fair at the Gallery Lara Vincy in Paris between 6th December 1979 and 31st January 1980. In the decades that followed the nineteen sixties, though, mixed-media poetry performance in Britain became a lot more marginalized from the public than it had been.

The end of the Concrete poetry movement is most dramatically stated by Finlay in an interview in *Transcript* magazine where he describes the movement to be 'a whole area of avant-garde culture' which 'has just been wiped out as if it had never existed at all'.[40] I would suggest that the start of what is described here as a complete suppression of Concrete poetry occurred in the context of an international economic crisis between 1972 to 1974 which ended the nineteen sixties era as the theorist Fredric Jameson, amongst others, has suggested[41] and through which a conservatism

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[40] Ian Hamilton Finlay, Interview with Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Transcript: A Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 2, No.1 (1996), pp. 5-24 (p. 5).

[41] Fredric Jameson, 'Periodizing the 60s' (1984), *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986, Vol. 2* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 178-210 (p. 205).

in the culture developed. In 1968 Better Books closed when the building was taken over by William Collins, Sons & Co Ltd, a commercial publishing company which decided not to renew the book store's lease. The threat of closure to Better Books was reported in *The Times* and Cobbing tried to encourage the Arts Council to intervene and acquire it. Cobbing was manager of Better Books in Charing Cross in London from January 1965 to November 1967 which was more than a bookshop and was a centre for the arts as well. Better Books served as the headquarters of the ALP and the London Filmmakers Co-operative, showing the works of Kenneth Anger, Steve Dwoskin and Stan Brakhage amongst others, and for which Cobbing was secretary from 1966 to 1972. From 1964 the bookstore held weekly readings and lectures on poetry, theatre and film, and after its closure Cobbing had intended to set up another centre for the arts called 'Boooooks' but which never happened.

The decline of the Concrete poetry movement in Britain was most effected, though, by a conservative suppression of the small press and the little magazine which accounts for the decline in the number of its publications. The critics Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt observe that a decline in small presses and poetry publishing in general in Britain had occurred by the nineteen seventies due to a decrease in funding from the Arts Council of Great Britain, as well as what they describe as '[t]he ascendancy of the academy over poets and poetry in the 1970s'[42] which made publication and distribution even more difficult than it had been. The hostility towards post-modern poetry was most dramatically manifest in 1977 when the Poetry Society Council which had been led by Cobbing was forcibly taken over by the Arts Council that was opposed to its non-traditional policy and poetry. The tenth Poets Conference meeting voted in favour for the Poetry Society to reject the Arts Council's intention to

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[42] Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt, *British Poetry Since 1970: A Critical Survey*, ed. by Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1980), pp. xxvi-xxvii.

appoint its representatives on to the society's council as a consequence of an investigation of the society. In December 1975 and January 1976 Cobbing issued a two-part statement on behalf of the Poets Conference at its fourteenth meeting called 'The State of Poetry' which stated that the intention of the literary director of the Arts Council was to dictate a narrow conception of what poetry should be to the society as a means of controlling it. Jeff Nuttall drafted 'The Manifesto of the Poetry Society' on 24th September 1976 which was a twelve point programme that set out the vision that the Poetry Society believed in as a means of opposing the traditional position of the Arts Council and its Committee. The failure to implement this conception of poetry and the consequence of not doing so meant a cutting of state support for such poetry. Concrete poetry was most notably denied an application for funding for the eleventh International Sound-Poetry Festival at London in 1978 on the grounds that it was not literature.

The Concrete poetry movement also came to an end, I would suggest, because it was exhausted as an innovative experiment in poetry by the end of the nineteen sixties. In an interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg, Chopin implies that this exhaustion was reflective of an end to authentic experiment that had been under the influence of a previous avant-garde when he explains that his audio magazine *OU* (six issues from 1964 to 1968), which he had begun in 1958 under the title *Cinquieme Saison* (nineteen issues from 1958 to 1963) and continued in England in 1969, was stopped in 1974 due to what he saw as a lack of interesting material being submitted and the disappearance of the last artists from the Dada movement.[43] I would suggest, though, that the aesthetic value of the Concrete poem also changes due to the ascendancy of Conceptual art in the late nineteen sixties which was part of a general displacement of

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[43] Henri Chopin, 'Henri Chopin interviewed by Nicholas Zurbrugg', *Art & Design*, Vol. 10, No 11/12 (November/ December, 1995), pp. 21-31 (p. 27).

the linguistic 'turn' of formalism at the beginning of the twentieth century by a cultural 'turn' in the post-war period where a critically scientific understanding of culture was seen as mistaken. Even though it had questioned the conventional categories of literature, Concrete poetry assumed a formalism in that it believed the literary text to have special aesthetic properties. Conceptual art questioned the metaphysical presence of the formal art object which changed the value of Concrete poetry's radical challenge to the conventional understanding of literature. The U.S. conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth criticised Concrete poetry in 1969 for its emphasis on the material form of poetic language. For him, the poem as a self-sufficient object could no longer justify this status, just as a sculpture or a painting could not, so that despite going beyond the conventional poem, the Concrete poem had only achieved a 'formalization of the poet's material'[44] and thereby still conformed to the metaphysical myth that some objects are justified in being called art. Both visual and sound poetry asserted the arts as aesthetic, or sensual phenomena, and although sound poetry opposed the notion of the poetic object as an autonomous work of art, it was still a poetry centred on the physical senses behind aesthetic experience and not on discourse. Conceptual art, though, was an attack against the assumption that one had access to a pure, pre-linguistic level of experience.

Conceptual art can be dated to 1960 with the U.S. Fluxus artist Henry Flynt and his essay, 'Concept Art', published in the 1963 book, *An Anthology of Chance Operations*, in which he describes an art where the material used are concepts. The Conceptual art movement which lasted from the late nineteen sixties to the mid-nineteen seventies was more about an artist's idea and placed less importance on the formal or aesthetic qualities of the object through which that idea was expressed and

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[44] Joseph Kosuth, 'Footnote to Poetry' (1969), *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, ed. by Gabriele Guercio (London: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 35-36 (p. 35).

sometimes no physical work of art existed but just the expression of an idea. An analytical form of conceptual art which questioned the primordial convention of art's visuality existed in England from 1968 to 1976 as the group called 'Art & Language'. This group was comprised of Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin, David Bainbridge, Harold Hurrell, and later on Kosuth. For conceptual art, how one experiences and understands an art-work is determined by the discourse of thought which surrounds it rather than one's physical encounter with it, which is never free from the mediation of language. Language as the discourse of thought played a significant role for conceptual artists in determining the nature of what is visibly seen or experienced by the body so that many of their works involved the written word. Conceptual art of this sort rigorously questioned the assumptions of authorship, or the intentionality believed to support an experience of aesthetic autonomy.

I would suggest that the Concrete poetry movement can be seen at its end through an attempt to negotiate Conceptual art. The critic Siegfried Schmidt in his 1982 essay, 'Perspectives on the Development of Post-Concrete poetry', describes what he calls the conceptualisation of Concrete poetry as emerging out of a convergence of two tendencies in the nineteen sixties which can be described as 'the *conceptualisation* of visual poetry and the *lingualization* of the fine arts'.[45] The discovery of Conceptual art by the Concrete poetry movement was seen as offering a new direction for it. The poet Jiri Valoch, who was the Czech correspondent for *Pages* magazine, wrote to Gibbs about the state of the movement in November 1971 which was published in the fifth issue of *Kontexts* in which he says that poets 'can find new possibilities between visual poetry and concept art'.[46] A more conceptual approach to Concrete poetry had begun to emerge with visual poetry that the Italian poet Luciano Ori called 'poesia

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[45] Siegfried Schmidt, 'Perspectives on the Development of Post-Concrete poetry', *Poetics Today*, No. 3 (Summer, 1982), pp. 101-136 (p. 113).

visiva' in 1960 which described a visual poetry that drew upon photography and non-verbal signs. Conceptual art was primarily concerned with making propositions and statements that reflected on the nature of art rather than trying to create an effect on the senses and I would suggest that Concrete poetry was seen by Houédard to call into question the nature of poetry to the extent of the category itself.

The triple issue eight, nine, and ten of *Stereo Headphones* published responses from twenty seven poets, artists, and critics whom Zurbrugg had asked in 1979 what the state of what he calls the contemporary avant-garde may be. These responses did not include one from Houédard, but I would suggest that he makes a response to such a query in the introductory paragraph to a 1987 essay called, 'What's a door doing here?" A Squint at Beckett's Layered Question'. He writes:

> Can it be, and unfortunately it can, that our generation hasn't left them (and sometime, them, if you are reading this, and I must presume you must be, must include you, and some of you, again at sometime, will have seen my question turned otiose) much to say, since the questions we were asking, and we were asking them incessantly, and some of us have kept this up as a habit, weren't suburbican points of grammatical interrogation, but anticartesian and contrakantian answers we were giving to affirmation made entre les deux guerres, and giving them only as we came to understand how these assertive assertions simply asserted the areas of investigation where questions loomed as the only possible form a reply could assume (sic).[47]

The Concrete poem for Houédard in comparison to later poetry experiments which came after the nineteen sixties appears to be the more significant poetry experiment because of its challenge to the assumptive category of the poem. Although this quote

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[46] Jiri Valoch, Letter to Michael Gibbs (November, 1971), *Kontexts*, No. 5 (1974), unpaginated, 1 page.

Figure 1

a   this poem
     is
     not a poem

b   but
     this poem
     is

leaves open as to whether Concrete poetry itself is no longer valid after the movement, the Concrete poem is being described here as having exhausted the project of experiment in poetry with the radicalism in which it implicitly questioned the poem as a discrete object and so was already infused with a scepticism towards art as found in the work of the Conceptualists.

Houédard's contribution to the Autumn 1971 issue of *Poetry Review* is a conceptual piece called 'two poems', 'Figure [1]'. Both poems consist of two propositions labelled 'a' and 'b'. The first proposition of the first poem reads, 'this poem/ is/ innocent', and its second proposition reads, 'this/ poem is/ obscene'. The first proposition of the second poem reads, 'this poem/ is/ not a poem', and its second proposition reads, 'but/ this poem/ is'.[48] The first poem can be read to imply that aesthetic taste is either arbitrary or self-evident whilst I would suggest that the second poem can be read as a dematerialization of the assumed presence of a poem. This poem questions the naturalised status of the framing conditions of an art object through which that object's identity as an art object is given. As a conceptualisation of the Concrete poem it reacts to the implicit formalism of Concrete poetry by being a second-order language which questions the framing conditions of the literary text. Yet I would suggest that this conceptual poem also plays with the notion of the conceptual poem. The way the words are presented, where the lines run on the page through enjambment, is a dominant cultural code which signifies that this verbal object is a poem. The first proposition, then, – 'this is a poem' – confirms what the reader has already assumed in seeing the layout of the poem. Having remembered this code the poem then moves onto its second proposition which proceeds to forget the code in the message – 'but this poem is not' – even though it still enacts it. The reader's

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[47] Dom Sylvester Houédard, '"What's a door doing here?" A Squint at Beckett's Layered Question', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1987), pp. 49-54 (p. 49).

assumption of what a poem is is denied and the dominant cultural code of tradition that signifies what is poetry is shown to be arbitrary. For marks on a page, or any material support, to get recognised as an object of cultural value means that a dominant code is in place which signifies them as such. This conceptual poem, however, is not serious and can also be read with its irrational use of the logical statement as a satire of Conceptual art's questioning of what it saw as the metaphysical assumption of presence within all objects of art which it often made through a logical reasoning.

I would further suggest that the poem's satire of a conceptual expression is made in the concern with the poem's outside context of experimental poetry's material status at the time in Britain. This poem was published in *Poetry Review* at the beginning of Mottram's role as editor and which would have contributed to the conflict between the Poetry Society and the Arts Council. Considering that the established literary institutions have a fixed notion of what poetry is and that this poem is about stating the experimental poet as the rule-maker and that categories in themselves do not have any ground in reality, this poem can be read as taking part directly in the struggle at the time over which types of literary art justify receiving economic support and which do not so that this becomes the poem's implicit subject-matter. In having actually been published the poem signifies itself as a means of testing not so much poetry but the temperamental material conditions for such poetry at the time.

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[48] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Two Poems', *Poetry Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Autumn, 1971), p. 296.

Chapter Two: Concrete Poetry as Post-Modern New

2.0 The Linear Development of Concrete Poetry

This chapter considers the Concrete poetry movement in Britain in relation to the concept of being new. In the last section of the previous chapter I considered that the end of the Concrete poetry movement can be considered in terms of its becoming out-dated as an experiment. This chapter focuses on the Concrete poetry movement's relationship with the temporal which is central to the concept of avant-gardism, and it is suggested that the Concrete poetry movement in Britain was not just new in being a break with literary tradition but that it was occupied with the new as a constant process of formal innovation. By considering the poetry and poetics of the Concrete poetry movement I suggest that this innovation proceeded in both a linear and non-linear manner which reflected a post-modern conception of the new.

This section of the chapter situates Concrete poetry within the history of the modern arts and proposes a linear development in Britain of the Concrete poem as it had originated in the nineteen fifties through the influence of Kinetic art. Concrete poetry as originating with Gomringer and the Noigandres group was a new type of visual poetry. Modern visual poetry began with Stephan Mallarmé's 1897 poem, 'Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'abolira le Hasard', where the verse is typographically arranged across the space of the page, and was continued amongst others by Futurism (1909 - c.1930s) and F. T. Marinetti's expressive typographic poems called 'parole in liberta' (words in freedom); by Dadaism (1916-1924) and the collage poetry of Raoul Hausmann, Schwitters, and Tristan Tzara; by Surrealism (1924 – c.1940) and the object poems of Andre Breton; by the visual poetry of Pierre Albert-Birot and Carlo Belloli, and by the visual-verbal paintings of Lettrism (1945 - c.1950s). In 1951,

Gomringer founded with Marcel Wyss, and the Icelandic artist Dieter Rot, the art journal *Spirale* and became its literary editor. Through this magazine he was able, as he says in his essay 'The First Years of Concrete poetry', to 'put forward programmatically a new type of poetry'[49] which left behind the imitative Shakespearean sonnets he had been writing and applied to poetry the aesthetic principles of inversion, permutation, symmetry, and repetition found in Concrete art. He called this new type of poem the 'constellation' and in Summer 1953 he published his first book called *Constellations*. It is the constellation poem as an assemblage poetry which launches the Concrete poetry movement. After the 1944 international exhibition in Basel, Concrete art spread to Italy, Argentina and Brazil. In 1952 a group of poets in Sao Paulo decided to call themselves and their magazine 'Noigandres', a name taken from Ezra Pound's poem 'Canto XX'. This group comprised of Décio Pignatari (b.1927), the brothers Augusto (b.1931) and Haroldo (1929-2003) de Campos, and later Ronaldo Azeredo. Augusto de Campos was the first poet to use the term Concrete poetry to describe his work and the fourth issue of *Noigandres* magazine in 1958 introduced the term 'poesia concreta'. In 1955 at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, West Germany, Pignatari met Gomringer to agree upon the term 'Concrete poetry' for the new type of poetry that he and the Noigandres group had both been producing. Both Gomringer and the Noigandres group wanted to make a poetry which employed a visual syntax rather than a traditionally linear one. Their constellation poems were ideogrammatic in that they created meaning through a juxtaposition of words and letters spatially arranged on the page.

The modern arts at the beginning of the twentieth century had been a revolutionary break with tradition. The Concrete poetry movement saw itself in the nineteen fifties

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[49] Eugen Gomringer, 'The First Years of Concrete poetry', trans. by Stephen Bann, *Form*, No.4 (April, 1967), pp. 17-18 (p.18).

as a revolutionary break with literary convention characteristic of the original avant-gardes. The Noigandres group in their 1958 manifesto 'Pilot Plan for Concrete poetry' published in issue four of *Noigandres* magazine introduce Concrete poetry as radically new whereby the emergence of the Concrete poem meant that conventional verse had been made obsolete. They state: 'the historical cycle of verse (a formal-rhythmical unit) is closed'.[50] I would suggest, however, that Concrete poetry in the nineteen sixties does not come as a revolutionary break with tradition and I now want to describe how the constellation poem was evolved by the movement in Britain.

Although Concrete poetry emerged through a close affiliation with Concrete art I would suggest that it was kineticism, or a sense of dynamism, which was the primary identity behind the Concrete poem. In 'Pilot Plan for Concrete poetry' the Noigandres group position Concrete poetry within a kineticism as the mutual interaction between the spatial and the temporal which was characteristic of the history of modern art:

> Concrete poetry: tension of things-words in space-time. dynamic structure:
> multiplicity of concomitant movements. so in music – by definition, a time art –
> space intervenes (webern and his followers: boulez and stockhausen; concrete
> and electronic music); in visual arts – spatial by definition – time intervenes
> (mondrian and his boogie-woogie series; max bill; albers and perspective
> ambivalence; concrete art in general) (sic).[51]

In Pignatari's 1957 essay, 'Concrete poetry: A Brief Structural-Historical Guideline', he observes that '[i]n Concrete poetry [. . .] movement is no longer the mere illustration of a particular and real motion, as with the Futurists – poets, painters, and sculptors – and with Apollinaire himself', and he goes on to say that '[t]he problem is

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[50] Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari, 'Pilot Plan for Concrete poetry' (1958), *The Journal of Typographic Research*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (July, 1967), pp. 323-324 (p. 323).
[51] Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari, 'Pilot Plan for Concrete poetry' (1958), *The Journal of Typographic Research*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (July, 1967), pp. 323-324 (p. 323).

now that of the dynamic non-figurative structure itself, movement produced by and producing grapho-phonetic functions-relations informed by meaning and conferring on the space which separates and unites them a qualitative value, a relational spatial-temporal force, which is rhythm.'[52] Concrete poetry in the nineteen fifties, then, was a response to a formal problem that arose from the modernist era in how to make the abstract structure of linguistic form itself dynamic rather than just represent a dynamic object outside of the poem which is what the poetry of the Futurist movement had tried to do according to Pignatari.

The critic Mike Weaver in his 1967 essay, 'Concrete poetry', gives a narrow definition of Concrete poetry's kineticism which is, as he writes, that 'the dimensions of the visual figure are extended to produce a temporal configuration only possible by virtue of the sense of succession'.[53] Weaver divides the Concrete poetry movement in the nineteen sixties into optic, phonetic, and kinetic categories where the kinetic refers to the Concrete poem characterised by serialism, that is, where single words or letters abruptly follow one after the other in a spatial arrangement rather than a discursive grammar. This explanation of kineticism in Concrete poetry stresses that the serialism found in Concrete poetry was a dynamic structure and tells us more specifically the nature of the Concrete poetry's inherent kineticism. Weaver's description of the kinetic in Concrete poetry emphasises how this assemblage poetry intended to induce a dynamic through the temporal medium of language in otherwise static visual structures.

I would suggest that this inherent kineticism of the Concrete poetry from the nineteen fifties was developed in the nineteen sixties in Britain through the influence

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[52] Décio Pignatari, 'Concrete poetry: A Brief Structural-Historical Guideline' (1957), *Poetics Today*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Summer, 1982), pp. 189-195 (p. 192).
[53] Mike Weaver, 'Concrete poetry', *The Journal of Typographical Research*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (July, 1967), pp. 293-326, (p. 295).

of Kinetic art. Kinetic art was an international movement during the nineteen fifties and sixties which had emerged out of Constructivism. In Brazil, Kinetic art was seen specifically as a neo-Concrete art development with the formation of Lygia Clark's group 'MAM' in 1959. It was preoccupied with the perception of movement that reflected the influence of modern science and technology on the visual arts. The main groups involved with the Kinetic Art movement were the 'Zero Group' ('Gruppe Zero') in Germany, 'Group T' and 'Group N' ('Gruppo T' and 'N') from Italy, the 'Dvitzhenie' group from Russia, and the 'Group of Research in Visual Art' ('Groupe de Recherché d'Art Visuel', or 'GRAV') from Paris. A main centre for the Kinetic art movement in Britain was around Paul Keeler's 'Centre for Advanced Creative Study' in London, which later became 'Signals London' art gallery. Its bulletin called *Signals* lasted from August 1964 to March 1966 and was edited by David Medalla (b. 1942), a Fillipino artist who arrived in England in 1960.

Britain was central to the international Concrete poetry movement's development of a kinetic aesthetic. As John Sharkey writes in his 1968 essay, 'An Evaluation of Visual Poetry in Terms of Movement' in *Studio International* magazine, the 'extension of words in space/ time constructions is the most important and singular British contribution to the international field of visual poetry,'[54] and the influence of Kinetic art on the Concrete poetry movement was at the forefront of the movement's reception in Britain. The Concrete poem's development through Kinetic art in the nineteen sixties was an advance of the Concrete poem and Britain's contribution to this development was all the more important when considering that the Concrete poetry movement was a poetry preoccupied with the formal problem of kineticism. Houédard proposes in his 1964 essay 'Paradada' in the *TLS* that Concrete poetry in

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[54] John Sharkey, 'An Evaluation of Visual Poetry in Terms of Movement', *Studio International* (December, 1968), pp. 237-238 (p. 238).

Britain with its preoccupation with kineticism was the beginning of a new phase in the Concrete poetry movement's history. He saw this new phase as a second decade from 1964 to 1974[55] and which came after the first decade of the movement from 1953 to 1963 which he refers to in a later essay as spatialist.[56]

The first exhibition of Concrete poetry in Britain and the first international exposition of the movement took place between 28th November to 5th December 1964 at Cambridge University and was based around the interaction between Kinetic art and Concrete poetry. The 'International Expo of Concrete/ Kinetic' was organised by the 'International Kinetic Poetry Fund' (IKPF), a group that was set up by Weaver, Reg Gadney, Stephan Bann, and Stephen Salter, and had links with Houédard, Finlay, Sharkey and the Kinetic artists Frank Popper, Nicholas Schoffer, and Frank Malina. A second major exhibition of Kinetic art and poetry was 'The Golden Mile' at the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol between the 13th August to 28th September 1966. Alongside Kinetic art from the West of England this exhibition included a harmonograph drawing machine by Cox, typographic poetry by Hansjörg Mayer, and thirty typewriter designs by Houédard. Weaver and Gadney had held an evening of audio-visual presentations on the 25th October 1964 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London called 'The Relations between Aesthetics of Kinetic and Concrete'. This critical focus of the relationship between Concrete poetry and Kinetic art was followed up in the Cambridge arts magazine, *Image*. Its thirteenth issue in November 1964 called 'Kinetic Art: Concrete Poetry' published Weaver's essay 'Concrete and Kinetic: The Poem as Functional Object', and its sixteenth issue in Winter 1966 published Bann's essay 'Kinetic Art and Poetry' which is an extensive

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[55] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Paradada', *The Times Literary Supplement* (6th August, 1964), pp. 696-698 (p. 696).
[56] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Ica Expo Bpp – Selective Notes on 3 Aspects', *Thaloc* (1965), unpaginated, p. 1 of 3.

examination of the Concrete poem's relationship with kineticism. Issues thirteen, fifteen, and sixteen of *Image* also made important critical contributions to the international Kinetic Art movement to Britain introducing the work of artists such as Schoffer, Malina, Gregorio Vardanega, Martha Boto, and J-M Cruxent and provided translations of texts by GRAV. *Form* magazine, edited by Bann, Weaver, and Philip Steadman, was another arts magazine based at Cambridge University and lasted for ten issues from Summer 1966 to October 1969. It placed emphasis on Kinetic art and Concrete poetry and provided important translations in Britain from the little magazines of the Constructivist and Dada movements.

Kineticism in the arts existed through two principle forms which were either the illusory perception of movement on the optic senses that would be generated by way of visual design, or the actual movement through space and time that would be experienced in mechanical or electro-magnetic constructions. In Britain the term kinetic poetry was used to describe a Concrete poem which was characterised by movement in these principle forms. A Concrete poem could become kinetic by being a moving machine or through its typography that might involve a geometric arrangement of verbal elements or the use of coloured ink that would create the optical appearance of movement. Finlay's first collection of Concrete poems published in 1963 called *Rapel: 12 Suprematist and Fauve Poems* employed a greater number of type sizes and coloured ink in comparison to the Concrete poetry of the nineteen fifties so as to encourage the eye to move back and forth between words. In Britain, poetry machines were made by Furnival and Cox and many were planned by Houédard. Kinetic art and poetry also included the use of film. In October 1969 Weaver began showing a series of what he called Concrete films at the National Film Theatre (NFT) in London. Such films were what Weaver calls 'cineplastics', or

animation of the abstract arts, which the fifteenth issue on *Image* in October 1965 took as its theme. With the mass-production of cine-film cameras at the time, Sharkey experimented with film as a medium for the Concrete poem in his 1964 work 'Openwordrobe'. This was a five minute 16mm film where the word of the title and the three words within it are played with by using, as he says, 'different letter-types and sizes; incorporating permutated blocks (I Ching hexagrams); moving dot and O motif; random design elements with irregular shaped cards with colour words, tossed in front of the camera lens; free association of words in a literal transcription of object and colours that a full wardrobe might contain.'[57] This poem for Sharkey meant a logical progression from Augusto de Campos's 1962 poem, 'Cubogramma', which according to him 'had taken the Concrete poem set on a printed page to its most extreme two-dimensional form.'[58]

I would suggest that kineticism in Concrete poetry was understood in Britain as addressing formal poetic problems for which the exhibitions of Concrete poetry in Britain partly helped to achieve. Houédard's 1965 essay, 'Ica Expo Bpp – Selective Notes on 3 Aspects' published in *Thaloc* magazine, was a review of the exhibition, 'Between Poetry and Painting' at the ICA between 22nd October to 27th November 1965. This exhibition included the work of over fifty poets and showed alongside Concrete poetry, the visual poetry of the Lettriste movement (Roberto Altmann, Isidore Isou, Maurice Lemaitre, Gio Minola, Roland Sabatier, and Jacques Spacagna) and also that from the Dada and Futurist movements (Hausmann, Albert-Birot, Richard Huelsenbeck, Man Ray, Theo van Doesberg, Ardengo Soffici and Marinetti). In Houédard's essay he writes:

> problem n.1 raised by the icaexpo – ie a poetry not of alphabets commas

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[57] John Sharkey, 'Openwordrobe', *ICA Bulletin* (April, 1966), pp. 8-9 (p. 8).
[58] Ibid., pp. 8-9.

mathsymbols & meta-post-hyper-super-letters &c but of movement &

relationship between elements (those elements are largely redundant except as

BEING what moves & ADDING particles & overtones & a certain harmonic

density) (sic).[59]

The problem stated here which needed to be addressed according to Houédard was in

how to make the linguistic elements in kinetic poetry have a function as they did in

the spatialist poetry of Gomringer and the Noigandres group, where functionality

refers to the way that form and content are made to logically reflect one another in the

Concrete poem. An exhibition of Concrete poetry at the Brighton Festival between the

14th and 30th April 1967, and reviewed by Bann in issue four of *Form* (April, 1967),

showed over ten works by Bann, Claus Bremer, Cox, Finlay, Mathius Goeritz,

Gomringer, and Morgan, which applied the Concrete poem to an art of environment.

Some of these works demonstrated how kineticism in Concrete poetry could be made

to serve functionality as Houédard had speculated in his essay about the 1965

'Between Poetry and Painting' exhibition. The poem, 'A text is passing/ happening',

by the Swiss poet Claus Bremer and Gomringer's poem 'wind' had been made into

banners by Edward Wright and Roger Limbrick from the Textile Department at

Chelsea School of Art. Off the town's West Pier in the sea floated a sculptural

construction twenty eight feet high by Cox called 'Three Graces'. A work at the

town's Rank Entertainment Centre by the Mexican architect Mathius Goeritz was a

shiny sculptural metallic construction eighteen feet square made out of the Spanish

word 'oro' (gold). In these works linguistic functionality was apparent through the

physical motion involved in their structures contributing aesthetic significance to their

messages.

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[59] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Ica Expo Bpp – Selective Notes on 3 Aspects', *Thaloc* (1965), unpaginated, p. 2 of 3.

Bann in his essay, 'Kinetic Art and Poetry', writes that Kinetic art also involved a third category of definition besides physical and perceptual movement which was when a work changed through the presence of the spectator and that this third category of kineticism could be found in Concrete poetry. He writes that there is 'a third category – the work in which change is induced by the intervention of the spectator' whereby through 'a particular formal scheme' the spectator 'may alter the arrangement of the forms, or experience, through the moiré effect, a rippling of surface that accompanies his movement in front of the picture.' Concrete poetry was also suited for an art 'in which the spectator determines the rhythm of his own actions and reactions'. Because, as Bann goes on to say, 'if the page or poster provides an opportunity to 'fathom' the poem which depends on a single cluster of images, the progression or permutation of images within a poem can be most succinctly conveyed by a succession of pages or surfaces' so that '[f]rom being a purely practical operation, the turning of the page becomes the means of opening up a new landscape of words, intimately related to what has gone before and what is to follow.'[60] An exploration with kineticism in this sense was made by Finlay between 1964 to 1967 with a series of booklets called *Canal Stripe Series* and *Ocean Stripe Series*. Finlay called these works 'kinetic booklets' whereby the poem revealed itself through the turning of pages. Bann in his introduction to the 1966 Concrete poetry issue of *The Beloit Poetry Journal* writes that this type of poetry began with Gomringer and the Noigandres group but was taken further by Finlay.[61] I would suggest that, like Finlay's booklets, Morgan's poem, 'Festive Permutational Poem', at the Brighton Festival experimented with taking the functionality of the Concrete poem into this third category of kineticism. The poem consisted of one poster and eighteen streamers

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[60] Stephan Bann, 'Kinetic Art and Poetry', *Image*, No. 16 (Winter, 1966), pp. 4-9 (pp. 8-9).
[61] Stephan Bann, 'Introduction', *The Beloit Poetry Journal* (Fall, 1966), pp. 2-5 (p. 4).

designed and printed by Edmund Marsden. The poem was made up from a class of fifty-four words which were grouped into eighteen adjectives and thirty-six nouns and centred around the theme of the town's cultural mix of the intellectual and the popular. These two themes were presented on the large poster. The other part of the poem consisted of eighteen phrases of three words which made up the total set of fifty-four words. These phrases could be found as streamers with half of them mounted on the town's buses and the other half in its shop windows. The poem was physically involved with the kinetic activity of the town where it was the physical position of the reader which could not but be involved with the poem's meaning. The works at the Brighton Festival developed the kinetic poem and can be seen as responses to the formal problem identified by Houédard for the kinetic poem.

2.1 The Non-Linear Development of Concrete Poetry

In the previous section of this chapter I suggested a linear path of development within the Concrete poetry movement with the evolution of the constellation poem in Britain through the influence of Kinetic art. In this section of the chapter I want to describe how the Concrete poetry movement in Britain was new in a non-linear manner which is how the new is thought to be experienced in the post-modern age. I explain how the Concrete poetry movement was non-linear by drawing on what the art critic Benjamin H. D. Buchloh says about the visual arts of the neo avant-garde and also by describing how the Concrete poetry movement in Britain thought of itself as new.

The Concrete poetry movement emerged in the nineteen fifties through a belief in the new as linear progression. For the Noigandres group, the constellation poem had made conventional verse obsolete which was historically justified because it was a result of an inevitable linear advance in the arts. As the Noigandres group state, their poetry was the 'product of a critical evolution of forms'[62] and progression of 'inherent tendencies'[63] that had been in progress in the literary, visual, and performance arts ever since the late nineteenth century with the Symbolist poets. Concrete poetry was seen to be the end result of an evolution of twentieth century art's preoccupation with a spatial dynamic, that is, with what the Noigandres group call 'qualified space: space-time structure instead of mere linear-temporistical development'[64] which they saw, as they say, in 'Mallarmé, Apollinaire, Joyce, Pound, the Dadaists, and the Futurists, but also the concrete music of Boulez and

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[62] Augusto de Campos, and others, 'Pilot Plan for Concrete poetry' (1958), *The Journal of Typographic Research*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (July, 1967), pp. 323-324 (p. 323).
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.

Stockhausen, the abstract art of Mondrian, Bill, and Albers, and the cinematic montage of Eisenstein'.[65]

Although for the Noigandres group Concrete poetry was seen to be the final achievement of modernist progress in all the arts, according to Chopin, Concrete poetry was not the end of a development in the arts but one of its evolutionary stages which would lead to some new type of art. Chopin's explanation for not endorsing Garnier's 1963 manifesto, 'Position I of the International Movement', was published in the July 1964 issue of Gloucester School of Art's magazine, *Link*, and re-printed in *It's: Wimbledon School of Art* magazine. In this response to Garnier's manifesto, Chopin writes:

> My disagreement is caused by wanting to put more emphasis on our break with the past. Of course, we have deep roots in the past, but we don't inherit its style and style is the point where we all need to begin again . . . the things that we create must be movement, and this we are beginning to see happen everywhere. This is where I see twentieth century movement leading us to some totally new art . . . This is the manifesto we have yet to sign.'[66]

Chopin's belief in progression was motivated by his desire to negate past radical poetry with a dynamic art-form for which the discovery of electronic technology by the Concrete poetry movement could serve and which resulted in what he called 'poesie sonore'. Chopin's magazine *OU* was, as he says in a letter to Nicholas Zurbrugg, intended to publish international authors under the title of 'poesie sonore' so as 'to put an end to the "dictature lettriste"',[67] that is, to the Lettrist movement. Even though Chopin moved to Britain from France in the late nineteen sixties, this

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[65] Ibid.

[66] Henri Chopin quoted in 'Copvoc Poetry: A Survey of Some Aspects of Contemporary Poetry', Ann Robinson, *It's: Wimbledon School of Art Magazine*, No. 2 (Summer, 1965), pp. 81-95 (p. 89).

[67] Henri Chopin, Letter to Nicholas Zurbrugg, *Stereo Headphones*, No. 6 (1975), p. 65.

belief in unified progression was not reflective of how Concrete poetry developed in Britain.

I have described how an ideology of linear progression informed some of the Concrete poetry movement but I now want to describe what I would suggest as the Concrete poetry movement's post-modern linear development as repetition of the past. The original avant-garde movements of Cubism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Futurism, and Constructivism date between around 1910 to 1930. According to the art critic Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, what he calls the neo-avant-garde period was a repetition of these movements between around 1950 to 1975. He describes the avant-garde in the visual arts as having originated what he calls the 'paradigmatic strategies'[68] of monochrony, assemblage, ready-made, photomontage, collage, grid composition and construction, and which are then repeated by the visual arts of the neo-avant-garde after the Second World War. This repetition of a cultural formation, though, is also new in that it means, as Buchloh says, the 'dialectics of the persistence and the repetition of artistic paradigms and their qualitative transformation'.[69] Not all artistic phenomena from the original avant-garde formation, however, sit comfortably within the time-frame from 1910 to 1930. Abstract Expressionist painting in the nineteen forties and early nineteen fifties is seen by Buchloh as 'a logical development emerging directly from the transfer of painterly Surrealism to the territory of the United States'[70] and therefore not a neo-avant-garde but an evolution of the original avant-garde. I would suggest that the constellation poetry of Gomringer and the Noigandres group was a poetic paradigm belonging to

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[68] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of Neo-Avant-Grade', *October*, No. 37 (Summer, 1986), pp. 41-52 (p. 41).
[69] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Introduction', *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), pp. xvii-xxxiii (p. xxiii).
[70] Ibid.

the original avant-garde formation but coming as a late development of Constructivism.

I have already described how this original avant-garde paradigm of the constellation poem of the nineteen fifties was repeated and transformed in Britain through the influence of Kinetic art. I would suggest, furthermore, that when the Concrete poetry movement arrives in Britain in the nineteen sixties it is as a repetition of paradigmatic strategies from the original avant-garde such as collage and photomontage, the spatial verse of Mallarmé, the typogram of the Futurists, the phonetic and optophonetic poetry of the Dadaists, the chance poetry of Tzara, the object-poem and found-poem of the Surrealists, the calligramme of the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, and the 'consistent poem', or poem of letters, of Schwitters. The Concrete poetry movement in the nineteen sixties becomes a repetition of not just modern visual poetry but also of modern sound poetry. Modern sound poetry begins with Lewis Carroll and Morgenstern, and continues mainly through the Dadaists Hugo Ball, Schwitters, and Hausmann; the Russian Futurist 'zaum' (transrational) poets, Vasily Kamensky and Velimir Khlebnikov; and the 'cri-rhythmes' poetry of the French poets Francois Dufrêne, Gils Wolman and Jean-Louis Brau.

This repetition, however, of paradigms from the original avant-garde by the Concrete poetry movement was experienced less as a repetition in Britain in comparison to other countries. The Concrete poetry movement was the first time Britain had experienced an avant-garde poetry comparable to that of Dadaism and Futurism. The Concrete poetry movement as the repetition of modern visual and sound poetry paradigms in the nineteen sixties was experienced as new in Britain in a way which was different to how the Concrete poetry movement was received in Europe which had already experienced the original avant-garde groups. The English

Beat poet Michael Horovitz (b. 1935) suggests that the experience of this repetition of the original avant-garde as new in Britain was due to a post-war generation which had not experienced the original avant-garde and so had a different sense of historical time in comparison to Continental Europe. As he says in his 1960 essay, 'Points of Departure', published in his magazine *New Departures*, that 'dada (there there) transition surreal bebop weren't born in the sixties, but then, nor were we [. . .] regeneration is not revival as the elements are not dead (sic)'.[71] Because of an absence of the original avant-garde in Britain there was a lack of self-conscious historical awareness, although as Horovitz suggests this lack of awareness among poets did not mean that the repetition was not new in some way.

The repetition of paradigms from the original avant-garde by the Concrete poetry movement were experienced as new in Britain, but they were also reinvigorated in their return. The repetition and transformation of paradigmatic strategies by the Concrete poetry movement in the nineteen sixties resulted in a proliferation of new intermedial forms. The French poet Pierre Garnier's 1963 manifesto, 'Position I of the International Movement', gave rise to the acronym in Britain of 'Copvoc Poetry' for the range of styles that the Concrete poetry movement embraced which the manifesto lists as including constellation, objective, phonetic, phonic, visual, verbophonic, cybernetic, and permutation. Other Concrete poetries included semiotic, process, and typestract. The wide range of morphological forms that the Concrete poetry movement came to include in the nineteen sixties was first publicly seen in the '2nd International Exhibition of Experimental Poetry' at St. Catherine's College, Oxford between June 5th to June 18th 1965. This exposition included over two hundred examples of visual poetry from nine European countries, North and South America

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[71] Michael Horovitz, 'Points of Departure', *New Departures*, Nos. 2 & 3 (1960), pp. 5-21 (pp. 8-9).

and Japan. Some of this work included photographs of the word by the German poet Carlfriedrich Claus, poem-machines by Furnival and the pop artist Richard Loncraine, poster-poems by the German poet Ferdinand Kriwet, and wall-poems by Sharkey. The exposition, 'Poem-Image-Symbol', from June 24th to June 25th 1967 at Falmouth College of Art also showed Concrete poetry's re-invention of avant-garde paradigms in the semiotic, semantic, phonetic, visual, machine, kinetic and linear poetry by around twenty-five poets from France, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Germany, and Great Britain which included Robert Altmann, Bann, Blaine, Ian Breakwell (1943-2005), Cobbing, Chopin, Furnival, John Hall (b. 1945), Houédard, and Sharkey.

I have suggested that Concrete poetry in Britain was new in a post-modern manner by describing it as a repetition of the past. I now want to describe how Concrete poetry developed in a non-linear manner that was unique to Britain and involved a return to temporal verse. The Concrete poem in Britain specifically developed according to a non-linear sense of time through a miscegenation with several other types of non-traditional poetry. The projectivist verse of the U.S. movements of Objectivism and the Black Mountain School and the spontaneous verse of the Beats are genres which transform Concrete poetry by exerting an influence upon it. In a 1965 essay called 'The Third Bridge' published in *Tzarad* magazine, Houédard categorises three hybrid poetic styles that arose in the nineteen sixties as a consequence of the Concrete poem. Houédard sees a trinity configuration between the Concrete poem, which he calls 'nouvelle' poetry, the poetry of Objectivism and of the Black Mountain School, which he calls 'new' poetry, and the poetry of the Beats. Between these three groups Houédard describes bridges linking them where hybrid poetries have evolved. Modern poetry from the U.S. arrived in Britain in the early nineteen sixties just as the Concrete poetry movement did which is one reason why

these new poetic forms appeared in Britain. What Houédard calls the third bridge between 'nouvelle' and Beat poetry appeared to him to be 'less available'[72] in Britain because not only had the anarchism of Dada been absent from Britain so had any poetry up until the nineteen sixties which resembled Beat poetry. Any disruption to the development of this third bridge would mean for Houédard that literary avant-gardism in Britain risked in becoming 'quite purposeless insular'.[73] The most prevalent of these hybrid poetries in Britain took place on the bridge between 'nouvelle' and 'new' poetry. The hybrid poetry between the Concrete poem and the Objective poem meant potentially a re-construction of a different kind of lyric poetry which was more spatial in its layout and foregrounded the materiality of language. It is specifically the poetry of the Black Mountain School which influences the Concrete poetry of Clark, Verey, and Sharkey in the late nineteen sixties. The hybrid poetry between 'new' and 'nouvelle' poetry can be seen to be the implicit topic of Bann's 1969 essay, 'Concrete poetry and After' published in *London Magazine*, and proposed as a development of Concrete poetry in the late nineteen sixties. He discusses the poetry of Finlay, Cutts, Mills and the U.S. poet Robert Lax, all of which place an emphasis on the larger linguistic units of the individual word or the verbal formula rather than the letter. Bann suggests that in such developments of the Concrete poem '[t]he apparent return to more conventional modes of language [. . .] conceals a continued interest in the same poetic problems'[74] as that of the Concrete poem from the nineteen fifties. As Bann says, 'the formal principle which lay behind this technique' of the Concrete poem 'has been retained and even extended' in this hybrid development of the Concrete poem which continues a '[t]ypographical manipulation'

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[72] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'The Third Bridge', *Tzarad* (1965), pp. 23-24 (p. 24).
[73] Ibid.
[74] Stephen Bann, 'Concrete poetry and After', *London Magazine* (July/August, 1969), pp. 72-83 (p. 73).

since this 'was useful above all' in the Concrete poem 'because it allowed the text to exist in two levels – the purely formal level of the individual sign and the semantic level of the connecting word or phrase.'[75] As Bann suggests, with this hybridism meant new ways of experimenting with the inseparability of form and content proposed in the Concrete poem. Verey makes this clear in his description of what he aims for in his own hybrid poetry when he writes in 1970 that 'every smallest particle of every syllable in every word should take its own place beside each and every other smallest particle of every syllable in each and every word and stand up straight and know it has its function'.[76] In such poetry, the spatial manipulation of language by the Concrete poem as a formalist device is used for similar effect with discursive language.

The emergence, then, of these hybrid versions of the Concrete poem in Britain meant an inclusion of temporal verse within the Concrete poetry movement and therefore a non-linear development. Unlike the Concrete poet of the Noigandres group in the nineteen fifties who viewed the Concrete poem as a privileged poetry above others because it had ended temporal verse, the poets of the Concrete poetry movement in Britain treat the modern genres of poetry as equally valid poetries through which to invent new rules for the Concrete poem. Houédard's model of literary history is non-linear which means that Concrete poetry does not render verse obsolete and this is reflected in the eclecticism of his first collection of poetry in 1965 called *Op and Kinkon Poems/ and Some Non-Kinkon.*

The British poet Michael Horovitz recognised that contemporary poetry in Britain was developing in a non-linear direction and he saw this direction as undermining the concept of the avant-garde as new. He writes in a statement for the *ICA Bulletin* in

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[75] Ibid., p. 72.

1964 that the meaning of the term 'avant-garde' in British poetry was 'too bespoke' so that it was not possible 'to declare – in this climate of researches too far-flung to be endorsed as a concerted progression'.[77] A linear path of advancement means the time structure of the cultural field is organised between the groups of innovators whose contemporaries and audience lie in the future and the groups of traditionalists whose contemporaries and audience lie in the past. The cultural field is made up of a set of chronological positions running from the latest art-form to the oldest. A temporal shift takes place when a new art form appears which by being new creates a movement in the structure of the cultural field. The arts in the twentieth century are made up of different temporalities at any given moment, out of sync with each other, so that the structure becomes animated upon arrival of a new art form which ages immediately what is already there in the field, until it too is surpassed, and so on. This was the temporal model of the new which Horovitz implies that the original avant-gardes were based upon and which he saw as no longer applicable in the post-war period. The poet and critic Hans Magnus Enzenberger criticises in his 1962 essay, 'The Aporias of the Avant-Garde' the traditional avant-garde model of time. Whilst, as he says, the 'forward march of the arts through history is conceived of as a linear, perspicuous, and surveyable movement in which everyone can himself determine his place, at the forefront or with the hangers-on',[78] 'just who' Enzenberger argues, 'other than the avant-garde itself, is to determine what at any given time is "to the fore" remains an open question.'[79]

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[76] Charles Verey, Untitled Statement (May, 1970), *Poems by Charles Verey, Thomas A Clark John Sharkey* (Gillingham: ARC, 1970), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1.
[77] Michael Horovitz, 'Live New Departures', *ICA Bulletin* (December, 1964), p. 8.
[78] Hans Magnus Enzenberger, 'The Aporias of the Avant-Garde' (1962), *The Consciousness Industry: Politics, Literature, Culture*, ed. by Michael Roloff, (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), pp. 16-40 (p. 27).
[79] Ibid., p. 25.

I have already described the repetition and transformation of the original avant-garde formation by the neo-avant-garde one, but I would also suggest, though, that the non-linear development of Concrete poetry in Britain through hybridism reflected a post-modern conception of the new. Post-modernity is recognised as being a cultural period of the non-linear. Arguing against a progressive concept of history with its assumption of inevitability, post-modern theory argues, in the words of the critic Thomas Docherty, that 'there may be a number of historical lineages, a number of 'progressions' or directions in which history is flowing simultaneously: that history is not a singular line but a network of forces which all proceed in their own directions, heterogeneously.'[80] This non-linear conception of time is a phenomena of the post-war avant-garde. The art critic Clement Greenberg suggests that the avant-garde does not come to an end in the post-war period but that its mode of development changes specifically in the nineteen sixties to that of the non-linear. The visual arts during the nineteen sixties involved a proliferation of what appeared to be new art forms and it was this very proliferation which for Greenburg meant that the identification of new art became more difficult and had to rely on a judgement of taste. In a 1968 interview with the poet Edward Lucie-Smith, Greenberg when asked for a definition of the avant-garde replies that [y]ou don't define it, you recognize it as a historical phenomenon' and also says that '[t]he avant-garde may be undergoing its first epochal transformation' in the present moment because [i]t has taken over the *foreground* of the art scene' in that the modern arts have become familiar and this has meant that the conventional meaning of avant-garde has been altered. 'The question now', as Greenberg says, 'is one of continuity: will the avant-garde survive in its traditional

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[80] Thomas Docherty, 'Postmodernism: An Introduction', *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. by Thomas Docherty (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 1-31 (p. 18).

form?'[81] The proliferation of new art forms in the nineteen sixties that were readily identified as such had changed the status of an avant-garde in terms of art recognised as progressively advanced. Greenberg's response to his own question as to whether the avant-garde will continue in its traditional form is implicitly made in his 1970 essay 'Avant-Garde Attitudes: New Art in the Nineteen Sixties' in which he writes: 'It turns out not to be true that all startling art is necessarily innovative or new art',[82] but '[w]hat is authentically and importantly new in the art of the 60s comes in softly as it were, surreptitiously – in the guises, seemingly, of the old, and the unattuned eye is taken aback as it isn't by art that appears in the guises of the self-evidently new.'[83] I would suggest that Greenberg is intimating that for visual art in the nineteen sixties to be radical and count as a genuine avant-garde it must proceed in a non-linear fashion because of the cultural success of morphologically new art forms in the nineteen sixties such as pop, op, kinetic, and minimal art.

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[81] Edward Lucie-Smith, 'An Interview with Clement Greenberg', *Studio International* (January, 1968), pp. 4-5 (p. 5).
[82] Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde Attitudes: New Art in the Nineteen sixties', *Studio International* (April, 1970), pp. 142-145 (p. 144).

2.2 The Sublime of Concrete Poetry

In the previous section I suggested that Concrete poetry in Britain was new in a non-linear manner and this section develops this argument by locating the poetry and poetics of the Concrete poetry movement in Britain within the theory of the post-modern new as non-linear according to the philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard. The end of the previous section described the hybrid development of Concrete poetry in Britain as non-linear and that this was reflective of a new type of post-war avant-garde. Lyotard gives a philosophical account of the non-linear new as sublime which describes how the non-linear new was specifically an avant-garde phenomena and so this section of the chapter seeks to explain how the non-linear new was avant-garde and to locate the Concrete poetry movement within Lyotard's theory.

I will now describe how Lyotard's account of the new in the post-modern period was non-linear. Lyotard explains the new as non-linear with implicit acknowledgement to the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's term, 'language game'. In a 1985 conversation with Jean-Loup Thebaud published as *Just Gaming* Lyotard describes the artist to be in a situation which he figuratively calls 'pagan', whereby there are 'several kinds of games at one's disposal',[84] where each game 'does not give itself as the game of all the other games or as the true one'[85] and where the purpose is to make 'new moves in an old game'.[86] Describing the different styles of art as games implies that creativity is a rule-based activity with its meaning subject to different usages and that the experimental artist is a rule-giver. The proliferation of intermedial experiments that defined the Concrete poetry movement were new moves in the games of the original avant-garde paradigms and in turn became new games. Concrete

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[83] Ibid.

[84] Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thebaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. by Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 61.

[85] Ibid., p. 60.

poetry's development in Britain through mixing with other genres of poetry, which was described in the previous section, meant that the Concrete poet treated the Concrete poem as one of several games and not a privileged one through which experiments could arise. It was not just the return to temporal verse, though, which made Concrete poetry's presence in Britain non-linear, but also the repeated effort to invent new forms.

Lyotard theorized the post-modern new as non-linear in that it was a continual cycle of experiment that did not build on a pre-existing tradition. In *Just Gaming*, Lyotard explains that the new in art exists in both authentic and inauthentic kinds in the post-war period or what he refers to as experiment and novelty respectively. The latter term which Lyotard associates with the linear trajectory of tradition is premised for him upon the Western desire 'to preserve, acquire, and accumulate contents. To turn them into what we call history, and to think that it progresses because it accumulates.'[87] The former term, however, which he associates with the post-modern, is premised as he says upon 'repetition which entails a forgetting of what is being repeated'.[88] To experiment is to be authentically new to such a degree that it is non-linear by figuratively forgetting tradition.

Lyotard goes on to describe his concept of the pagan as a description for the new in the post-modern period. He draws on the story-telling tradition of primitive cultures where because the narrative is passed on by word of mouth it gets forgotten and so has to be repeated. This mode of tradition is based on repetition and forgetting and not on accumulation and is reflected in the repetition of primitive music. Lyotard's description of the new as repetition means that the new always involves a break with tradition rather than being a repetition or evolution of it and it is this process which is

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[86] Ibid., p. 61.
[87] Ibid., p. 34.

repetitive and hence non-linear. This understanding of the new is what Lyotard calls the post-modern. In a 1982 letter to Thomas E. Carroll, Lyotard explains the post-modern as non-linear time when he writes: 'A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Thus, understood, postmodernism is not modernism at its end, but in a nascent state, and this state is recurrent.'[89] In describing the post-modern as coming before the modern, in the way that the new is experienced before it becomes part of the modern tradition, is to implicitly stress that the new is a continual process.

I would suggest that during the time of its movement, Concrete poetry prevented itself from becoming established through a process of re-invention with experiments without criteria. In a letter to Houédard, the Canadian poet who called himself bp Nichol (1944-1988), wonders what Houédard thinks the project of the Concrete poetry movement is. '[I]s there a goal', he asks, 'or is there the continual pushing back, the creation of langwedges to help us escape from the language or into it? (sic)'.[90] The uncertainty expressed here reflects how Concrete poetry in the nineteen sixties was felt to be driven by continual intermedial experimentation in many directions and national contexts without a pre-established rule. In Britain the wide-spread extent of this experimentation was publicly shown at an exhibition organized by Cox called 'Arlington Une' and held at the refurbished Arlington mill at Bibury, a remote village in Gloucester, from July to September 1966, and which had over sixty poets from twenty-one countries. Reviews of two 'Arlington' exhibitions were published in the September 1966 and 1967 issues of *Studio International*. Houédard, who had begun experimenting for the exhibition with placing texts between plastic

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[88] Ibid., pp. 35-36.
[89] Jean- Francois Lyotard, 'To Thomas E. Carroll Milan, May 15, 1982', *The Post-modern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*, trans. by Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas (London: Turnaround, 1992), pp. 11-25 (p. 22).

laminates or in coloured liquid such as hair shampoo or soft drink, describes in the introduction to the catalogue the purpose of this exhibition:

> arlington-une isnt a retrospect of what has been done during this last decade in the now well-defined field of concrete or kinetic eyear poetry – & for britain this is still only a four-year decade – arlington-une as expo & sympo is meant as an opportunity for poets to mutually explore their current explorations – an opportunity for visitors to view & hear something of this emergent landscape where poetry now includes the weather – where it isnt only concrete & kinetic but where it goes on to be intentional conceptual blankform verse – where it exists in all intermedia as well as eye & ear – where it can be silent and invisible as well as visual & phonetic – where it gets created on mind as well as on paper tape film glass & ginclear plastic – where it is autocreative and autodestructive as well as deep in movement & repose – where it hovers round the poets & societys own inner borders frontiers limits & definitions as well as those between the classic disciplines – where it can be an object-perdu as well as a poeme-trouve – where it can be the poetry of antipoet-audienceparticipation as well as antipoetry – where poems arnt only in constant flux as actual random-planned events in our totalenvironment but where contingency itself becomes somehow and for the moment an ultimate poem (sic).[91]

From Houédard's description of the exhibition this experimentation of Concrete poetry took place within the context of an art of environment. Environmental art was an art form developed in the late nineteen fifties by the U.S. artist Allan Kaprow

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[90] bp Nichol, Letter to Dom Sylvester Houédard (c.1960s, unpublished), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1. dsh Archive, Collection of Modern Literary Archives, The John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester.

which referred to a space in which the spectator physically occupied, and by the end

of the nineteen sixties Concrete poetry in Britain began to identify itself with this

category of art. Sharkey began to edit a magazine around environmental art in 1968

which was to help take Concrete poetry into an environmental art. In the introduction

to its one and only issue he writes that its intention is 'to explore the concepts of

potential environment structures and their actual realisation in social terms, art of

play' and to 'explore the structural elements of environments as well as the creative

possibilities and aesthetic extensions into dance, theatre, music, poetry, colour and

light.'[92] This issue included twelve international contributions that included Jeffery

Shaw, Al Hansen, Ivor Davies, Dick Higgins, and Jean Toche. The Concrete poem's

potential to synthesise the audio, the visual, and the kinetic in an environmental

situation was a conscious realisation in the international exhibition called 'Dorothy'

held between the 13th February to 6th March 1971 at the Bear Lane Gallery in Oxford.

This exhibition involved the spectator by having the gallery arranged so that a number

of small rooms and corridors were erected according to the themes of sand, light,

colour, and word imagery that created an event that was audio, visual, tactile, and

semiotic. It included work by students from the Bath Academy of Art, the U.S. poet

Richard Kostelanetz, flags by Astrid Furnival, coloured panels for windows by

Houédard, Cox's mobile, 'Suncycle', and Furnival's multi-panel visual-verbal

constructions. Within the context of an environmental art the Concrete poetry

movement was a restless experimentation through which no one particular experiment

could be said to be true. One of the consequences of this proliferation of poetic

categories within the Concrete poetry movement is that the term 'Concrete poetry'

became indeterminate and a field of poetry is experienced as semantically

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[91] Dom Sylvester Houédard, Untitled introduction, *Arlington Une* (Bibury, 1966), unpaginated, p. 1 of
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unknowable. By the end of the movement in 1971 Gibbs in his magazine *Kontexts* writes that 'the designation 'concrete' is no longer sufficient to cover the wide range of poetic styles [. . .] practised by so-called 'concrete poets',[93] whilst also acknowledging that as intermedial material poetry this term was the only one which was of any use, for as he goes on to say: 'But if it is not 'concrete' then what is it?'.[94]

I have so far described Lyotard's theory of the post-modern new as non-linear and located the Concrete poetry movement in Britain within this. I now want to elaborate on this description of Lyotard's theory of the post-modern new as non-linear by describing what he calls the sublime and position Concrete poetry within this description. Lyotard's understanding of the sublime explains the non-linear new as a specifically avant-garde phenomena. Lyotard, in his letter to Thomas E. Carroll, associates the post-modern with the experimental in that it is authentically new because it challenges aesthetic forms which have become accepted. He writes:

> The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unpresentable in presentation itself, which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia, and inquires into new presentations.[95]

This description of the post-modern as new is what Lyotard refers to as an experience of the sublime aesthetic, and I will now explain Lyotard's concept of the new in terms of this aesthetic. He defines the sublime in his essay, 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde', as the following:

> The possibility of nothing happening is often associated with a feeling of

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[92] John Sharkey, *Structure*, No. 1 (Spring, 1968), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1.
[93] Michael Gibbs, 'Notes Towards an Editorial', *Kontexts*, No. 3 (Summer, 1971), Unpaginated, page 1 of 2.
[94] Ibid.

anxiety, a term with strong connotations in modern philosophies of existence and of the unconscious. It gives to waiting, if we really mean waiting, a predominantly negative value. But suspense can also be accompanied by pleasure, for instance pleasure in welcoming the unknown, and even by joy, to speak like Baruch Spinoza, the joy obtained by the intensification of being that the event brings with it. This is probably a contradictory feeling. It is at the very least a sign, the question makes itself, the way in which *it happens* is withheld and announced: *Is it happening?* The question can be modulated in any tone. But the mark of the question is 'now', *now* like the feeling that nothing might happen: the nothingness now. Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe this contradictory feeling – pleasure and pain, joy and anxiety, exaltation and depression – was christened or re-christened by the name of the *sublime*. [. . .] To be true of this displacement in which consists perhaps the whole of the difference between romanticism and the 'modern' avant-garde, one would have to read 'The sublime is now' not as 'The sublime is now' but as 'Now the sublime is like this' [. . .] Here and now there is this painting, rather than nothing, and that's what is sublime. Letting go of all grasping intelligence and of its power, disarming it, recognising that this occurrence of painting was not necessary and is scarcely foreseeable, a privation in the face of *Is it happening?*[96]

I would suggest that the sublime is being described here as an experience of the new as a heightened sense of the present moment through an unprecedented aesthetic occurrence outside of any tradition or prescription. The beautiful and the sublime as

[95] Jean- Francois Lyotard, 'To Thomas E. Carroll Milan, May 15, 1982', *The Post-modern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*, trans. by Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas (London: Turnaround, 1992), pp. 11-25 (p. 24).

aesthetic categories originate from the German philosopher Immanuel Kant and his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*. For Kant an experience of the beautiful is a perception of an object accompanied by a feeling of pleasure because the perception has satisfied the free play of the imaginative faculties which treats the perceived object as free. The object is not perceived and judged in terms of a usefulness, that is, as Kant says, '[w]hen the form of an object is in mere act of reflecting upon it, without regard to any concept to be obtained from it'.[97] The free aesthetic experience of the beautiful object is different from everyday experience which cannot afford to be detached from reality with its laws of causality. The sublime is understood as that experience when the imagination is unable to present an object in intelligible form and rationally make sense of it. As Kant says, 'the sublime' is 'a presentation of an indeterminate concept of reason'.[98] The object appears radically indeterminate, hence the sublime's characteristic feeling of fear and terror and the opposite to the beautiful which arises when there appears to be a correspondence between the reality and the mental form given to it.

The theorist Paul de Man describes Romanticism in his essay, 'Criticism and Crisis', in terms of 'the belief that, in the language of poetry, sign and meaning can coincide, or at least be related to each other in the free and harmonious balance that we call beauty'.[99] The beautiful is here associated with a self-sufficient experience, and for Post-Structuralist theory the Romantic belief in beauty is a fallacy because it endorses the concept of closed meaning. Lyotard's theory of the sublime and the beautiful, however, is different from the conventional description of the beautiful and

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[96] Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde' (1989), *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. by Thomas Docherty (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 244-256 (pp. 245-247).
[97] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* (1790), trans. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), p. 31.
[98] Ibid., p. 91.

the sublime as a rational, self-sufficient experience and an irrational, dematerialised experience respectively. Instead, the sublime and the beautiful are temporal experiences for Lyotard in that they relate to what is new and old. By drawing on Kant's aesthetic theory of the sublime, Lyotard is arguing that the new in the post-modern period continually breaks with the institutional support of what has become tradition, and so passes the threshold of the comprehensible where the experimenter suffers the pain of the creative act not being guaranteed and of being a rule-giver to art. Lyotard's concept of the new as sublime means that the new questions a notion of reality or truth foundation. An art-work is sublime when it is new because it breaks with what has become to be believed as true and real. The post-modern new, then, is non-linear in being a continual process of invention and because of this it is sublime because it is always challenging what becomes established as reality.

Lyotard recalls in his essay, 'Philosophy and Painting in the Age of Their Experimentation: Contribution to an Idea of Postmodernity', that at a seminar a collage of abstract visual poetry presented by the writer Raymond Federman was denounced by Cage because, as Lyotard says, 'despite its clever deconstructive apparatus, it remained dedicated to expressing the lack of meaning for a subject', so that '[i]n short it was modern, in other words, romantic.'[100] What this anecdote illustrates about Lyotard's theory of the new is that a formally abstract art can itself become realist, or what he alludes to in the quoted passage above as expressive, in that a negation of traditional form by such abstract art can become naturalised so that it appears to reflect a belief in truth about what art should be. For Lyotard, the sublime and the beautiful are temporal events, so that for instance anti-formal abstract art

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[99] Paul de Man, 'Criticism and Crisis', *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd edn., (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 3-19 (pp. 12-13).

Figure 2

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l o c k b l a c k b l o c k b
l a c k b l o c k b l a c k b

which is conventionally described as sublime can itself become a form of the beautiful. For abstract art to reflect what is prescribed by a consensus of taste is to remain at the level of the beautiful or what Lyotard calls modern, when in fact for art to be authentically new and post-modern it would have to challenge what has become part of the consensus of taste and be sublime. The non-linear new is sublime when it challenges a belief in truth in being a continual process. It is this sublime challenge to truth that constitutes the revolutionary temporal moment of the avant-garde.

The distinction between a modernist and an avant-garde aesthetic can be made in terms of the temporal difference between the evolutionary and the revolutionary which the writer Alexander Trocchi made in his speech at the Writers Conference in Edinburgh in August 1962. He describes the destruction of the realist art-work which first took place in the early twentieth century with abstract painting and the modernist novel as showing that the 'problem is not to play yet another variation of the tune' but 'to accept the fact that it is necessary to jettison the tune itself.'[101] I would suggest that Lyotard's theory of the post-modern new as non-linear was a means of solving this problem in the post-war period in that the revolutionary new persists for him as the sublime through art's relationship with cultural value rather than with a self-enclosed history of its forms.

I would suggest that the Concrete poetry of Finlay can be read as a response to a crisis of originality in the post-modern period through a use of pastiche to suggest that the revolutionary new had become an impossibility. A poem called 'Homage to Malevich', 'Figure [2]', from *Rapel: 12 Fauve and Suprematist Poems*, is a black square of letters made from the words 'black', 'block', 'lack', 'lock', and the letter

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[100] Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Philosophy and Painting in the Age of Their Experimentation: Contribution to an Idea of Postmodernity', trans. by Maria Minich Brewer and Daniel Brewer, *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 181-195 (p. 193).

'b'. According to the art critic Rosalind Krauss one of the dominant ways in which modern art expressed the myth of being new was through the structure of the grid. In her essay, 'Grids, You Say', she argues that the grid was a formal feature that grounded the project of modernist art and its belief in being historically new. She writes:

> There are two ways in which the grid functions to declare the modernity of modern art. One is spatial; the other is temporal. In the spatial sense, the grid states the absolute autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is anti-natural, anti-mimetic, anti-real. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature. [. . .] In the over-all regularity of its organisation, it is the result not of imitation, but of aesthetic decree. [. . .] In the temporal dimension, the grid is an emblem of modernity by being just that: the form that is ubiquitous in the art of our century, while appearing nowhere, nowhere at all in the art of the last one.[102]

The grid is ubiquitous throughout the Concrete poetry movement with its geometric ordering of language on the page, but in 'Homage to Malevich' it is used to declare the failure of the modernist project in the nineteen sixties by being identified with a newness that existed in the past but which can not be experienced in the post-modern present. The poem as an imitation of the 1913 painting of a black square by the Russian artist Kasimir Malevich suggests that the status of this iconic painting of once being revolutionary new is now that of being an art-work amongst others with no claims to being temporally more advanced. This poem recognises that the aesthetic of the grid has become a cliché and plays with it as such. The experience of the new

[101] Alexander Trocchi, 'The Future of the Novel' (1962), *A Life in Pieces: Reflections of Alexander Trocchi*, ed. by Allan Campbell and Tim Niel (Edinburgh: Rebel Inc., 1997), pp. 158-159 (p. 159)
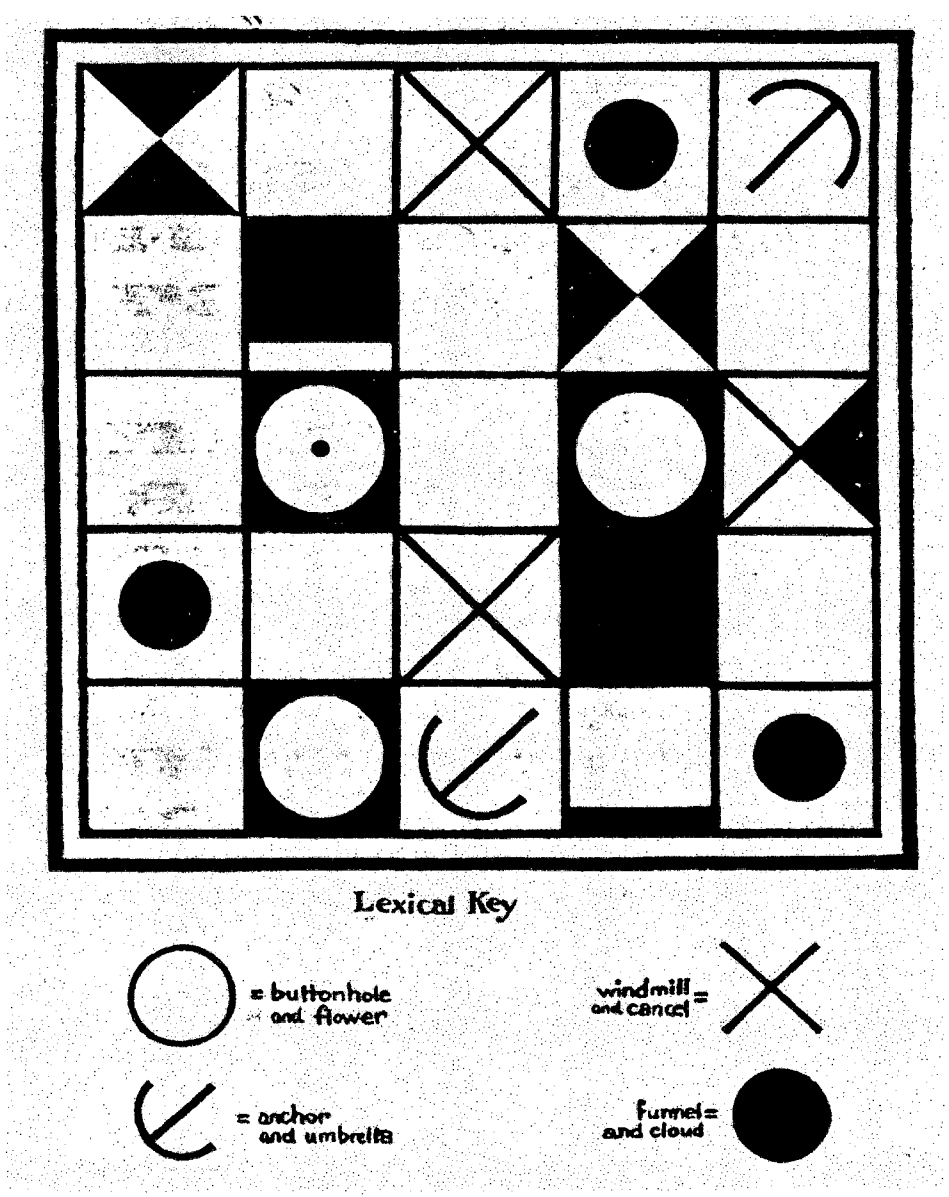[102] Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids, You Say', *Grids: Format and Image in the 20th Century* (New York: Pace Gallery, 1980), unpaginated, p. 2 of 8.

through the grid during modernism is undermined in this poem which in imitating Malevich's painting acts as a second-order language with the grid as a code signifying modernist painting. The displacement at the right-hand edge of the letter 'b' in the poem has meant different meanings have come about which disrupts the potential semantic harmony in the message 'black block' coinciding with the visual shape. Where Malevich's painting was meant to signal the beginning of a new modernist age, Finlay's poem suggests the end of this age through the words 'lack' and 'lock' and the letter 'b' all of which intimate they need the addition of other letters for semantic completion. The words 'lack' and 'lock' themselves also suggest the absence of a presence, and in treating the language of modernist visual art as a language to be played with, Finlay is suggesting that the presence of the avant-garde new as a break with the past is no longer a reality but is one which might be longed for.

The new for Finlay does still exist in an evolutionary sense if not a revolutionary one in that newness for him was inherent within a concept of tradition as a dialectic. Finlay's version of the new reflects that of T. S. Eliot's argument that the new should be part of a dialectical engagement with the past in his 1919 essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. To create a new work for Eliot involves a simultaneous understanding of the past as both detached and contiguous with the present and his explanation of this can be read as a description of what Lyotard shall later be said to criticize as mere novelty:

> The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is
> modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among
> them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to
> persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if

Figure 3

Lexical Key

◯ = buttonhole and flower

windmill and cancel = ✕

Ɛ = anchor and umbrella

funnel = and cloud ⬤

ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work

of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old

and the new.[103]

This is a description of a dialectical relationship existing between new and old which

motivates the life of the cultural canon. In a letter to Houédard during the nineteen

sixties, Finlay distinguishes between two types of newness which are an inauthentic

revolutionary kind that unavoidably exists in a compromised state with the old and an

authentic evolutionary kind. He writes of Houédard: 'I only half-share your delight in

ALL manifestations of THE NEW, because, you know, I am more classical in need . .

. I like to feel where a poem is leading, and if it fits with the one before and the one

after'.[104] Finlay continues by intimating that the newness which he believed Houédard

to favour exists in fact in a compromised state. He makes this point with a reference

to Horovitz's *New Departures* magazine by writing: 'New Departures (say) . . . it has

no centre, no coherent aim. Perhaps I mean it is too much a reaction AGAINST, with

the other thing always being there by implication.'[105] The semiotic poem of the

Noigandres group which shall be discussed in the next chapter is used several times

by British poets and I would suggest that in its use by Finlay it is as a meta-poetic

criticism of the Noigandres group and its underlying belief in the revolutionary new.

Finlay's 'Semi-Idiotic Poem', 'Figure [3]', published in his 1966 collection, *Tea-

Leaves and Fishes*, is from its title intended as a parody of the Brazilian semiotic

poem, and also of the implicit claim of breaking with tradition which is implied in the

invention of such a poem. In Finlay's poem the lexical key provided assigns a pastoral

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[103] T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), *Selected Prose* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953, repr; 1955), pp. 21-30 (pp. 23-24).

[104] Ian Hamilton Finlay, Letter to Dom Sylvester Houédard (Unpublished, undated), unpaginated, p. 1 of 2. dsh Archive, Collection of Modern Literary Archives, The John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester.

[105] Ibid.

identity to the abstract shapes of the poem which creates an ironic tension with the geographic context of the urban setting of the Noigandres group and the advanced temporality attributed to such poetry.

I have described Finlay's view that it is specifically the revolutionary new which cannot exist in the post-war period and I now want to describe what I would suggest are two theoretical perspectives which emerged in the post-modern period that countered the notion of the new existing in the arts. Firstly, there is the theory of Post-Structuralism which sees the new as a myth and which has always been so. What Jameson says about the notion of the self in his essay, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', can be applied to explain this theory of new when he says that 'not only is the bourgeois individual subject a thing of the past, it is also a myth; it *never* really existed in the first place; there have never been autonomous subjects of that type. Rather, this construct is merely a philosophical and cultural mystification which sought to persuade people that they "had" individual subjects and possessed this unique personal identity.'[106] Newness, like the concept of the self, is associated with originality and uniqueness and it is such concepts which Post-Structuralism sets out to critique and show that they are symbolic constructions with no ground for being real.

Secondly, there is the theoretical perspective which sees the new as having become a myth in the post-modern period but which was once a reality in the modernist period. If one reads the term 'avant-garde' as a synonym for that of being modern or new, then, as the critic Matei Calinescu observes about the arts in the nineteen sixties, there occurs a 'crisis of the avant-garde's concept'.[107] In the nineteen sixties art is questioned to no longer be capable of being new. For the theorist Peter Bürger, the art

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[106] Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', *Postmodern Culture* ed. by Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), pp. 111-125 (p. 115).
[107] Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (1987) (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 120.

of what is sometimes referred to as the neo-avant-garde period that began in the nineteen sixties was an art that failed to be new and was instead an art of eclecticism which is what is commonly thought to be the dominant aesthetic mode of the post-modern period. Bürger in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* makes a division between an authentic avant-garde period of the early twentieth century and an inauthentic neo-avant-garde period emerging in the nineteen sixties where art has become incapable of making progression. He argues of post-war art the following: 'Through the avant-garde movements, the historical succession of techniques and styles has been transformed into a simultaneity of the radically disparate. The consequence is that no movement in the arts today can legitimately claim to be historically more advanced *as art* than any other.'[108] For Bürger the end of artistic advance in the post-war period meant the end to an historic avant-garde and the beginning of its unhistoric repetition.

The dominant character of the post-modern period according to such theory is one where there is no possibility for the new. In the arts according to Jameson the dominant post-modern aesthetic is pastiche which in itself means an end to the original. For him the new did once exist during the modernist period which he reveals in contrasting pastiche with parody. Modernism consisted, as he says in his 1984 essay, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', of 'a fertile area in the idiosyncrasies of the moderns and their 'inimitable' styles'[109] which could be subjected to parody. This was because parody, as he says in his essay, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', 'capitalizes on the uniqueness of these styles and seizes on their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce an imitation which

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[108] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 63.
[109] Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review* (July/ August, 1984), pp. 55-92 (p. 64).

mocks the original.'[110] With pastiche there is imitation but without the satire of parody because in the post-modern period there is no norm from which something could deviate to be considered new, and it was this sense of something being new in that it deviated from a norm which the satire of parody relied upon in the modernist period.

In Lyotard describing the post-modern time of the new being a continual revolution he is intimating that it is a characteristic of the modern period although it is in the post-war period in which this becomes recognised and has to be distinguished from an inauthentic type of innovation. Whilst Lyotard acknowledges that the contemporary arts in the post-war period are compromised by absorption he still asserts there is the potential for an authentic manifestation of the new in the arts. Houédard's description of how the new in the post-war arts might be conceived in his 1963 essay called 'Men-Men & Right Mind-Minding' published in *The Aylesford Review* describes a difference between an authentic and an inauthentic newness in the post-modern period. As he says:

> Music words shapes relationships ideas sympathies & rhythms have not only
>
> been getting away from the cant hypocrisy & propaganda of the pseudo copy
>
> mock & mock-mock, but they are able now to be themselves without tedious
>
> selfconsciousness apology or hint of trying to epater the bourgeois. The period
>
> from Ubu to Hitler is the sieve through which 1965 has come, a major epuration
>
> enough to sadden the Old Guard (sic).[111]

The Concrete poetry movement is described here as a repetition of an avant-garde period which Houédard dates between Alfred Jarry's 1896 play, *Ubu Roi*, and the

[110] Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', *Postmodern Culture* ed. by Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), pp. 111-125 (p. 113).
[111] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Men-Men & Right Mind-Minding', *The Aylesford Review* (Winter, 1962/63), pp. 13-19 (p. 13).

Second World War and reflective of an authentic newness in the post-war period which is different to an inauthentic aesthetic of derivation, irony, and shock. Houédard's experience of the new in the post-modern period is closer to Lyotard's theory of the new. The inauthentic art of post-modern eclecticism is what Lyotard calls 'transavantgardist' art, and which Jameson might call pastiche, but authentically new art also exists for Lyotard which continues the project of modernity's challenge to tradition because it was new in a non-linear manner. Unlike for Houédard, for whom the Concrete poem is the only poetry capable of challenging the conventions of poetry, the new for Lyotard is continual because it does not mean newness in the sense of a morphological development of a media which runs the risk of coming to an end. The task of art in the post-war period for Lyotard was to be authentically post-modern, that is, to be continually new and challenge the given reality as the consensus of belief at any moment in time.

Lyotard's theory of the new is an event as an occurrence in space and time which cannot be understood within the prevailing systems of reference. I have suggested that Concrete poetry was sublime in the context of Lyotard's theory of the new in that this poetry tried to renew itself and disrupt itself from becoming established. The Concrete poetry movement can be defined by its attempt to regenerate itself through innovation during the course of the nineteen sixties. I want to now expand upon how Concrete poetry was a sublime challenge to the truth of poetry during the time of the movement by focusing on its intermediality, given that it is within the realm of the intermedial that it experiments with language. The literary critic Werner Wolf defines inter-media as a 'transgression of boundaries between conventionally distinct media of communication'[112] whereby there are two or more media which exist inseparably

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[112] Werner Wolf, 'Intermedial Iconicity in Fiction', *From Sign to Signing*, ed. by Wolfgang G. Muller and Olga Fischer (Amsterdam: John Benjamin's Publishing Company, 2003), pp. 349-360 (p. 349).

from one another in a text rather than in mixed-media where there are two or media which exist alongside one another. Houédard introduced Concrete poetry in Britain as an inter-media poetry that mediated between the visual, the verbal, and the aural in a two-part lecture at the Royal College of Art in February 1964 and at the ICA in December 1964 under the titles 'oroeuil/ eyear' and 'oreuil/ eyear'. It is as inter-media experiment which motivates the Concrete poetry movement in Britain rather than a self-conscious historical awareness of the previous avant-garde period. In summing up the discussions at the exhibition 'Concrete/ Spatial Poetry' at the Midland Gallery in Nottingham from 18th February to 5th March 1966 held between Cobbing, Furnival, Cox, Houédard, and McCarthy, Ray Gosling in the exhibition catalogues writes: 'All said they were not happy, or satisfied with their work so far. That they were experimenting in the great unknown between painting, poetry, music and maths. Wanting to break out of old categories not into new ones but into whole ones. Aesthetic experience that can involve all five senses not merely one of two.'[113] This suggests that the process of inventing new forms by the Concrete poetry movement all took place within the context of the intermedial. In the context of Lyotard's theory of the new, Concrete poetry's experimentation with the linear sentence was a sublime event as the historical identity of poetry was suspended from the present.

The poem is traditionally understood as a verbal text with lines primarily arranged according to temporal form rather than meaning. This understanding of poetry was challenged by Concrete poetry's visual re-arrangement of the verbal line, but a more detailed account of how Concrete poetry was a new poetry through its intermedial experiment is given in Weaver's description of the kinetic in Concrete poetry when he writes that by way of a non-discursive syntax, '[c]oncrete poetry represents

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[113] Ray Gosling, *Concrete/ Spatial Poetry* (Nottingham: Midland Galley, 1966), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1.

polemically the search for a new metric pattern'.[114] In a recorded interview with the artist John Lyle, Weaver compares the structural principles of Concrete poetry with the U.S. poet William Carlos Williams's quest for what he called a new type of measure. According to Weaver, the modern poem for Williams has shifted poetry from traditional metre to more of a metrical framework, which Williams called a 'machine made of words' and this systematic metre would then lead to a new measure in the same way as Weaver writes that Concrete poetry 'seeks a metre which will produce measure'.[115] This new sense of metre for the constellation poem can be explained as a structural account of the way such a poem can be read. In the constellation poem reading can sometimes be made in different directions. Such poems offer several different paths for reading and hence for combining in different ways the poem's constituent words so that the poem itself is a composite of different versions, or of different readings, which exist empirically by way of the design, or metre, of the poem. The structure of linguistic material in the Concrete poem which does not conform to the predicable patterns of speech was a new metre intended to bring about a new experience of aesthetic form.

I would suggest, however, that Concrete poetry cannot be so easily placed within a modernist context. Concrete poetry's intermedial experimentation with the structure of poetry departed from the inheritance of modernist verse which was trying to achieve the specificity of its discipline. The modernist project is stated by Greenberg with his argument that abstract painting was the turning away from the imitation of external reality to show the essence of painting and symbolist poetry was the turning inwards towards the verbal medium to show the essence of poetry. The specificity of the discipline, which for Greenberg was the aim of Modernism, assumed a divide

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[114] Mike Weaver, 'Concrete poetry', *The Journal of Typographical Research*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (July, 1967), pp. 293-326 (p. 317).

between the verbal and the visual. Greenberg writes in his 1944 essay, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' that the 'nonrepresentational or "abstract" if it is to have aesthetic validity, cannot be arbitrary and accidental, but must stem from obedience to some worthy constraint or original.'[116] This constraint was the specificity of an artistic medium which at its fundamental level took Gotthold Lessing's argument in *Laokoon* (1832) in which the verbal and visual realms in the arts were seen as separate from one another in that the former was temporal and the latter spatial.

Even though Concrete poetry foregrounds a materiality of language like modernist poetry the intermedial experimentation of Concrete poetry does not cohere with the medium specificity of modernist poetry. If the constellation poem described by Weaver was a search for a new type of metre, the visual syntax of the Concrete poem was more fundamentally occupied with experimenting with the category of poetry itself and seeing under what formal conditions it could be said to exist. Concrete poetry's experimentation with the poem meant a challenge to the assumption that the literary object of poetry is immediately given. Literary criticism which believes that it can give a close reading of a text ignores that its perception of an object as a poem relies on the assumption of a tradition that legitimises what objects are. Concrete poetry destroys the immediacy of the perception of the literary object which otherwise exists in the typographic conventions of poetry. For words on a page to get recognised as a poem means assuming that those words which have been arranged in such a way are different from other ways that justify calling it a poem. To know what a poem or a novel is, or what is literary, means relying on a tradition, that is, on a frame-work of assumptions that are not always recognised as such. The assumption behind literary
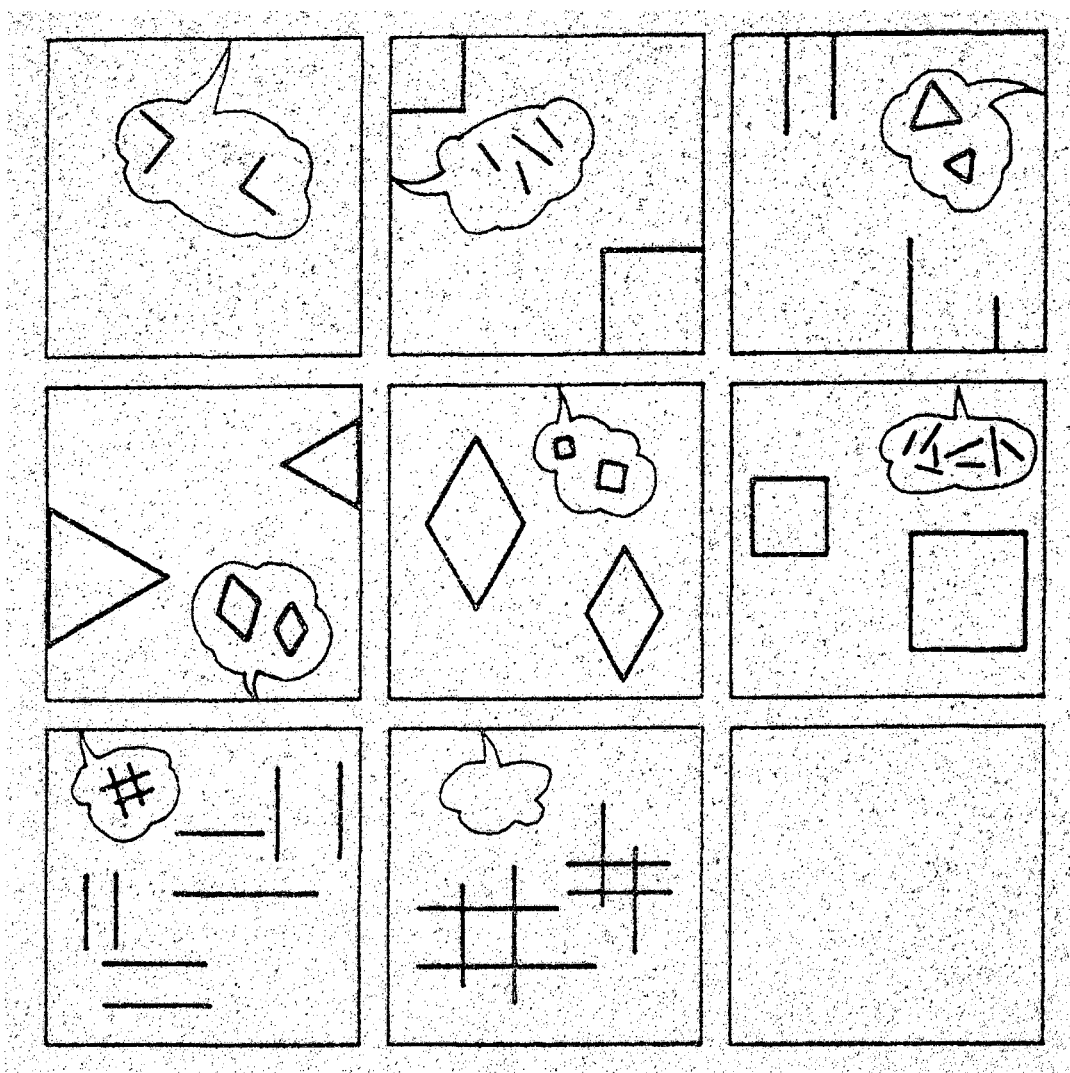
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[115] Ibid.

[116] Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1944), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 1, ed. by John O' Brian (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, (1986) 1988), pp. 5-22, (p. 9).

studies that there are texts which belong to literature and its particular genres and others which do not is ignored by the Concrete poem. By the end of the Concrete poetry movement the separate categories of literature were felt to have become indeterminate as a result of its experimentation. The U.S. critic Eugene Williams writes in the introduction to the anthology *Experiments in Prose*: 'Categories are not binding realities. They have only conventional existence. [. . .] We are in the area of something distinctly new. Why are Richard Kostelanetz's concrete series, or Joseph Vojacek's words in movement across a grid not a new style of prose? Why is Jochen Gerz's poster not really a novel? It is a matter of recognition. In the absence of a body of convention, there is surely as much reason to call a Concrete poem a concrete prose work as there is to call it a poem.'[117]

I would suggest that the Concrete poem's more conscious destabilisation of the conventional categories of literature was with the process poem which had developed out of the semiotic poem in the late nineteen sixties in Brazil around the group of Wlademir Dias Pino, Moacy Cirne, and Alvero de Sa. This was a wordless poetry where the reading experience had become completely visual partly in an effort to communicate internationally. Dias Pino who had some conception of the process poem since 1956, explains the thinking behind this poetry in his manifesto, 'Limit Situation: Distinction and Consequences', which was published in *Kontexts* in 1975. He distinguishes between the notion of a poem and that of poetry, where the experience of the former inclines towards the material and visual whilst the latter inclines towards the vocal. He writes that the process poem was intended to show 'unquestionably that poem is physical and even tactile – in its graphic visuality, while poetry is purely abstract', and that 'a poem – a visual process – may be tested

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[117] Eugene Williams, 'Introduction', *Experiments in Prose* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1969), pp. vii-x (p. ix).

Figure 4

collectively right from its functional capacity down to its very plasticity.'[118] The process poem made a hierarchy of the visual over the oral, of the visual image over the mental image and of the sensual quality of the non-verbal sign over the verbal one in order to transform the reading experience into a process of looking. But as Dias Pino says '[w]hat the process poem reaffirms is that poem is done by means of a PROCESS and not with words.'[119] The process poem was about externalising a self-conscious realisation into the category of the poem through manipulating non-verbal material.

A process poem by Sa, 'Figure [4]', published in the last issue of *Thaloc* in 1969 from a collection called '12 x 9' consists of six panels which play on the semiotic language of the comic-strip and its use of the frame. In this poem the grid is used for a set of narrative frames which become themselves involved in the poem's content. It is at the margins inside of each frame that expression is represented by a speech bubble and in each frame what is said is a re-organisation of the abstract shapes inside the frame but outside of the speech bubble. The representation of verbal expression from the margin of each frame is different to the contents which creates an ambiguous relationship between the speech bubble and the action inside the frame. This graphic representation of a poem involves the movement of a narrative indicated by an eventual turn to a blank content in the last two frames. Although the frames otherwise portray the interpretative relationship between the different kinds of expression of a frame's interior and exterior, they are given integrity and made to cohere as a whole through the action of implied narrative. The poem conveys a temporality solely through visual means that destabilises the traditional category of the poem as verbally discursive.

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[118] Wlademir Dias Pino, 'Limit Situation: Distinction and Consequences', *Kontexts*, Nos. 6 and 7 (1975), unpaginated, p. 1 of 2.

Given the context of the advertisement behind this predomination of the visual in Concrete poetry I would suggest that it was by interacting with commodity culture that contributed towards the destablisation of the category of the poem by the process poem. A dialectical relationship with the cultural mainstream is proposed as an important factor in the activity of an avant-garde during the nineteen sixties according to the art critic Christopher Finch. He writes in his 1966 essay, 'On the Absence of an Avant-Garde', that popular culture on one hand prevented the emergence of an avant-garde. As he says:

> The total acceptance of mass-communication phenomena by some English painters (and this is by no means limited to the general area of Pop) must according to all observed rules lead to stagnation unless an element of spiritual and intellectual conflict is introduced.[120]

Popular culture through mass-media hampered the emergence of an avant-garde by absorbing new art which made it familiar and less of a challenge to the dominant values of a mainstream. But popular culture is also suggested by Finch to be a necessity in the emergence of an avant-garde because it meant that such an avant-garde could, as he says, 'cut across media distinctions between the fine arts and the demotic',[121] and encourage the possibility for creative tension. He writes that he would 'hope to find an avant-garde emerging which is superficially close to the new Ad Mass orientated cultural pattern but which, through some minor deviation of alignment, is responsible for the generation of intense intellectual/ spiritual disturbance.'[122]

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[119] Ibid.
[120] Christopher Finch, 'On the Absence of an Avant-Garde', *Art International* (December, 1966), pp. 22-23 (p. 22).
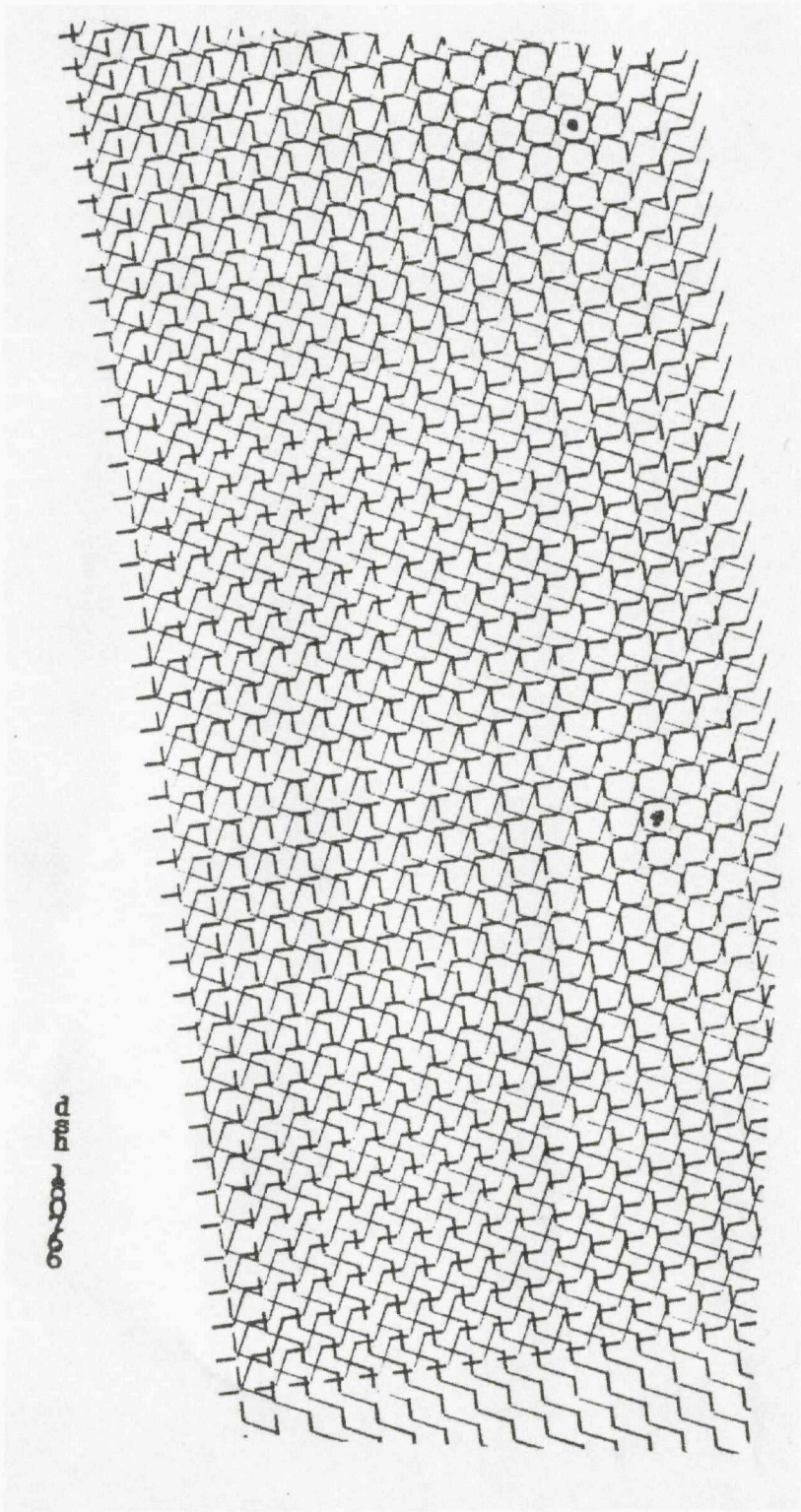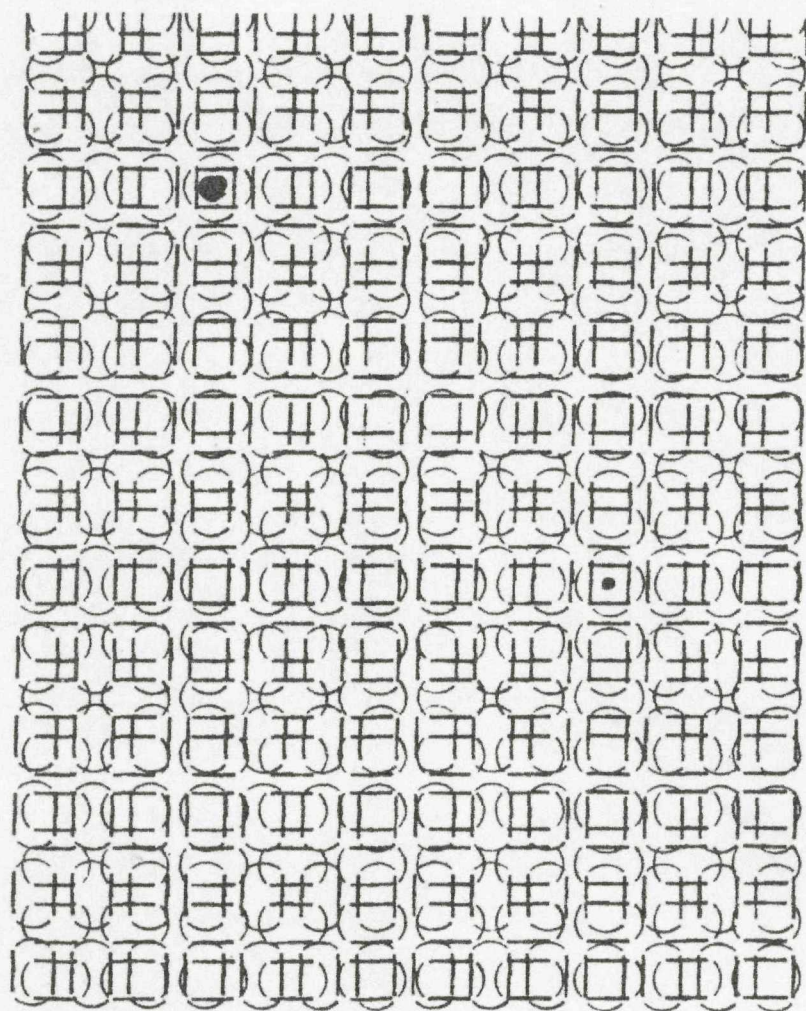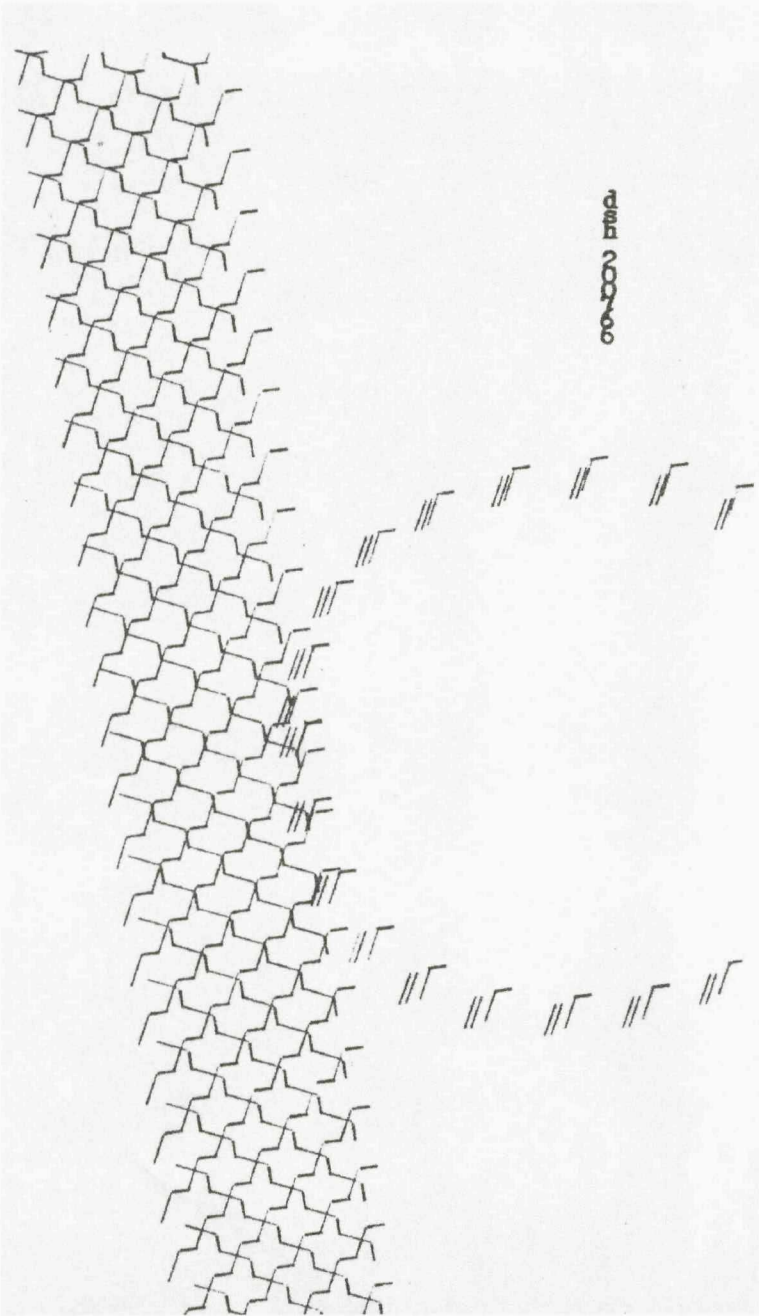[121] Ibid., p. 22.
[122] Ibid., p. 23.

Figure 5

Figure 5

Figure 5

The turn towards predominantly visual work by the Concrete poetry movement can be seen in Britain within more of an arts context with the poster-print. The *Wild Hawthorn Press* began a series of poster-prints in late 1964 with Finlay's *Poster Poem (le circus)* and included work by Furnival, Kriwet, and the instigator of the poster-poem, Pierre Albert-Birot. In the poster-print, the poems of the concrete movement are some of the most visually preoccupied given the nature of the poster to dramatically present a message. *Openings Press* also began a limited edition series of folders around the work of a single poet which contained lithograph, letterpress, or silk-screen sheets. Nine folders were produced between 1968 to 1972 by Finlay, Houédard, Furnival, Morgan, Bann, Cox Jandl, and Jochen Gerz. Finlay also collaborated with students at Bath Academy of Art from 1968 to 1969 to produce six projects involving silk-screen and letter-press prints of his poems.

I would suggest that in an experiment with the process poem by Houédard with a series of typestracts, 'Figure [5]', the category of the poem is destablised even further. Published in the 1967 visual poetry anthology of John Hall's poetry magazine *Exit* and exhibited at the Absalom Gallery in Bath (29th April, 1968), Houédard describes these converging and diverging grids as 'formal searches for (discoveries of) subatomic structures below the threshold of lexical verse', and that they explore beyond the given presence of the poetic object to visually portray the experience of language in that they interact, as he says, 'like the levels of a single language used in dialog by two people – or used at both levels in a single poem – or used when thinking'.[123] These typestracts were intended as private explorations beyond the verbal but I would suggest their shifting matrices which convey an articulation of distinctive graphic shapes situates the process poem away from the codes of popular

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[123] Dom Sylvester Houédard, *Exit*, Nos 5&6 (1967), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1.

culture and within that of an intermedial experimentation between kinetic art and poetry. The result of this is that a sense of temporal movement and an activity of reading rely less on the convention of linear narrative than it did in the poem by Sa. I would suggest that these typestracts propose a visual kind of literacy by using a minimal suggestion of visual rhythm through overlapping structures and which potentially pushes the category of poetry to its limit. In the first two typestracts, two black dots of ink are inside separate parts of their grids. Because the location of these minimal marks indicate those parts of the typestracts which remain most symmetrical and unaffected by the overlapping grids, they behave like punctuation marks in guiding interpretation and incline the looker of an otherwise visual work to focus on the shifting segments and interpret them as parts of a non-linear visual syntax. In the third typestract the focus on to visual segments to be interpreted as a syntax is made with the representation of contact between two structures of different design.

Chapter Three: Concrete Poetry as Anti-Author

3.0 The Material Aesthetic of Concrete Poetry

In the previous chapter I discussed Concrete poetry's relationship with the concept of

the new. I would suggest that this implicitly described how Concrete poetry

challenged a sense of an author through its preoccupation with making itself new in a

sublime challenge to what becomes fixed as a true poetry. In his essay, 'Death of the

Author', Roland Barthes writes:

> To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a
>
> final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well,
>
> the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its
>
> hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author
>
> has been found, the text is 'explained' – victory to the critic.'[124]

Barthes describes the author here in terms of an ideology, or belief in a reality or

dominant meaning which fixes and closes the text. Abstraction, therefore, can be

understood to mean the text which does not directly reflect a final point of reference

in terms of a world and an ideology. Although Concrete poetry was abstract it should

be realised, however, that in the last chapter it was suggested how even the abstract

arts can find themselves with an author in the sense of reflecting an underlying reality

of taste and tradition and for which Lyotard's concept of the new was suggested as

sublime in its disruption to this notion of an author. For Barthes the ambiguous nature

of language meant that the text was not fixed, but Lyotard takes into account the

contextual position of a text.

In this chapter I suggest that Concrete poetry came as an avant-garde rejection of a

realist tradition as part of an experimental project to construct a poetry without a

traditional model of an author. I am understanding the author as a reality such as the world or the mind which is believed to be reflected by that text and to guarantee its meaning. I would suggest that Concrete poetry was an abstract poetry through the way it undermined this understanding of an author by foregrounding the material over the referential properties of language, that is, what the critic Leon Roudiez would call the 'visibility and fullness (or phonicity) of language'.[125] The term 'author', then, in this chapter can be substituted for that of 'reality' although the term 'author' has greater relevance because besides from indicating a reality with intention which the first two sections of the chapter deal with, the remainder of the chapter deals with the notion of the author as the person of a text as underlying reality.

Concrete poetry was described as a poetry without an author by the Swedish artist and writer Öyvind Fahlström in his 1953 'Manifesto for Concrete poetry'. He writes:

> Poetry can be not only analysed but also created as structure. Not only as
>
> structure emphasising the expression of idea content but also as concrete
>
> structure. Say good-bye to all kinds of arranged or unarranged private,
>
> psychological, contemporary, cultural or universal problematics. It is certain
>
> that words are symbols, but there is no reason why poetry couldn't be
>
> experienced and created on the basis of language as concrete material.[126]

Although Fahlström did not have the example of Concrete poetry to support his theory at the time, the term 'concrete' was being used here to suggest a new kind of poetry which was not determined by the authority of a reality outside of a text and instead one which would foreground language as a material object. Fahlström's

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[124] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image-Music-Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142-148 (p. 147).

[125] Leon S. Roudiez, 'Readable/ Writerable/ Visible', *Visible Language* (Summer, 1978), pp. 231-244. (p. 243).

[126] Öyvind Fahlström, 'Manifesto for Concrete poetry' (1953), *Concrete poetry: A World View*, ed. by Mary Ellen Solt (London: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 74-78 (p. 75).

statement from his manifesto invites the abstraction of Concrete poetry to be seen in terms of an aesthetic objectivity and in terms of a philosophy of language. In this section of the chapter I discuss the abstraction of Concrete poetry in terms of an aesthetic materiality and I will discuss in the next section of the chapter how Concrete poetry might be conceived as abstract from the perspective of formalist language philosophy.

Concrete poetry in Britain had particular relevance because it was through Concrete poetry that post-war poetry in Britain became more engaged in a formalist poetic than it had done. Modernist movements of poetry in Britain before the Second World War were Imagism (1914 to c.1917), Surrealism (1936 to c.1940), and New Apocalypse (1938 to c.1943). The Concrete poem in Britain arrived at an important moment in literary history, though, for it introduced a mode of literary abstraction that modernism in Britain had otherwise not managed to achieve and which was not present in the post-war period. In a 1972 letter to the critic Nicholas Zurbrugg published in *Stereo Headphones* magazine, Thomas A. Clark describes his reasons for becoming involved in Concrete poetry, writing of his 'involvement with "concrete" in the first place, i.e. a concern with the structural base of a poem, a frustration with the fact that any discussion of *means* was alarmingly absent in English, at least, poetic practice and criticism.'[127] According to Clark, Concrete poetry in Britain meant the arrival of a formalist poetics.

I will now begin discussing the nature of the materiality of Concrete poetry's abstraction. This shall be done by drawing on the poetics of the movement in Britain which provides an involved understanding that is itself reflective of an avant-garde trying to understand itself. I will begin discussing the nature of Concrete poetry's

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[127] Thomas A. Clark, Letter to Nicholas Zurbrugg, *Stereo Headphones*, No. 5 (Winter, 1972), p. 31.

abstraction by relating it to the history of abstract visual art. The Concrete poetry movement initially arose out of a close affiliation with Concrete art. In 1936 the term 'concrete art' became associated with the Swiss artists Max Bill and Richard Lohse. Bill had trained at the Bauhaus in Germany, a school of art and design which stressed a unity of the arts at the service of architecture and emphasised the importance of the crafts. He would later become director of the Hochschule für Gestaltung, a design school which continued the principles of the Bauhaus. The 'International Exhibition of Concrete Art' in 1944 at Basel and a 1947 exhibition of Concrete painting in Berne made an impression on Gomringer, who from then on wanted to find an equivalent in poetry to the abstract art he had seen. Gomringer met Bill in 1944 in Zurich and worked as his secretary from 1954 to 1957. Concrete art was based on a belief in non-representation in that the work of art could be an autonomous entity in the world and free from the presence of an author. Concrete art belonged to the Constructivist movement. Bann historicises the Constructivist movement of 1917 to 1930 as consisting of two ideologically different parts which were Russian Constructivism and International Constructivism in Western Europe.[128] International Constructivism continues in the post-war period with the 'Realites Nouvelles' (1946-1955) in France, the 'Structure' group (1958-1964) in Holland, and the 'Systems' group (1970-1972) in England which continued the Constructivist project from the Circle group in 1937. International Constructivism stemmed from the *De Stijl* (Style) group led by the Dutch artist Theo Van Doesburg who first publicised the term 'concrete art' in his 1930 magazine and manifesto 'Art Concret'[129] which called for a totally non-mimetic

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[128] Stephan Bann, 'Introduction', *Systems* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1972), pp. 5-14 (p. 7).

[129] Theo van Doesburg, 'Art Concret' (1930), trans. by Stephen Bann, *The Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. by Stephan Bann (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), p. 193.

art of elemental and harmonious forms.[130] In 1945 the term 'concrete' was used as a

general term to describe abstract art in an exhibition at the Galerie Drouin in Paris

which showed works by Hans Arp, Wladimir Kandinsky, and Piet Mondrian. This

association of the term 'concrete' with abstraction in art was different to how

Doesberg had intended the term 'concrete art' where it had meant art completely

separate from nature and to be a reality itself whereas the term 'abstract' in art can

still be applied to non-figurative representations of nature.

I want to elaborate now on the nature of Concrete art's abstraction by describing

Houédard's account of Concrete art as the result of an evolution in the modern arts.

According to Houédard abstraction in the arts came as a response to a change in the

status of reality in the modern period. In his introduction to the catalogue for the

'Freewheel' exhibition, he describes the concept of an original and unique reality no

longer existing as it had once done due to the technological reproduction of images.

He writes:

> our accelerating ability to make eye-ear images precise & to distribute them
>
> thru mass media – telegraph telephone rotarypress gramophone photograph
>
> cinema taperecorder radio television &c this is our familiar world where we
>
> prefer fabricated news to gathered news – a repackage to a new creation – the
>
> marketed image to personal ideals – the ersatz to its original – an interpretation
>
> to the event itself – ever since these media began to develop – just before
>
> napoleon 3 founded the salon des refuses – art & poetry have been flying
>
> inward away from confusion between image & reality – like picasso 'but
>
> madame this isnt a lady it's a painting' – but & inevitably also flying toward
>
> their ultimate fusion – like duchamp who saw how thru our images of things we

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[130] The term 'concrete' was first used in relation to art by the artist Max Burchartz.

can claim & validly sign them – & like maxbill who saw the reverse – how

everything we create – mental images or tangible facts (& pseudo-events) – are

real additions to the solar system & valid as any wave hill or cloud – & this –

cool maxbill additives – is what concrete began as – from there – with the art

object safely interiorised & autonomous (sic).[131]

Houédard is here re-stating how form and content have been moving closer towards

one another which has resulted in two kinds of abstract art to have emerged in the

twentieth century, these being Conceptual art stemming from the Dadaist Marcel

Duchamp and Concrete art stemming from Bill. This history of the fusion of form and

content in the visual arts contextualizes Concrete poetry's abstraction. The abstraction

of modern art was a response to the way that the difference between reality and its

representation had been undermined by reproduction technology and its simulation of

reality. Realist art depended on a distinction between the real and its representation.

With the confusion of this distinction by the mass reproduction of images, artistic

media turned inward upon themselves and foregrounded themselves as media.

Houédard is suggesting in this catalogue introduction with his reference to the

Concrete art of Bill that concreticism in the arts which Bill helped to instigate is the

end result of an evolution of abstraction in art which meant that any kind of object can

be treated as abstract and a reality in itself. This understanding of abstraction,

however, should be situated within the context of the Constructivist movement where

the art-work is a reality in itself because each part of the work has its meaning in

relation with other parts and not with a thing outside the work. The theorists M. M.

Bakhtin and P. N. Medvedev explain how the realistic image is managed by the

formalist position when they write that if an art-work 'reproduces, reflects, expresses,

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[131] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Introduction', *Freewheel*, (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1967), unpaginated, p. 1 of 2.

or imitates something' then this content is 'subordinated to its basic constructive aim – to build a whole and closed work.'[132] Rather than treating a realistic image as a reflection of reality, concreticism in art treats the image as an autonomous artefact, and the nature of this concrete abstraction will be expanded in the course of this chapter.

I want to begin describing now how the abstraction of Concrete art was reflected in Concrete poetry by quoting from the last issue of *Tarasque* magazine in 1971 which published four letters of correspondence from anonymous senders which discussed the specific nature of the Concrete poem. Two of these letters describe the relationship between Concrete poetry and Concrete art in terms of a non-discursive syntax which made Concrete poetry less of a visual poetry than what it might appear to be. A letter dated 8th September 1968, addressed to the poet Simon Watson-Taylor, argues that Concrete poetry was not simply a visual poetry because it was derived from the visual art language of abstraction. With reference to Apollinaire it says:

> Whilst one recognises that the 'Calligrams' are an early attempt at the visual
>
> usage of language, their direct importance to the visual movement in the early
>
> nineteen fifties which has become known as Concrete poetry seems to be rather
>
> superficially overplayed. If one were to accept the confines of Concrete poetry
>
> as 'Between Poetry and Painting', viz. The I.C.A. 1964, and not attempt a more
>
> stringent definition, then fairly enough the list of names Lewis Carroll,
>
> Morgenstern, Apollinaire would be that of the immediate precursors. What I am
>
> saying is that I see concrete as something more than the mere visual usage of
>
> language, and the concrete aspects of Neo-Plasticism, turned towards language
>
> in this case, seem to be more the immediate tradition than the loosely termed

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[132] M. M. Bakhtin and P. N. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, trans. by Albert J. Wehrle (Cambridge MA: Harvard University

"visual".[133]

Another letter from the same issue of *Tarasque*, dated 9th June 1969 suggests that the visual art language of Concrete art offered a means of making an abstract poetry with a non-discursive syntax. It says:

> Concrete seems to have arisen out of a need to discover a new syntax, and, as you say, one not dependent on the directional quality of speech. It is the whole impure business of narrator and description as a hangover of the syntax of spoken language that has worried me, and it seems that the syntax discovered in the general *idea* of Concrete Art fulfills, at least theoretically, a position.[134]

The influence of the geometric aesthetic of Concrete art on poetry is not seen in terms of a visuality here, but in terms of Concrete poetry's order of words and letters which resemble the structural relationship between colours and shapes found in Concrete art. Concrete art is described here as a visual art modeled on the systematic nature of language and which the Concrete poem was responding to. In his 1969 essay, 'Ian Hamilton Finlay – The Structure of a Poetic Universe', Bann reads Finlay's sculptural experiments with the format of the Concrete poem as revealing that Concrete poetry was not primarily a visual poetry but one which was closer to the model of language from the point of view of Structuralist theory with its belief in a universal structure of oppositions and differences which produce meaning. Bann writes that 'it becomes increasingly plain that this new syntax is not simply or exclusively the "graphic syntax" proclaimed by the concrete poets' and that [a]t a more fundamental level, it is a syntax based on the binary structure of language, reflecting the ultimate cleavage between visual presence and semantic inference and exploiting the possibilities of

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Press, 1968, repr; 1985), p. 45.
[133] *Taresque*, ed. Simon Cutts and Stuart Mills, Nos. 11&12 (1971), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1.
[134] Ibid.

relationships of affinity and dissimilarity between linguistic components.'[135] As the correspondence from *Tarasque* magazine suggests, however, it was within Concrete art that Concrete poetry could realise this structural model of language.

I have described so far the nature of Concrete art's abstraction and its relation to Concrete poetry and I will now elaborate on what this abstraction meant in terms of the Concrete poem itself. The Concrete poem as an abstract poetry and as a reality in itself is espoused by Houédard in his 1964 essay, 'To Freshen our Sense of the Language We Do Have', as a supersession of modernist poetry's anti-realist position. He writes that with the abstraction of modernist verse such as that of the Imagist and Objectivist groups 'the poet interferes w/ language, explores & freshens its resistances – 'language itself is VIEW' (sic)'.[136] For Houédard such modernist poetry sought to focus on attention on the medium of language through which the world outside of the text is represented. The world outside the text is still portrayed but it is refracted in the modernist poem as the medium of language becomes involved in this reflection. The Concrete poem on the other hand goes a stage further and is described by Houédard as 'language/ communication as VIEWED'[137] in that the poetry is maintained to be non-representational and completely formal. Where modernist poetry was abstract in that it resisted a transparent use of language onto the world, the Concrete poem is being suggested by Houédard to take abstraction further by foregrounding to a greater extent the materiality of its medium until the difference between art and reality becomes unclear. The modernist poem upset a transparent portrayal of reality in order to revitalise perception and show reality in a new way whereas the Concrete poem goes a stage further and is more occupied with being an object of experience itself through

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[135] Stephan Bann, 'Ian Hamilton Finlay – The Structure of a Poetic Universe', *Studio International* (February, 1969), pp. 78-81 (p. 80).
[136] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'To Freshen Our Sense of the Language We Do Have', *The Aylesford Review* (Summer/ Autumn, 1964), pp. 154-157 (p. 155).

a revitalisation of language. Houédard explains the nature of Concrete poetry's abstraction by distinguishing it from the abstraction of modernist verse. I would suggest that this distinction reflects a difference between modernist and post-modernist versions of abstraction. The U.S. poet Dick Higgins describes the course of development for all twentieth century arts as a move from what he calls a cognitive to a post-cognitive aesthetic. In his essay, 'A Post-Cognitive Era: Looking for the Sense in it All', published in issue nine and ten of *Kontexts* he writes that in the post-war period 'the focus has come off the individual and his identity where, for instance, it had for the most part been since the romantic period, or off the emphasis on new means of perception which had been the basis of most of the objective art tendencies since the lineage began of the anti-romantic reaction (in this case Stein, Eliot, Mann, Gide, Apollinaire, Satie, Webern, Mondrian, Lissitsky – and so on)', and he goes on to say that the focus 'came to be, instead on the object qua object, the poem within the poem, the word within the word – the process as process, accepting reality as a found object, enfolding it by the edges, so to speak, without trying to distort it (artistically or otherwise) in its depiction.' [138] I would suggest, then, that Concrete poetry in Britain reflected a post-modern shift in the epistemological function of abstraction in poetry whereby the poem was about itself as a construction rather than about a reality outside the poem.

A better understanding of the nature of Concrete poetry's abstraction can be approached through Weaver's description of abstract film. In his essay, 'Cineplastics or Film as Kinetic Art', Weaver writes that concreticism in film 'is not concerned with narration or representation, nor with the camera as an instrument for reproducing

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[137] Ibid.

[138] Dick Higgins, 'A Post-Cognitive Era: Looking for the Sense in it All', *Kontexts*, No. 9&10 (Winter, 1976/1977), unpaginated, p. 5 of 6.

nature so much as producing it.'[139] Weaver elaborates on this point in a conversation

with the artist John Lyle, when he says that in Kinetic art natural phenomena is

material to be transformed into unique realities, that is, 'structures of nature' act 'as

models for the treatment of certain material which would then produce phenomena

previously unrecognisable by man'.[140] Like Houédard, Weaver is distinguishing the

abstraction involved in concreticism as a pure type of non-referentiality from that of

non-figurative abstraction. The application of film as an abstract art was not intended

to create effects which could be compared to existing natural phenomena, but was

rather developed to explore formal qualities such as depth, speed, pattern, colour, and

duration for their own sake in order to expand visual knowledge. Likewise, in

Concrete poetry it is the 'act of perception'[141] which is important, where, as Weaver

says in his essay 'Concrete Poetry', '[e]nergy is directed towards solving problems of

scale, movement, sequential relations, time, stamina, and, above all, the identification

of forms.'[142] Kinetic art and Concrete poetry of the nineteen fifties were aimed at

creating unique perceptual aesthetic experiences from the structural organisation of

material. Non-figurative film was abstract in that it did not present an empirical

picture of reality but it was still concerned with imitating the structures of reality.

Similarly, modernist verse in the style of Objectivism did not present a picture of the

world in the convention of realism but could still be considered to be concerned with

reproducing a reality of consciousness with its dialectical engagement with language

and the world. This type of abstraction which as Weaver says tries to reproduce nature

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[139] Mike Weaver, 'Cineplastics or Film as Kinetic Art', *Image*, No. 15 (October, 1965), p. 10.
[140] Mike Weaver, 'Concrete poetry: Discussion by John Lyle and Mike Weaver' (Undated, unpublished). Recording. 2 tapes, 7 inch mono. Audio-Visual Department, Main Library, Exeter University.
[141] Mike Weaver, 'Concrete poetry', *The Journal of Typographical Research*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (July, 1967), pp. 293-326, (p. 294).
[142] Ibid.

is different to that of Concrete art and poetry which is concerned with new experiences of aesthetic form.

The Concrete poem as a radically abstract poetry resisted paraphrase by making form and content inseparable in a way which relied on the physical material of language and its semantics. The term 'functional' used in the Concrete poetry movement was derived from Concrete art to refer to an inextricable relationship between form and content. In modernist verse form and content had moved closer towards one another, but in the Concrete poem they are inextricably linked through the spatial position of verbal elements directly bearing on their semantic meaning. Form and content are inextricably linked in the Concrete poem so that to change the form of a Concrete poem is to change its content and vice versa. Concrete poetry was about creating unique realities in the sense of unique relations between form and content as it had been for Concrete art.

I now want to elaborate on the nature of the aesthetic objectivity, or materiality, of the Concrete poem by describing its relationship with a rational aesthetic. The Concrete poem of the nineteen fifties was characterised as a reality in itself through a rational aesthetic. It was a formal aesthetic of primarily repetition and symmetry which formed the basis for Concrete poetry's autonomy as it had for Concrete art, because it was through order that the poem could escape the subjectivity of its author and embody what the Concrete poem assumed to be the rational laws of the universe. This aesthetic took the form of the organic work of art. Organic unity is described by the theorist Peter Bürger as stemming from a work which is 'constructed according to the syntagmatic pattern; individual parts and the whole form a dialectical unity' and where '[a]n adequate reading is described by the hermeneutic circle: the parts can be

understood only through the whole, the whole only through the parts.'[143] The organic unity of this aesthetic took specifically the form of the gestalt which is described as such by Gomringer who writes in 1954 in his first manifesto, 'From Line to Constellation', that 'the new poem is simple and can be perceived visually as a whole as well as in its parts.'[144] The concept of the gestalt arose out of early twentieth century German psychology for which an entity must be investigated in its entirety in order to be understood rather than the individual parts which comprise it that differ from the overall effect of the whole. The Concrete poem achieved an overall effect which was different from the individual elements separately considered. The gestalt of the Concrete poem was also important to its kinetic development in Britain. The phenomena of the perception of movement caused by several static stimuli rather than by actual physical movement was common in Kinetic art and Concrete poetry with its moiré patterns that create a shimmering surface through the superimposition of two or more overlapping patterns on top of one another.

The Concrete poetry of the nineteen fifties as organic poems reflected an experimental search for rational form. I would suggest that this search for rational form in language was continued by the Concrete poetry movement in Britain as a sculptural adaptation of the Concrete poem that was capable of expanding the rational aesthetic of the constellation poem. Finlay was one of the first poets in the Concrete poetry movement to take the Concrete poem out of the page and into a three-dimensional environment. His 1964 poem 'Standing Poem' could be folded into a miniature sculpture, but his most important step in this respect came in the summer of 1965 when he experimented with applying letters to a number of sculptural

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[143] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 79.

[144] Eugen Gomringer, 'From Line to Constellation' (1954), trans. by Mike Weaver, *Concrete poetry: A World View*, ed. by Mary Ellen Solt (London: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 67.

constructions and reliefs for architecture that were either sand-blasted onto perspex glass or applied to coloured sheet-metal or wood. Taking the Concrete poem into an environmental context in the form of construction offered a new way of presentation that developed Concrete poetry's semanticization of form. In a review of the exhibition of Concrete poetry at the Brighton Festival, Bann remarks about Finlay's work in particular that 'the material which serves as a receptacle for the letters and words of the Concrete poem is not merely a notional surface chosen for convenience but an indivisible part of the poem'[145] and this remark describes the significance of the sculptural adaptation of the Concrete poem in general in that it was not decorative but was to deepen the relation between form and content. The exhibition at Brighton, which was organised by Bann, was the culmination of the sculptural adaptation of the Concrete poem and contributed to an important stage in the history of the Concrete poem by displaying poems specifically made into three-dimensional objects for the environmental setting of the town, many of which had previously existed only in printed format.

So far Concrete poetry has been discussed in terms of exploring a rationality that would enable a poetry to be free from the notion of the author and exist as an autonomous reality, but I want to now consider how the irrational was also understood by the movement to be involved in the rational aesthetic of concreticism as well as being a potential means of making a work more objective. The Concrete poetry movement in the nineteen sixties began to explore beyond its Constructivist origins of making the poem formally self-sufficient. Where concreticism had meant a formal or rational art in the nineteen forties and fifties, in the nineteen sixties concreticism in the arts applied also to a non-formal or non-rational art. Abstraction in Concrete

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[145] Stephen Bann, 'Concrete poetry Exhibition Brighton Festival 1967', *London Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (May, 1967), pp. 67-68 (p. 68).

poetry, then, emerged within the formal Constructivist tradition and developed in the nineteen sixties with anti-formal influences from the Dada tradition.

I would suggest that the non-rational was always inherent within the rational aesthetic of Concrete art. Max Bense (1910-1990) describes Bill's exhibition of Concrete painting and sculpture from the 2nd November to 22nd December in 1966 at the Hanover gallery in London in terms of entropy, writing in the exhibition catalogue that 'in the augmented state of exactness the fragile, diffuse, disturbance-possibilities multiply as well, – the uncertainties, the random-bodies, the alternative of choice.'[146] In Concrete art the irrational is experienced as the counterpart to the rational and the same can be said for Concrete poetry. The first Concrete poems of Gomringer's as so-called constellation poetry were discovered through the principle of inversion. He writes in his 1967 essay, 'The First Years of Concrete poetry': 'I came upon the possibility of inversion and so to the Constellation. Inversion I consider as probably my most important contribution to Concrete poetry. For me it intimates that every message be it ever so slight, is aligned in one direction, even if it is examined in an inverted order.'[147] What Gomringer is suggesting here is that the rational was an inherent property of language which the preconceived principle of inversion demonstrated. However, some of the Concrete poetry of Gomringer written in English can be read as experiments to try and discover the rational because it was not a self-evident property of language. An untitled poem from the 1962 book, *Konstellationen*, is a serial composition of one hundred and one lines which are a list of predicates for the word 'snow'. Each line consists of the phrase 'snow is' which is followed by an adjective most of which are incongruous descriptions for the object snow. The content

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[146] Max Bense, *Max Bill*, trans. by George W. Staempfli (London: Hanover Gallery, 1966), pp. 3-18 (p. 14).

[147] Eugen Gomringer, 'The First Years of Concrete poetry', trans. by Stephen Bann, *Form* No.4 (April, 1967), pp. 17-18 (p.18).

of the poem is non-sensical, but this irrationality is overcome through repetition

which has the effect of eliminating sense altogether so that all the poem amounts to is

the tautology 'snow is snow'. In this poem Gomringer has experimented with seeing

under what conditions the rational might still persist with the result that the rational is

asserted through the irrational. In another poem written in English Gomringer tests

out to what extent the rational can be made as such from language. The poem

'Silence' was made as Gomringer says in his essay, 'The First Years of Concrete

poetry', with a rational method whereby 'the number of repetitions' were 'calculated

with precision.'[148] This poem consists of the word 'silence' used fourteen times in a

rectangular block with the centre left empty where the word 'silence' might be. The

centre of the visual structure of the poem does not contain the word 'silence', and so

is silent of verbal language. The surrounding structure says 'silence' but is not silent

of verbal language. The blank space in the middle has been made to signify the

meaning that it is 'silent' and so in having been made to signify it too is not silent of

meaning. Such a poem might be read as a play on what the U.S. philosopher Charles

S. Peirce calls 'the material qualities of the representation' and 'those imputed

qualities which can only be seen by the mind's eye', where for instance as he says

'[t]he printed word *white* is white as to its imputed quality but is materially speaking

black according to the colour of ink.'[149] As a consequence of this semiotic play

between content and visual structure the rational binary of presence and absence

becomes indeterminate.

The purity of the meta-language of the Concrete poem, or in other words its

functionalism whereby the semiotic form and the semantic content reflect one another

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[148] Ibid.
[149] Charles S. Peirce, 'On Representations' (1873), *The Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. 3, ed. by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp. 65-66 (p. 66).

to the extent that they are rationally co-dependent, was understood by Houédard to be capable of undermining itself and which the movement in Britain was more consciously involved with. In his essay, 'ICA Expo Bpp – Selective Notes on 3 Aspects', Houédard writes how self-reflective language which gave Concrete poetry its initial purity could be extended so as to undermine this purity. He writes:

> The purity in fact of pure concrete [. . .] can be relegated step by extraordinary step to deeper & deeper meta- & meta-meta-languages – till it is discoverable only by a reading in considerable depth as [. . .] in pop-art – pornography – & the clank & glitter of some trigger-literature (sic).[150]

Houédard is suggesting here that the Concrete poetry movement developed in the nineteen sixties with an irrational aesthetic due to its initial rational self-reflexivity being experimented with and not despite of it. The 1965 exhibition 'Between Poetry and Painting' is described by Houédard as partly showing how the Concrete poetry movement in the nineteen sixties was concerned with exploring the aesthetic of purity and seeing at what point it would become compromised. He writes that the issue 'raised by the icaexpo is at what point quark/ antiquark symmetry serialism & repetition patterns can swamp purity'.[151] Houédard is referring here to how some of the works at the exhibition were experimenting with seeing how far they could foreground the visual and lessen the semantic before they started to undermine the self-reflexive rationality of Concrete poetry.

I have suggested that the non-rational was understood to be inherent within the rational aesthetic of Concrete art and which the Concrete poetry movement explored and made manifest. I will now describe how the non-rational was understood by the movement as a means of realising aesthetic objectivity. Within the visual arts of the

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[150] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Ica Expo Bpp –Selective Notes on 3 Aspects', *Thaloc* (1965), unpaginated, p. 2 of 3.

nineteen sixties it is the non-rational aesthetic in the context of the theatrical which is assumed to be capable of realising the objectivity which concreticism tried to achieve. The U.S. Fluxus artist George Maciunas (1931-1978) describes concreticism in the arts in his 1962 manifesto, 'Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art' written for the Fluxus concert, 'Apres John Cage'. He identifies five different types of concreticism as 'pseudo,' 'structural,' 'method,' and 'extreme', with this last type exceeding the category of art itself. His method of categorising the arts involves a horizontal axis charting the change from temporal to spatial art and a vertical axis which goes from artificial and illusionistic art to an art of reality. The concrete for Maciunas in its extreme mode is all of reality outside of art, 'from mathematical ideas to physical matter'.[152] This notion of concreticism in art cannot be achieved without art moving beyond art itself, since the concept of art implies artifice, and this is where the concept of concreticism meets with the nihilism of anti-art. A concrete artist according to Maciunas would show for example a decaying tomato simply by presenting the real thing rather than change its form or content through an image or symbol of it.[153] When it comes to music, the concrete musician would present a sound that has not been made artificial by a musician. A concrete sound is one which, as he writes, 'clearly indicates the nature of material or concrete reality producing it. Thus a note sounded on a piano keyboard or a bel-canto voice is largely immaterial, abstract and artificial since the sound does not clearly indicate its true source or material reality – common action of string, wood, metal, felt, voice, lips, tongue, mouth etc.'[154] Concreticism as reality is how Arp first described concreticism in the arts. According to Weaver, Arp in his 1946 essay, 'Konkrete Kunst', gave Gomringer the idea for his

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[151] Ibid., p. 1 of 3.
[152] George Maciunas, 'Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art' (1962), *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 727-729 (p. 728).
[153] Ibid.

constellation poetry when writing about his sculptures that '[e]verything that is, is "concretion"; so is art, only art may separate from nature'.[155] The difference between the Concrete artist of the nineteen forties and that of the Fluxus artist of the nineteen sixties is that the former was searching for rational artistic form whereas the latter was not. For Maciunas the perception that concreticism extends to reality meant that a non-rational aesthetic had to be realised which took the form of the art happening that was a theatrical art-form that originated in the early nineteen sixties out of environmental art. The Scottish artist Mark Boyle (1934-2005) who introduced the art happening to Britain writes in a statement explaining his events at the ICA in 1965:

> My ultimate object is to include every thing in a single work. [. . .] In the end
>
> the only medium in which it will be possible to say everything will be reality. I
>
> mean that each thing, each view, each smell, each experience is material I want
>
> to work with. Even the phony is real. I approve completely of the girl in Lyons
>
> who insists that it's real artificial cream. I want to work even with the
>
> picturesque. There are patterns that form continuously and dissolve; and these
>
> are not just patterns of line shape colour texture, but patterns of experience pain
>
> laughter, deliberate or haphazard associations of objects words silences on
>
> infinite levels over many years.[156]

Concreticism in the arts during the nineteen sixties meant that anything in the world, whether it be appear to be realistic or abstract, rational or irrational, could be experienced as material, and it was through the theatrical that this concreticism could be fully realized. It has already been said how Houédard understood concreticism as an art of reality which was already inherent within Bill's conception for the rational

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[154] Ibid.

[155] Mike Weaver, 'Concrete and Kinetic: the Poem as Functional Object', *Image*, No. 13 (November, 1964), pp. 14-15 (p. 14).

[156] Mark Boyle, 'Background to a Series of Events at the ICA', *ICA Bulletin* (May, 1965), p. 6.

aesthetic of Concrete art. In the happening, though, as implied by Boyle, meant that the original tenet behind Concrete art, of art to be equivalent to nature, comes to fruition. An art of reality is realized through embracing the non-rational that extends to undermining the performance as separate from reality by including the context situating it such as the experience of the audience itself. I would suggest, then, that Concrete poetry in Britain came to reflect a breakdown between the traditional divide separating art from reality and that had otherwise prevailed under modernism. Concrete art's tenet of art to be an equivalent to nature had been the limit of a modernist claim of autonomy but which also came to anticipate the breakdown between art and reality than emerged with the irrational in the nineteen sixties.

Besides being about the nature of the art-work, non-rationality meant involving randomness in the creative process and it was this use of chance which undermined the intentionality behind the concept of the author. I would suggest that the claim by Concrete art for art to be an equivalent to nature becomes more consciously an anti-author claim when chance was used at the level of the creative process between author and text by Fluxus. Doesburg's 1930 manifesto declares that '[t]he work of art must be entirely conceived and formed by the mind before its execution. It must receive nothing from nature's given forms, or from sensuality, or from sentimentality.'[157] The call for rationality here to bring the art work closer to reality is superseded by Fluxus and the use of chance to escape individual subjectivity and make the material more objective. In Concrete art chance was eliminated because the making was according to a rational procedure which could be repeated. What constitutes concreticism for the artist of happening, however, is as Maciunas says, 'indeterminacy and

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[157] Theo Van Doesburg, 'Art Concret' (April 1930), trans. by Stephen Bann, *The Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. by Stephen Bann (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), p. 193.

improvisation'[158] which allows the random nature of reality to enter the work and for it to depart even further from artifice. A 'truer concretist', Maciunas writes, 'rejects pre-determination of final form in order to perceive the reality of nature, the course of which, like that of man himself is largely indeterminate and unpredictable'.[159] The subject must intervene as little as possible in making concrete art so as to allow the nature of reality to express itself with its inherently random structure. In order to achieve this the artist must create, as Maciunas writes, 'a kind of framework, an "automatic machine" within which or by which, nature (either in the form of an independent performer or indeterminate-chance compositional methods) can complete the art-form, effectively and independently of the artist-composer.'[160] In order to realise an objective materiality, the artist must rationalise an irrational process of composition by way of a preconceived method.

Chance composition was rationalised by the use of such a method in the Concrete poetry movement with the cut-up method. Cobbing's first book in 1963 called *Massacre of the Innocents,* written with John Rowan, was a collection of cut-up poems by Cobbing, although he claims that he began his own version of cut-up poetry in 1956. Unpublished examples of these are published in the first volume of his collected poems, the introduction of which describes them as having been composed through a rationalised method of chance. Cobbing writes that to make these poems he followed a formula which 'was to decide on the number of lines, clip out newspaper lines of the required number, and paste them up in an effective order. Success was to use all the lines, failure to have one or more left over which did not fit in.'[161]

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[158] George Maciunas, 'Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art' (1962), *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 727-729 (p. 729).
[159] Ibid.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Bob Cobbing, 'Introduction', *Cygnet Ring: Collected Poems; Volume 1* (London: Tapocketa Press, 1977), unpaginated, p. 1 of 2.

The cut-up method of Burroughs and Gysin was a further rationalization of chance composition. Gysin had accidentally come across the literary technique of the cut-up in France in September 1959 when slicing through newspapers whilst preparing a drawing mount. This method was taken up by Burroughs, the U.S. poet Gregory Corso, and the South African poet Sinclair Beiles who all happened to be frequenting what was known as the 'Beat Hotel' in Paris at the time, the results of which were published as *Minutes To Go* in 1960. Whilst for Beiles and Corso this experiment was a one-off, Burroughs had been able to adapt the method for writing novels and worked with Gysin in various subsequent projects. Burroughs and Gysin collaborated on another book of cut-ups and permutation poems in 1960 called *The Exterminator*. The cut-up method became a method during the nineteen sixties particular to a small international group of collaborators which included the French poet Claude Pelieu, the German writer Carl Weissner, the British film-maker Anthony Balch (1937-1980), and Ian Sommerville (1940-1976), a mathematics student at Cambridge University. A collection of cut-up texts from Beat writers was published by Gibbs in the one issue of his *Ginger Snaps* magazine in 1972. In his 'Statement of the Cutup and the Permutated Poems', which is dated to 1958 but was first published in *Fluxus 1* in 1965, Gysin gives instructions to the reader on how to make a cut-up text which was, as he says, to cut 'through the pages of any book or newsprint – lengthwise, for example – and (then to) shuffle the text', '[p]ut them together at random and read the newly constituted message.'[162] Burroughs later developed this technique from being a haphazard cutting through and arrangement of texts into a more rationalised one. In 'The Literary Techniques of Lady Sutton-Smith', first published in the 1964 'Changing Guard' issue of the *T.L.S.* Burroughs describes his own use of the cut-up

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[162] Brion Gysin, 'Statement on the Cutup and Permutated Poems' (1958), *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, ed., by Emmett Williams (New York: Something Else Press, 1967), unpaginated, page 1 of 1.

that he employed for his novels as a number of potential routines which follow strict procedures. He writes:

> There are many ways to do cut-ups. 1. Take a page of text and draw a line down the middle and cross the middle. You now have four blocks of text 1 2 3 4. Now cut along the lines and put block 1 with block 4 and block 2 with block 3. Read the rearranged page. 2. Fold a page of text down the middle lengthwise and lay it on another page of text. Now read across half one text and half the other. 3. Arrange your texts in three or more columns and read cross column. 4. Take any page of text and number the lines. Now shift permutate order of lines 1 3 6 9 12 ecetera.[163]

The cut-up was intended to be an equivalent in writing to the random method of collage in the visual arts so as to try and achieve the material objectivity of its abstraction. By rationalising this aleatory method the subjectivity of the author can be reduced and a material objectivity can be realised to a greater extent. The cut-up is stressed here by Burroughs as a set of algorithms centred around the rational shape of the right-angle inherent in the linear margins of the page. The use of logic for literary composition that reflected the rationale of materialising mathematical reasoning in Concrete art is taken further by Burroughs in his 1965 essay called 'Grids', published in the U.S. arts magazine, *Insect Trust Gazette*. The method proposed here involves scoring a grid onto a sheet of paper and then typing a sentence from a pre-selected source into one of the grid's squares and then typing further sentences into the other squares randomly selected. The use of the right-angle for the cut-up is surpassed by

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[163] William Burroughs, 'The Literary Techniques of Lady Sutton-Smith', *Times Literary Supplement* (4th August, 1964), 682-687 (p. 687).

his suggestion that 'the mathematically inclined could progress from plane to solid geometry and put prose through spheres and cubes and hexagons.'[164]

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[164] William Burroughs, 'Grids', *Insect Trust Gazette*, No. 1 (Summer, 1965), pp. 27-31 (p. 27).

3.1 The Materialist Philosophy of Concrete Poetry

So far I have suggested what abstraction meant in Concrete poetry in terms of its aesthetic as understood by the movement. In this section of the chapter I want to describe what abstraction meant in the Concrete poetry movement in terms of its understanding of a materialist philosophy of the text. Such a philosophy of the text argues that the author as grounding reality has been displaced by language as an autonomous system and Concrete poetry will be discussed in the context of laying bare the construction of literary representation and expression.

A materialist philosophy present within the Concrete poetry movement was reflective of a wide-spread formalism in the philosophical disciplines. The post-war period according to Jameson is characterised by what he sees as the demise of traditional philosophy and its replacement by what he calls theory and its critique of representation as the portrayal of a truthful or meaningful object separate from its own practice and set of principles. Contemporary theory partially comes into existence by way of its critique of this realist assumption of traditional philosophy, that there is a world external to its textual self about which meaning or truth can be applied. Jameson associates this critique of philosophy by theory with a particular understanding of materialism. He writes in his essay, 'Periodizing the 60s': 'materialism here means the dissolution of any belief in "meaning" or in the "signified" conceived as ideas or concepts that are distinct from their linguistic expressions.'[165] This definition of materialism which characterises much of both post-war theory and the arts, could be re-stated as the point where form and content, or image and reality, coincide, and Concrete poetry should be read in this context as a poetry aware of itself as a symbolic system. Language was conceived by Structuralist

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[165] Fredric Jameson, 'Periodizing the 60s' (1984), *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986, Vol. 2* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 178-210 (p. 194).

theory of the nineteen fifties to be a set of signs which produce meaning as signification through their difference and opposition to one another in a closed symbolic system. In a realist theory of language it is the referent as the object in the world which is believed to ground meaning through representation. In uses of language described as realist, language as a material thing recedes before an assumed transparency onto the world. For Concrete poetry to be thought of as without an author in the context of language philosophy is to think of it as foregrounding the theoretical position which the critic Dieter Freundlieb calls 'semiotic idealism'. This is a theoretical concept which compliments what Jameson describes as materialism and accounts, as Freundlieb says, for much of '[c]ontemporay literary theory, particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries', by describing 'the epistemological assumption that linguistic signs or certain other linguistic or discursive structures are not *representations* of an extra-linguistic reality but that these signs are somehow *constitutive* of reality, i.e., that reality cannot be known as it is but only in the form it appears to us through language.'[166] This is a theoretical position that sees reality as a symbolic construction and which I would suggest is recognised by Houédard to bridge different theological traditions and to be made conscious by the Concrete poem. He says in his introduction to the 'Freewheel' exhibition that 'in traditional contemplation east & west agree at least on this that talk of human contact with reality apart from images is meaningless – nothingness sunyata neant & void are as much images as mrs pankhurst's reported image of god as an elderly lady with rather liberal views – to recognise images as images – visual aural mental – is a step poets take when they begin patching the universe (sic)'.[167]

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[166] Dieter Freundlieb, 'Semiotic Idealism', *Poetics Today*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (1988), pp. 807-841 (p. 807).
[167] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Introduction', *Freewheel*, (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1967), unpaginated, pp. 1 & 2 of 2.

I would suggest that the understanding of the Concrete poem as a reality in itself in terms of being materialist should be distinguished from an understanding of the Concrete poem as a reality in itself in terms of an ontological presence. Where Concrete art understood itself as a reality in itself in terms of such metaphysics, the Concrete poetry movement understood itself as a reality in itself in terms of a materialist philosophy. Concrete art was anti-realist in that instead of having its existence situated on a lack of presence, as is the case with representational art which can only point to a reality outside itself, it was about finding a solution to ontological inadequacy by finding forms that would ensure the work as its own resemblance. The critic Wendy Steiner argues in *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting* that both Concrete poetry and art were mistaken in their claim to being autonomous realities but she does not distinguish Concrete poetry from Concrete art as being a poetry more occupied with a formalist understanding of language. She writes:

> Semiotically, of course, concrete art is a contradiction in terms. Paintings and
>
> poems by definition are signs rather than things, except in the sense that
>
> ultimately a sign is a thing; a poem that is literally a tree or a rose is not a poem
>
> but that tree or rose. Gertrude Stein's famous formula, "A rose is a rose is a
>
> rose," which serves as an archetype of concrete thinking, however much it may
>
> insist on the thingness of each token of the word *rose* and the nonfigurative
>
> quality of its reference, remains a sign. And so the mythos surrounding
>
> concreteness in literature remains finally that. Insofar as a poem is art, it cannot
>
> be totally concrete'.[168]

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[168] Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 198.

She reads Chopin's 1965 poem, 'Le Poeme Alphabetique' (Alphabet Poem), as an implicit acknowledgement of Concrete poetry's impossible task of trying to realise itself as an autonomous reality. This poem consists of a square made from the letters of the alphabet with the 'a' line of the alphabet and the sentences 'il manque toujours l'y' and 'quelle importance' at the bottom of the square. Chopin's poem misses out the letter 'y' from the square and from the row of letters beneath. The row of the letter 'y' is found between the phrases 'il manque toujour l'y' and 'quelle importance'. The otherwise absent 'y' is present as visually empty space in the main block of the poem where it has been inverted and fragmented. Steiner's reading of the poem observes these features of the poem and adds a further observation about the meaning of 'y' in French which is as she says that '*y* is also the adverb "there" and the pronoun for all but possessive prepositional phrases, it is a vehicle of indexical specificity, this indexical gesture relating to both extratextual and textual space.'[169] She concludes from this that the 'pun here on the notion of presence – a blank that stands for location, "thereness," and indexicality to both text and world – indicates the inevitable compromise in the concrete project, where all presence is mitigated by the sign function'.[170] The Concrete poem cannot be a reality in itself according to Steiner because it cannot achieve the ontological presence of an object due to the symbolic nature of the linguistic sign.

I would suggest, though, that the notion of the Concrete poem as a reality in itself, which Steiner sees as an impossibility for poetry, was not necessarily meant in terms of achieving ontological presence. The Concrete poem was a reality in itself in that it was trying to break away from the notion of an author within literary realism by foregrounding the objective properties of its linguistic material. Steiner is assuming

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[169] Ibid.
[170] Ibid.

that language is realist and so produces meaning by reflecting reality which means that any claim for a text to be a reality in itself would appear to be invalid. The critic Eric Vos also criticises the claim of Concrete poetry as a reality in itself in his essay, 'The Visual Turn in Poetry: Nominalistic Contributions to Literary Semiotics, Exemplified by the Case of Concrete Poetry', writing that the poetry 'seems to contradict established theories of meaning constitution which rely heavily upon denotative semantic reference.'[171] Concrete poetry, though, should not be read in the context of realist philosophies of language but in the context of formalist philosophies of language which deny that reality is transparently mediated by a symbolic system.

For Finlay, Concrete poetry came explicitly as a critique of realism which he explains in terms of language philosophy. The Concrete poem for him was part of a struggle during its movement between a formalist and a realist conception of literature over which could provide the truer notion of what literature was. In a 1965 letter to the German poet Ernst Jandl, Finlay writes:

> I can't agree, though, that just any poem defines itself as art. On the contrary, almost any Scottish poem of the present is offered to one as a comment on life, an aid, an extension, etc. . . . Hence we get inane critical remarks like: 'X has something to say' (which actually means, X's poems are crammed with jargon, about politics, hunger, Scotland, his love-life, or whatever). The notion that 'something to say' is actually a *modulation of the material* scarcely enters anyone's head.[172]

Finlay in the above passage sees the content element of a text as form which has been manipulated in such a way so as to disguise itself as such. In poetry attempting to be

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[171] Eric Vos, 'The Visual Turn in Poetry: Nominalistic Contributions to Literary Semiotics, Exemplified by the Case of Concrete poetry', *New Literary History*, (Spring 1987), pp. 559-581 (p. 561).
[172] Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'Letter to Ernst Jandl' (1965), *Chapman* (October, 1964), p. 12.

realistic and evoke the world of contemporary society means that it also hides a formalist truth about literature, which is that the content of a literary work is secondary, if not irrelevant, to the value of the work as literature and to what makes it exist as such. What appear to be different representations of the world between two texts are actually different manipulations of form, for it is form as the organization of elements which is what constitutes a work's significance. The realist text is mistaken in encouraging a belief in the reader that it is merely reflecting a world outside of it. Concrete poetry as Finlay describes it is a critique of realism in that it is a poetry which implicitly acknowledges the gap between word and meaning and that the real cannot be transparently represented by the sign. By implication, Finlay is suggesting that Concrete poetry provides a more truthful kind of text which makes it explicit that all literary texts are primarily manipulations of form and do not reflect a world outside of themselves. It is this critique of the text as a representing medium of reality which is one significant difference between pre-modern visual poetry, such as that of the Greeks, and the visual poetry of the Concrete poetry movement. Pre-modern visual poetry was underpinned by Horace's realist dictum of 'Ut Pictura Poesis' which means literally 'a picture poetry' or a poetry of plain speaking that could behave like a representative painting in that it was supposedly able to reflect reality.

I now want to describe how the Concrete poem was seen by the movement as resistant to realism which is particularly relevant to its visual poetry that is often not totally non-semantic like its sound poetry. The Concrete poem achieves a disruption to a realist belief in language through its non-linearity. The Concrete poem resists a linear arrangement of words so that there is no referential illusion created with referents determining meaning in advance of reading. Linearity within language exists in the way in which signifiers were strung together to evoke a sense of progression

that suppresses a density of signification. It is grammar, then, which serves a realist belief in language through an accumulation of references which culminate in a sense of closure that serves to give the impression that language is transparent to a world of meaning.

Concrete poetry divides language up into small linguistic units because it was in the linear phrase or sentence themselves in which the multiplex dimension of language tends to disappear. Barthes in *S/Z* describes the sentence in a similar way in his analysis of the codes of classical prose. He divides up the short story *Sarrasine* by Balzac so as to isolate what he calls the 'blocks of signification of which reading grasps only the smooth surface, imperceptibly soldered by the movement of sentences, the flowing discourse of narration, the "naturalness" of ordinary language.'[173] Barthes randomly cuts up the Balzac short story into a set of short segments which he calls 'lexias' which as 'units of reading' include 'a few words, sometimes several sentences'.[174] Concrete poetry goes one stage further and uses letters and single words to resist the 'flat and smooth'[175] space of the sentence which Barthes otherwise describes of the whole text of classical prose.

A belief in representation means a belief in the referent of the external world determining the meaning of language. This is a common-sense realist view of language which assumes that the given meaning of the world determines linguistic meaning and is not dependent upon it. The linguistic terms signified, signifier, and referent refer to meaning or signification, the vehicle of meaning, and the actual object in the world which is being referred to. A belief in linguistic representation entails a realist or denotative theory of language whereby the signifier offers a direct knowledge of a referent. Barthes in 'Death of the Author' adopts an anti-realist

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[173] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 13.
[174] Ibid.

position where a belief in the referent governing linguistic meaning is claimed to be a myth. A sense of reality in a text has been determined by the system of codes constituting language and not by a social or psychological world outside the text. Barthes's anti-realist stance denies that the reader can have knowledge of the referent via language and places an emphasis on connotation at the expense of denotation.

The Concrete poem resists the referential, or representational, intention within linear language that directs meaning outside of it through its non-linearity, becoming more a text to be worked with rather than absorbed where normal reading patterns are disturbed in the material form of words themselves interacting with their cognition. In refusing meaning directly determined by the world through non-linear syntax, the Concrete poem complicates a one to one correspondence between word and object to create a potential space of open meaning.

I have suggested that the Concrete poem resists a teleological momentum in language and the belief in the referent by not following the grammatical rules of the linear sentence. It is for this reason that I would suggest furthermore that the craftsmanship involved in the typography particular to Concrete poetry in Britain was important and which Hansjörg Mayer from Germany who worked as a lecturer in typography at Bath Academy of Art (1966 to 1971) and at Watford College of Technology in the mid-nineteen sixties was able to contribute to. The experimental non-linearity of the Concrete poem meant that the poet had to work with subtle semiotic relationships between words and letters that involved arranging spaces between them and using the correct typefaces to place the right amount of emphasis on them.

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[175] Ibid., p. 14.

I have explained how Concrete poetry can be conceived to be without an author in terms of a materialist philosophy of the text. I will now continue this explanation of what it means for Concrete poetry to be without an author in terms of language philosophy by focusing on how the Concrete poetry movement understood itself as a philosophical critique of the real in its portrayal of the self as symbolic construct. So far the notion of the author has been considered in terms of a general belief in a reality underlying a text, but I will now consider this notion in the more specific sense of the individual assumed responsible for a text.

A crisis in the individual came about in the post-modern period through a critique of the humanist concept of the individual by social and psychoanalytical sciences. In Modernity the autonomous individual was critiqued most notably by Marx and Freud whose theories shifted an understanding of the self as the cogito, or self-transparent ego, to understanding it as one conditioned by the external forces of class and the unconscious. This critique was continued in the post-war period where the traditional concept of the individual was replaced with that of the subject.

Contemporary theories of subjectivity do not assume that the author of a creative work is an autonomous entity in possession of agency. An expressionist theory of the self holds that the author as individual is thought to have a known and knowable self to express which can be communicated so that the work stands as an unmediated expression of that self's intentions. For theories of subjectivity, which approach the individual from the context of psychoanalytical and cultural sciences, a text can not be said to be the expression of a pre-existing consciousness. The subject for Structuralist theory, for instance, is seen as an entity that produces meaning within pre-existing cultural codes rather than one which expresses a self. From the perspective of structural psychoanalysis, the psychological and cultural construction of a person is

through a process of identification. The subjectivity of the reader or spectator is created through a process of identifying with textual representations. The psychoanalytic theory of the French theorist Jacques Lacan, argues that the subject does not exist outside of images, or symbolic systems. Through a representation, a subject can be given a fictive sense of identity in which the subject believes that they exist outside of the representation. A fictive sense of a whole and stable self is affirmed through the dominant codes of representation. Although the self is by its nature uncentred, or split, in that it has separated from its unity with nature in the course of its biological development and insertion into culture, this inherent instability is masked by the subject's continual efforts to represent themselves to themselves as whole through external symbolic systems.

An account of the subject in terms of linguistic philosophy can be found in the theory of the French theorist Michel Pecheux who argues in *Language, Semantics and Ideology* that the centred subject is the result of capitalist ideology reflected in language. Pecheux amalgamates the social and human science of Marx and Lacan with the structural Marxism of Louis Althusser who argues that the ego is unavoidably conditioned by the material practices of capitalist ideology. In Pecheux's theory of paraphrase the subject is determined by discourse whilst this determination is hidden by discourse at the same time from the subject's consciousness. What he calls the 'discursive structure of the subject-form'[176] imposes itself on the subject whilst concealing itself to create an appearance of the subject's autonomy. This means that the social condition of language is masked by its common usage which creates the illusion that meaning is self-evident. Pecheux explains this further by describing two types of 'forgetting' involved in language use. The first type is analogous to

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[176] Michel Pecheux, *Language, Semantics and Ideology* (1975), trans. by Harbans Nagpal (London: Macmillan Press, 1982, repr; 1983), p. 111.

unconscious repression which explains that the subject cannot locate themselves outside the discursive formation through which they are given a fixed identity. The second type of 'forgetting' explains how every speaking subject, as Pecheux says, 'select, from the interior of the discursive formation which dominates him, i.e. from the system of utterances, forms and sequences to be found there in relation of paraphrase, one utterance, form or sequence and not another, even though it is in the field of what may be reformulated in the discursive formation considered', so that, '[w]hat is 'said' is actually the 'unsaid' but in other words.'[177] Pecheux goes on to say that the 'subject of the subject-form of discourse is thus above all to mask the object of what' he is 'calling forgetting no. 1 via the operation of forgetting no. 2.'[178]

Language as an impersonal structure with interchangeable elements promotes the belief in the bourgeois individual as an autonomous entity with its own agency who imparts meaning to language. Pecheux calls this effect the 'Munchausen effect', 'in memory', as he says 'of the immortal baron who *lifted himself into the air by pulling on his own hair.*'[179] The subject is constructed by the system of language through which they achieve a fixed identity whilst at the same time this construction is hidden from the subject by language. The self reads only one meaning as present in a signifying chain so that it appears to be self-evident and not the product of an arbitrary and differential linguistic system. The individual is inducted into the belief of themselves as centred and autonomous through this process of forgetting that meaning has been produced by the system of language outside the control of agency. It is nonsense in language found in jokes and dreams which interferes with the smooth induction of the individual into ideology. Pecheux gives a number of examples of jokes and asks 'does not the analytical series dream-slip-parapraxis-*Witz* intersect

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[177] Ibid., p. 123.
[178] Ibid., p. 126.

Figure 6

a peach
an apple
a table

an eatable
peach

an apple

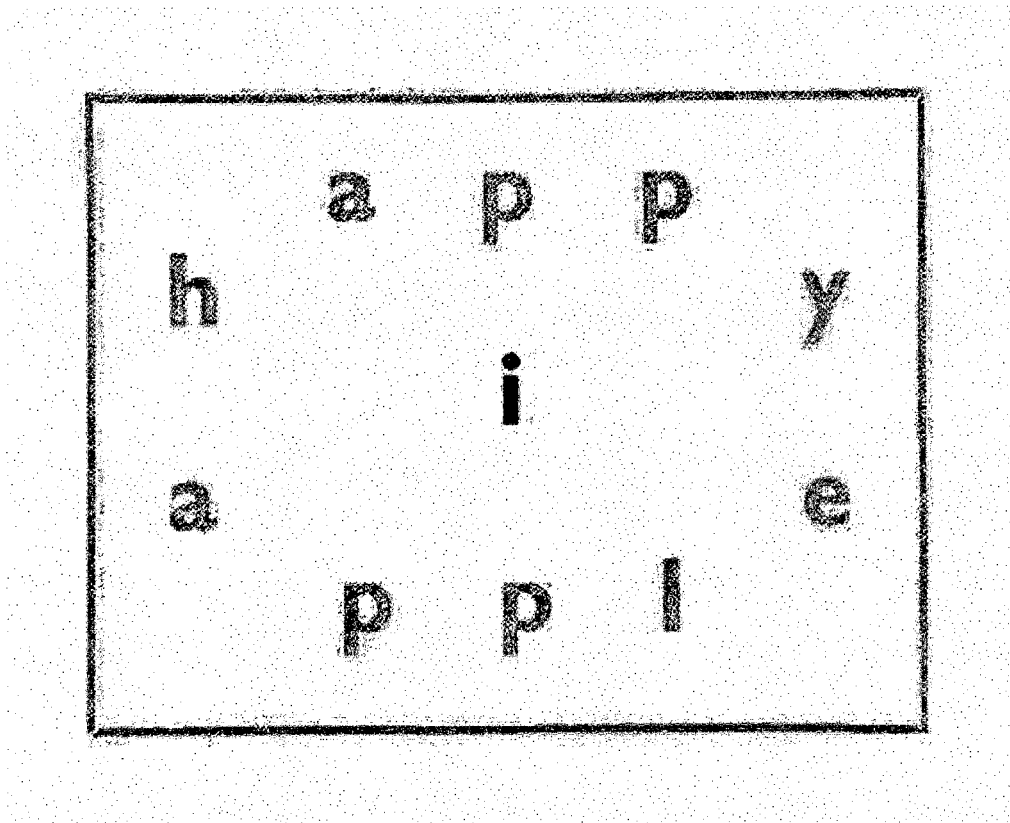an eatable
table
apple

an apple
a peach

obliquely with something constantly infecting the dominant ideology'.[180] Concrete

poetry, like the non-sensical joke, has a similar effect with its poetic punning of

allowing theoretical insight into the ideological operation of language as described

here. The consequence of subverting grammar and the unicity of the referent is that

the subject can be theoretically grasped as decentred.

The formation of the subject through representation is made self-conscious in two

poems by Finlay from *Rapel: 12 Suprematist and Fauve Poems*. I would suggest that

these poems play with the style of Cubism in a self-conscious deconstruction of the

formation of the subject through representation, so that what is decentred is modernist

painting having become in the post-war period a representation to secure the subject

as whole. The fragmentation of an image as a device for fragmenting the subject was

explored initially by the Cubists. The art critic John Berger describes representational

painting as providing a reassuring visual coherence as the eye becomes 'the centre of

the world' where the 'visible world is arranged for the spectator as the universe was

once thought to be arranged for God.'[181] In Cubism this traditional position of unity

held between the spectator and the pictorial image which had served to create the

illusion of an autonomous subject was rejected. The sense of an imaginary wholeness

of identity in the subject was not achieved in the Cubist painting. The simultaneous

representation of objects from different perspectives cannot be made to cohere to a

centralised point of view. In an untitled poem by Finlay, 'Figure [6]', which can be

read as visually imitating a still-life painting in a Cubist style, the adjective 'eatable'

upsets the simple arrangement of nouns for objects and upsets any simple closure of

meaning. The line 'an eatable/ table / apple' forces the reader to engage in a more

active process of reading than if the line were a set of simple nouns. However, it is not

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[179] Ibid., p. 108.
[180] Ibid., p. 218.

Figure 7

possible to totally reconcile the poem with a mimesis of a Cubist painting. The adjective, 'eatable', also suggests a pictorial life-likeness which would normally be associated with realist painting that Cubism was reacting against.

In another poem depicting a Cubist still life from *Rapel: 12 Suprematist and Fauve Poems* called 'to the painter, Juan Gris', 'Figure [7]', the ego represented by the letter 'i' in bold type is not a fragmented one. The subject is shown to be produced through a single point of perspective and viewing position which would be associated with classical painting. The 'i' of the viewing subject is at the centre of the pictorial shape of an eye with this pun indicating that scopic drive is at the centre of the subject's being through which it can secure its imaginary wholeness. The enunciated subject is shown to be inscribed by the Cubist painting with a sense of wholeness. The poem gives an uncharacteristic representation of what a Cubist picture would be expected to achieve with regards the subject position of the viewer. There is no suggestion of any subversion to the unity of the subject. This poem suggests that in the enunciation of a subject by a Cubist painting the subject is still constructed with its illusory sense of wholeness in tact. The literary critic Johanna Drucker has written that despite the fragmentation of the subject in Cubist painting there is still nonetheless a 'process of reunification of those cubist fragments' through which 'the "I" overcomes its negation and becomes an "I" as the fiction' and so 'thus the developmental scenario is inverted: the illusory fracturing within the image forges an (equally illusory) image of wholeness within the reconstructed referential "whole" of the image with which the viewer seeks to identify.'[182] The subject produced in Cubist painting according to Drucker is not successfully decentred because of the ability to recognise the depicted objects albeit from multiple angles. The poem's visual pun between an apple and an

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[181] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, (1972) 1977), p. 16.
[182] Johanna Drucker, *Theorizing Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 148.

eye gives the connotation of the cliché 'the apple of his eye'. In the context of the poem's play with the history of painting this cliché suggests a direct line of inheritance between traditional and modernist styles and a position for the self as viewer to discover themselves as autonomous. It is as a reader of the poem, though, in which this realist ideology is grasped as a construction because a position for the reader to feel autonomous themselves does not exist. The awkward spatial arrangement of the letters invites a play of words in a multi-directional reading which foregrounds the relativity of meaning on syntax.

I have so far described a theoretical account of the critique of self as a means of situating the Concrete poetry movement in Britain and its own understanding of a critique of the self which was provided by Gysin and Houédard, both of which will now be described. Gysin gives an account of the self's lack of presence through its construction in language and I will now describe the cut-up and permutation poem in the context of the anti-self claims that Gysin made for them and suggest that these methods came in reaction to the ideology of a spontaneous self subscribed to by the Surrealists and the Beat poets. Gysin describes the cut-up and permutation poem as a critique of the author as cogito in his 1958 statement where he writes: 'Poets have no words 'of their very own.' Writers don't own their words. Since when do words belong to anybody? "Your very own words indeed! And who are 'you'?"'[183] According to this, individual meanings could not be said to be the expression of an individual self because language was an entity autonomous of the individual. The cut-up and permutation poem are by implication suggested to allow language to be autonomous of an expressive self. It is the last question, though, which Gysin adds at the end of this statement which suggests that, moreover, original expression was

dubious when the self was in question. Gysin's permutated poems, 'I Am that I Am', and 'I think therefore I am', parody the Western idealist concept of the self. The shifting positions of the words from these phrases produce contradictory meanings to imply that it is the structure of language which governs what can be thought and that the self is in fact decentred because of the differential system of language. The self, though, which Gysin questions is not just that of the unified cogito of the individual inherited from Western philosophy but the Freudian self as a conscious and unconscious.

The cut-up and permutation poem came as a critique of the philosophy of self-expression common to Surrealism and the Beats with their belief in an authentic and higher reality of the psyche made manifest through spontaneous or unconscious utterance. The cut-up was a repetition of the Dada poet Tristan Tzara's proposal in *Sept Manifestes Dada* (1916-1920) to make non-rational poetry by randomly drawing words out of a hat. When the proposal by Tzara for making such texts was repeated by Burroughs and Gysin as the cut-up method, its origins are acknowledged in such a way so as to reinstate its radicalism that had been otherwise diluted by its later Surrealist appropriation. Andre Breton superseded the Dada movement with the Surrealist movement in 1924 with its central principle of psychic automatism that sought creative expression without the guiding control of reason. For Gysin and Burroughs it was a matter of distancing themselves from the automatic writing of Surrealism, otherwise similar to the cut-up, in order to assert its rebellious credentials. Burroughs in his essay, 'The Cut-Up Method', makes out that Surrealism came about as a conservative reaction towards Dada. He suggests that it was Tzara's act of pulling words out of a hat to make a poem which was the prime reason that Breton had for

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[183] Brion Gysin, 'Statement on the Cutup Method and Permutated Poems' (1958), *An Anthology of Concrete poetry*, ed. by Emmett Williams (New York: Something Else Press, 1967), unpaginated, p. 1

'expell[ing] Tristan Tzara from the movement',[184] and Burroughs describes Breton with his techniques of automatic writing as having compromised the freedom of the cut-up with theoretical legitimisation in that he 'grounded the cut-ups on the Freudian couch.'[185] From his description of the history of the cut-up Burroughs aligns the method with the irreverence of Dada, but in such a way that both movements are reduced to the method itself. The birth of Surrealism and the demise of Dada happens around the cut-up with the former's appropriation and repression of the original method's irreverent intention. Burroughs does not stress his own particular version of the cut-up as a new invention and instead describes its past as a literary technique that once had causal influence in the history of the avant-garde movements. Gysin's own particular version of the cut-up and Burroughs subsequent use of it is then to be seen as a matter of recovering and restoring an original avant-garde strategy from its previous misuse under Surrealism. The reaction against Surrealism in the repetition of the cut-up was motivated by a critique of the irrational self.

The critic Michael Riffaterre has explained that surrealist texts are not necessarily the result of an unconscious. He writes that in a comparison between conventional and surrealist literature 'what is different' in surrealist literature 'is the automatic text's total departure from logic, temporality, and referentiality', so that '[i]n short, it is different because it violates the rules of verisimilitude and the representation of the real', and Riffaterre goes on to further explain this by saying that '[b]ecause logical discourse, teleological narrative, normal temporality, and descriptive conformity to an accepted idea of reality are rationalised by the reader as proof of the author's conscious control over his text, departures from these are therefore interpreted as the

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of 1.
[184] William Burroughs, 'The Cut-Up Method', *The Moderns: An Anthology of New Writing in America*, ed. by LeRoi Jones (New York: Corinth Books, 1963), pp. 345-348 (p. 345).
[185] Ibid.

elimination of this control by unconscious impulses.' It is this as Riffaterre says which 'creates the appearance of automatism', an 'appearance (that) may be artificial, the product of very conscious work on form.'[186]

For Riffaterre the unconscious may be a reality, but its communication through the automatic text can be questioned. I would suggest that the cut-up and the permutation poem are strategies which demystify the automatic poetry of the Surrealists and of the Beats by showing that such texts are not the expression of the irrational forces of a divided self but the result of conscious procedures on literary form. As one of the collaborators in the cut-up project, the German writer Carl Weissner, describes in the introduction to a collage of writing by himself, Burroughs, and Pelieu in the poetry magazine *Klactoveedsedsteen*, the unconscious self is more like a rational machine in its nature. He writes:

> The technique of free association, that is standing in front of a microphone & saying whatever comes into your mind, is of course quite useless to this department. because association impulses, are of course no more free than the wires in a recording machine or in a computer [. . .] we realise that something interesting happens when two people get together & sort of put their faculties at each other's disposal, and make separate recordings & fold them in together (sic).[187]

I would suggest that the unconscious self believed in by the Surrealists and the Beats is implied by the cut-up method to not be authentically irrational because of the mind's rational biological structure. The critique, then, of the expressionist self by Gysin came in reaction to the unconscious author of the Surrealists and the Beats

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[186] Michael Riffaterre, *Text Production*, trans. Terese Lyons (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 222.
[187] Carl Weissner, 'La Guerre Partout, Preface & Code Précis in Present Time 10/23/66', *Klactoveedsedsteen*, No. 4 (November, 1966), unpaginated, p. 1 of 5.

which displaces a notion of a biological unconscious with that of the systemic structure of language which escapes the intention of its users.

I have described so far how the critique of self by post-war theory received its own version in the Concrete poetry movement in Britain through Gysin and I will now describe Houédard's own version of this critique which came in his concept of a 'wider ecumenism'. Houédard's critique of the self is more of a negotiation with the concept of the author, for the Concrete poem is for him a means of guiding contemplation into a metaphysical understanding of a self's lack of presence and the nothingness of reality. A critique of the expressionist theory of the sign with its belief in the autonomous and self-transparent individual was present within the Concrete poetry movement in Britain through the theory of Houédard who critically engaged in an exploration of self outside of Western idealist philosophy by drawing on Eastern religion. I would suggest that Houédard was the most central figure to the Concrete poetry movement in terms of his contribution to its poetics which is most notable for its idiosyncratic style that is ungrammatical with its abbreviations and absence of punctuation. This style reflects what the critic Marius Buning would call 'apophatic writing' in religious texts, which as he says in his essay, 'Negativity Then and Now: An Exploration of Meister Eckhart, Angelus Silesius and Jacques Derrida', is an 'open-ended form of discourse' which 'precludes filling in or spelling out the referent, that is, what words refer to. It has its own implicit logic, its own conventions (especially the continual displacement of the grammatical object, the persistent negative predication on sentence and word level, the indistinctiveness of pronouns, the blurring of grammatical tense distinctions, etc.)'.[188] His theological essays after the nineteen sixties which lack his unconventional grammar are clearer explanations

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[188] Marius Buning, 'Negativity Then and Now: An Exploration of Meister Eckhart, Angelus Silesius and Jacques Derrida', *Eckhart Review* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 19-35 (p. 25).

of where the similarities lie between different religions, although they are also more conservative in that they focus less on Buddhism and are intended to lead to a reinforcement of orthodox religion.

Because Houédard, or 'dsh' as he signed his works, was the most central figure to the Concrete poetry movement in Britain I will now give an account of his biography. He was born in Guernsey and grew up speaking both French and English. He studied history at Oxford University in the early forties and philosophy at the Benedictine University of Saint Anselmo in Rome where he wrote a doctoral thesis on Sartre and liberty in 1955. Between 1944 to 1947 he served in the British Army Intelligence in India. From 1949 he became a Benedictine monk at Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire where he would remain until his death. In 1959 he was ordained a priest and was a librarian at Farnborough Abbey in Hampshire from 1959 to 1961. In 1961 he was literary editor for the New Testament and sub-editor for the Old Testament for the Jerusalem Bible. From the nineteen sixties onwards, Houédard was involved in inter-faith relations which he called the 'wider ecumenism'. As a member of the Benedictine committee for dialogue with other monastic traditions, he initiated the yearly inter-faith conferences at the Samye Ling Monastery in Dunfriesshire, Scotland which was the first Buddhist monastery founded outside Tibet. This was set up by two Buddhist monks who Houédard met at Prinknash Abbey in 1963 when they came to Britain having been exiled from Tibet.

Houédard's ecumenism in the nineteen sixties wanted to find the common ground between the two otherwise different theological systems of the West and the East, and in particular between Roman Catholicism and Buddhism where the former relied on a concept of God while the latter did not. Houédard's interest in Buddhism began when he first heard a radio broadcast of Tibetan music when he was eight and it is this

interest which motivated his critique of the self. According to Houédard, the similarity between theist Christianity and non-theist Buddhism can be found in the concept of nothingness. He writes in his 1986 essay 'How Near a Kinsman to Benedict is Buddha?': 'what for us in the imageless contemplation of god, ie the union of NOTHING & NOTHING, is for the buddhist the union of MIND which is empty & the EMPTINESS it contemplates & cognises.'[189] Houédard's 1960 essay, 'Heathen Holiness', and his 1962 essay, 'Men-Men & Right Mind-Minding', are book reviews which relate Buddhism and Hinduism to Christianity, and this relationship is discussed further in mostly unpublished essays held at The Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society and at the John Rylands Library which comprise of 'The Dimension of the Dimensionless' (1980), 'The Rainbow Crystal' (1985), 'The Gateless Gate' (1985), 'How Near a Kinsman to Benedict is Buddha?' (1986), 'On the Possibility of Searching for Criteria to Establish the Distinction in Unity between Macrocosmus and Microcosmus' (1987), and 'Compassion through Understanding' (1988).

Houédard introduced the term 'wider ecumenism' in 1951 through which he tries draws extensive parallels between Eastern and Western thought and the post-war arts. In a 1965 theological essay called 'The Wider Ecumenism', Houédard in the course of reviewing a number of recent theological books describes in detail his religious concept of self in relation to poetry, Eastern religion and Western philosophy. He writes:

> To approach the world of zen & tantra – the world of mental events – there is
>
> only one centrally essential insight required – to recognize it **notionally** will
>
> give a critical base to discussion – to recognise it **really** is satori – I attempt to
>
> describe ('if I say "zen" it isnt') that insight wld be: the JE reflects on itself but

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[189] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'How Near a Kinsman to Benedict is Buddha?', *The Sawang* (Unpublished, 1986), pp. 1-8 (p. 3). The Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society Library.

can never see the JE it only sees the MOI – one further tropism is always necessary that can never be taken – the JE must be content w/ an image of itself[190]

It is through Houédard's engagement with Buddhism that he was able to develop a radical questioning of self within his own religious tradition and relate this to Concrete poetry. The terms 'je' ('I') and 'moi' ('me') used by Houédard refer to two aspects of consciousness. The 'je' of consciousness is the unknowable self whilst the 'moi' is a knowable image of an otherwise unknowable self. An image for Houédard, as he writes in the introduction to a 1972 collection of typestracts called *Like Contemplation*, included 'diagrams, models, gestures and muscular movements – as well as words'[191] through which there was only contact with 'moi' rather than with the unknowable reality itself of 'je' but which by being used as tantra could enable one to have a truer experience of the self as unknowable.

Houédard's introduction to the examination of the sermons of the thirteenth century monk Meister Eckhart reads as a paraphrase of the above passage from 'The Wider Ecumenism' in which he explains this notion of 'je' and 'moi' in terms of time. He writes:

> Now the world of 'things' is what people study normally in science, where we discover that everything is changing, everything exists in a flux and this is because of the nature of time. So we tend to halt things and call them 'things', forgetting that they are changing the whole time and that mind is also changing the whole time: mind is always going beyond itself. Mind itself is part of the world and so if we are studying the whole of the world, then we have to study

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[190] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'The Wider Ecumenism', *The Aylesford Review*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Summer, 1965), 118-124 (pp. 120-121).
[191] Dom Sylvester Houédard, *Like Contemplation* (London: Writers Forum, 1972), unpaginated, page 1 of 1.

our own mind as well. There you have the introduction to the nature of the fundamental paradox, because if we think of something analogous to space and time, in mind there is distance between mind as the subject, which is knowing, and the object which is being known.[192]

Houédard's theory of the self is based on negative theology, and here he is describing the religious understanding of reality through the language of phenomenology which holds that consciousness is not a presence in itself and is only known through what it is conscious of. The 'je', then, is the impossible reality of the mind as subject knowing itself as object whilst 'moi' is a knowledge of the mind by what it is not. Because Houédard relates this negative philosophy of the self in the above passage to time an experience of 'je' as the impossibility of knowing the mind as object is an experience of the absence of the present moment in the passage of time.

Concrete poetry for Houédard was a means of trying to exceed a notional realisation of 'je' and to realise it authentically in a spiritual experience of nothingness. The Concrete poem could be used, according to Houédard, as a tool to mystically expand consciousness into a closer realisation of 'je' and so therefore belonged to the category of tantra art which for Houédard had its roots in the early avant-garde. As he says in his 1967 letter, 'Tantrism and Tantric Sense', published in *Studio International* in response to a review by Dr. Erling Eng, the presence of tantra art in the modern period began with the 'collective satori Europe experienced through the Dadaists.'[193] As tantra art, the Concrete poem was intended to change the consciousness of both the reader and the creator.

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[192] Dom Sylvester Houédard, *Commentaries on Meister Eckhart Sermons* (Roxburgh: Beshara Publications, 2000), pp. 4-5.
[193] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Tantrism and Tantric Sense', *Studio International* (July/ August 1967), pp. 7-8 (p. 7).

Houédard writes in his statement for the catalogue of the exhibition, 'Between Poetry and Painting', that he was motivated as a Concrete poet from having read Burrough's remark to Allen Ginsberg in the U.S. literary magazine *Palante* in which he advises Ginsberg that he should abandon poetry because it relied on words.[194] For Houédard it was a gnostic reality which conventional language use prohibited but which tantra art could help to achieve. As he says, '[t]antra art is a machine', or method, 'of becoming the word mind and body of the tattagaha (or realising one is that in inner space)', so that 'the painting is only the brush – the painter is the *objet d'art* – and this painting or machine is no less external to and distinct from the painter when it is produced mentally.'[195] In notes for an ICA lecture on typewriter art called 'Typewriterart: Machine Poetry & Poetry Machines' at the ICA on the 22nd April 1965, Houédard describes the mind in Kantian terms when he speaks of 'the mind as a poem-machine imposing mental structures moulds processes'[196] and it is this centred concept of the self understanding the world by imposing its own perceptual apparatus which a tantra art would dissolve as subject and object become one.

The purpose of Concrete poetry for Houédard was in its potential to decentre the self through meditative use as theorised through Eastern religion. This spiritual function for the Concrete poem, though, was not necessarily within an orthodox religious context. Mottram writes of Cobbing in his essay, 'Beware of Imitations: Writers Forum Poets and British Poetry in the '60s', that '[w]here traditional mantras operate within a theosophy inclined to dogma, Cobbing's mantric poems resist the politics of stasis in religion and society. They contain nothing of the monastery and

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[194] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Statement', *Between Poetry and Painting* (London: Exhibition Catalogue, 1965), pp. 53-55 (p. 55).
[195] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Tantrism and Tantric Sense', *Studio International* (July/ August 1967), pp. 7-8 (p. 7).
[196] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Typewriterart: Machine Poetry & Poetry Machines', *ICA Bulletin* (April, 1965), p. 11.

the guru, nor do they encourage imitation or that yielding to tradition which the classicist determines as security.'[197] I would suggest that where Concrete poetry conceived as tantra art differed from a traditional religious context was that the dissolution intended between the poet and the poem was meant as an escape from the structure of language systems. In a letter to Houédard, the English Beat poet Dave Cuneliffe describes mantric poetry as 'a fluid, alive poetry, rather than a traditional, confined, static system', that could involve 'word power focus' or 'creative sound vibration', and where the 'Word is seen as within the language, albeit esoteric, confined to the initiate, & as a symbol whose sole function is to assist the mediator to transcend such symbols as words & Mantric Poetry'.[198]

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[197] Eric Mottram, 'Beware of Imitations: Writers Forum Poets and British Poetry in the '60s', *Poetry Student*, No. 1 (February, 1975), pp. 6-35 (p. 6).

<u>3.2 Concrete Poetry's Somatic Author</u>

In this section of the chapter I want to discuss the sound poetry of the Concrete poetry movement as a poetry arising in the nineteen sixties in opposition to the notion of an expressive self. In the previous section I described Concrete poetry as a poetry which involved a decentred concept of the author as self and this section continues this discussion by focusing on sound poetry which as a vocal poetry was the closest experiment to the notion of the author as a physical person within the movement. I suggest that in a negotiation with the notion of the author, sound poetry challenged the realist convention of the voice as expression of an author's mind with the voice as expression of an author's body. Concrete poetry in this section is not about laying bare the processes of representation but about decentring the grounded self through sensual means.

In traditional Western thought the voice is most identified with the notion of the author as the expressive authority of a person. Oral speech, unlike writing, is directly emitted from a person, a presence in actual space and time, and so is considered by Western idealist philosophy to be imbued with fixed meaning. Through the voice there is assumed to be a transparent communication of the mind's reality. I would suggest that the materiality of sound poetry as a poetry using the voice upsets this notion of the self. The critic Jon Erikson argues that sound poetry that it was a poetry that foregrounded the notion of an author as a metaphysical closure of expression. In his essay, 'The Language of Presence: Sound Poetry and Artaud', he describes it as 'Adamic language, the true and original language', and 'the language of presence – an emotional gestural telepathy emanating from the living vibrations of the newly-created as a component of a self-regulating symbiotic system.' This for Erikson 'is the

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[198] David Cuneliffe, Letter to Dom Sylvester Houédard (Unpublished, 8th January, 1967), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1. dsh Archive, Collection of Modern Literary Archives, The John Rylands University Library,

object for sound poets of what Jacques Derrida calls "nostalgia for presence," a concern about origin, about a type of Golden Age myth'.[199] A metaphysics of presence informs some of the discourse behind sound poetry in Britain. Cobbing and Mayer in a statement published in issue five of *Kontexts* acknowledge that the linguistic sign is arbitrary but say that letter forms and phonetic sounds are meaningful and non-arbitrary.[200] Mills in his essay, 'Sign & Sound', suggests that it is sound poetry's attempt to re-invigorate language which leads to an assertion of the poet as a uniquely expressive self, writing that '[t]he sound poet, on the other hand, according to Mills tries to make 'language new again' and 'reasserts the original magical connection, the invisible sympathy between man & object'. [201] The theorist and poet Steve McCaffery, on the other hand, would apply the argument of Erikson's that sound poetry was based on a metaphysical notion of presence to one specific kind of use of the voice in poetry. McCaffery in his essay, 'Voice in Extremis', describes two types of voice in poetry. He describes one of these voices in poetry as 'a primal identity, culturally empowered to define the property of person' and as 'a phenomenological voice that serves in its self-evidence as the unquestionable guarantee of presence' so that 'when heard and understood through its communication of intelligible sounds this voice is named conscience.'[202] This first use of voice in poetry as described by McCaffery fits with Jonathan Culler's description of the lyric poem conceived by Post-Structural theory as 'a fictional imitation of personal utterances, so that to interpret a sequence as a lyric is a matter of working out who is speaking, in what situation, with what concerns, to what tone – aiming ultimately to

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[199] Jon Erikson, 'The Language of Presence: Sound Poetry and Artuad', *Boundary*, No. 2 (Autumn, 1985), pp. 279-290 (p. 283).

[200] Bob Cobbing and Peter Mayer, Untitled statement, *Kontexts*, No. 5 (1973), unpaginated, p. 1 of 2.

[201] Neil Mills, 'Sign & Sound' (1970), *Stereo Headphones*, No. 5 (Winter, 1972), p. 37.

articulate the full complexity of the speaker's attitudes, as revealed in the tones of the overheard utterance', which means that '[t]o interpret a sequence as a lyric is to find ways of hearing in it a speaking voice, which is taken as a manifestation of consciousness.'[203] The sound poem, on the other hand, belongs to the other type of voice in poetry which according to McCaffery is 'renegade and heterological – requires the voice's primary desire to be persistently away from presence. This second is a thanatic voice destined to lines of flight and escape, to the expenditure of pulsional intensities and to its own dispersal in sounds between body and language.'[204] From this perspective, the argument by Erikson which sees sound poetry as conforming to an ideology of presence would apply to a lyric verse poetry and not to a poetry foregrounding its materiality. In sound poetry, the author as expressive self is replaced with the author as expressive body.

Sound poetry is being associated by McCaffery with desublimation. Sublimation means to convert biological and unconscious desires into more socially acceptable forms and desublimation means to free this libidinal energy trapped in socially acceptable forms and return it back to its sensuous state. I would suggest that in the sound poetry as McCaffery describes it the instinctual forces of the body are ideally released from the confines of rationalised habitual behaviour to disturb the symbolic order. The poet Stan Trevor specifically describes Cobbing's performances in a similar manner when he writes that '[t]o attend a performance by Bob Cobbing is to become involved in a world of immediate oral and aural sensation to which one is invited to abandon oneself and to be carried along on the tide' and which seems to deny the individual 'his rational base grounded in the meanings of words, syntax,

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[202] Steve McCaffery, 'Voice in Extremis', *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. by Charles Bernstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 162-177 (p. 163).
[203] Jonathan Culler, 'Reading Lyric', *Yale French Studies*, No. 69 (1985), pp. 98-106 (p. 99).

grammar, image, etc.'[205] Cobbing's use of the voice which foregrounds language and the body as physical substance was opposite to the poet communicating his mind. The scripts for Cobbing's sound poems are assemblages of letters, non-sense words, word clusters, and sometimes illegible language where any semantic finds itself serving the material presence of language. McCaffery's manifesto, 'For a Poetry of Blood', which was published in issue four of *Stereo Headphones* in Spring 1971 suggests that this emphasis on the body in sound poetry was a strategy at the time within Anglo-American poetry. He writes:

> in liberating sound we are discovering these basic forces for oneself in organic
> expressionistic performance. the repetition of sound only seems to establish an
> external object of mesmerism for in reality it liberates the elemental regions &
> most primitive impulses of the human self. as these forces are omnipresent so
> have they been long dormant & ignored by poetry; as these forces are hidden
> dormant & ignored so are they frightening as a biological extension until they
> are realized as self-discovery. [. . .] sound is the awareness that direct sensory
> involvement/ impact is a greater thing then indirect communication to &
> through the intellect. sound is the conviction that the senses should be married
> not divorced, sound is a respect for the purity of immediacy & utter faith in the
> human capacity to grasp the immediate. this is the infinite extension of man.
> this is the successful assimilation of your own into another biology. the true
> cosmic organism. the true cosmic orgasm. this & only this is not degrading to
> our time. (sic)[206]

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[204] Steve McCaffery, 'Voice in Extremis', *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. by Charles Bernstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 162-177 (p. 163).
[205] Stan Trevor, *On the Concrete poetry of Bob Cobbing* (London: Anarcho Press, 1992), unpaginated, p. 1 of 10.
[206] Steve McCaffery, 'For a Poetry of Blood', *Stereo Headphones*, No. 4 (Spring, 1971), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1.

The primitivism of sound poetry is described here in such a way that it is difficult to entirely refute Erikson's argument about metaphysical closure of the text, but such poetry which looks back to a primal communication is also described here as a strategy against repression of the material body at a specific historical time in the post-modern period. In this sense I would suggest that sound poetry was a poetry of desublimation that came in reaction to the poetry of sublimation that was lyric poetry and its contribution towards naturalising cultural alienation by making a hierarchy of the mind over the body.

I would suggest that sound poetry as a revolt against lyric poetry's repression of the body was a development that expanded one of the original purposes of the Concrete poetry movement. Concrete poetry was conceived by Augusto De Campos in his 1957 essay 'The Concrete Coin of Speech' as a purely aesthetic experiment and not as a reactionary poetry. He describes Concrete poetry as 'against the non-functionality and formalization of language',[207] which means that the Concrete poem as an autonomous entity in giving form a function in relation to content upset a predictable usage of language. But this for De Campos was a consequence of the poetry and not an intention by the movement. He writes: 'The moment arrives in which poetry no longer must define itself in terms of anti-syntax, or anti-discourse', and instead, '[i]t comes to be governed by its own rules, by its own conditions, and these in turn are founded on the concrete roots of language.'[208] As De Campos elaborates, just as it seemed that a historical inevitability was at work in modern visual art which left behind 'the human figure or of perspective' for 'pure visuality', so it is that 'discursive syntax' can no longer be a viable means of practice when the movement of tradition dictates instead that it be replaced with 'the function of

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[207] Augusto de Campos, 'The Concrete Coin of Speech' (1957), trans. by Jon M. Tolman, *Poetics Today*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Summer, 1982), pp. 167-176 (p. 169).

language itself'.[209] Concrete poetry is described here as a formal evolution in the literary arts and not as a reaction against realist literature. Sound poetry, on the other hand, directs the Concrete poetry movement in the nineteen sixties into more of a reactionary position than it had been.

I have said that sound poetry in the nineteen sixties was reactionary in that its expression of the material body was an attack against the voice specifically implied in the lyric poem. Sound poetry replaces the concept of the author as idealised presence of mind with a decentred concept of the author as expressive body. I would suggest that this is the value of Cobbing's sound poetry as repetition of an original avant-garde paradigm. In a letter to Cobbing about a radio broadcast he had made called 'The Electronic Voice' in the nineteen seventies, Chopin accuses Cobbing of never having heard him use an electronic voice. Cobbing had made electronic poems in collaboration with the New Zealand composer Anna Lockwood, and Dufrêne. Cobbing had also broadcast the poems from his first collection *An ABC in Sound* on B.B.C. Third Programme on the 7th January 1966 in a version which had been produced at the B.B.C. Electronic Workshop where the speed and volume of Cobbing's voice had been manipulated. *An ABC in Sound* was composed in 1964 and published and recorded onto a gramaphone record in 1965. The B.B.C. recording of these sound poems are described by Chopin as 'simple readings at a micro with echoes, no more.'[210] In Chopin's account, Cobbing's resistance to the electronic manipulation of the voice aligns him with the *Lettriste* group in France that appeared in 1945 and which Chopin sees as the last of the phonetic poets but which, as he says

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[208] Ibid., p. 176.
[209] Ibid.
[210] Henri Chopin, Letter to Bob Cobbing (Unpublished, undated), unpaginated, p. 1 of 2. Bob Cobbing Papers, British Library. Box. 3: Correspondence 2; Envelope 1-3 1970's.

in *Poesie Sonore*, 'no longer had the spirit of Dada', because 'it suffered from being nothing more than aesthetics'.[211]

Cobbing's sound poetry continued Hausmann's 'optophonetic' poetry that dated from 1918 which used the size and shape of the typographic layout of a poem to indicate the nature of the voice in a live performance. Cobbing's sound poetry also had much in common with Dufrêne's primitive vocal utterances called 'cri-rhymes' from the early nineteen fifties. For Cobbing, the use of technology was for foregrounding the human voice rather than for advancing the sound poem. He began using a tape recorder in the early nineteen sixties, but his use of it was more as an instrument to emphasise his own human voice. He remarks in an interview with Mottram that after reading some of his poems into a tape recorder he was so disappointed with the weak quality of his own natural voice that he started manipulating the tape controls to try and improve the reading of the poems. Cobbing says about the tape machine: 'It is a matter of understanding the nature of the voice, I think, and in using the tape recorder, particularly if you maltreat it as I always do, you can find out a lot about the vibrations of the voice, about the physical nature of the voice.'[212] The tape recorder meant a more material kind of expression might be achieved for the natural voice.

Although failing at being a qualitative transformation of the sound poem format as Chopin suggests, the value of Cobbing's phonetic poetry was in its reaction to conventional lyric poetry at the time in Britain. The sound poem in Britain had the effect of inverting lyric poetry's emphasis of the poet by taking it to an extreme in that it made the literal body of the poet the source of communication. In a comparison

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[211] Henri Chopin, 'Extracts from *Poesie Sonore*', trans. by Ulises Carrion and Michael Gibbs, *Kontexts*, No. 8 (Spring, 1976), pp. 4-5 (p. 4).

between British and American poetry of the nineteen sixties, the critic Michael Schmidt writes that '[t]he British poet – it seems – is urged to write either impregnably private or, conversely, vatic poetry, where the poet is the point on which we focus, not himself focal onto a significant world', so that '[f]or the poet, writing the poem is an assertion of an identity, "I am a poet", rather than an act of communication, in the first instance.'[213] Cobbing's sound poetry, then, had relevance in Britain during the post-war period as a strategy against the expressive self found in the lyric poem.

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[212] Bob Cobbing, 'Composition and Performance in the Work of Bob Cobbing: A Conversation', Eric Mottram (Unpublished, 5th March, 1973), pp. 1-16 (p. 2). Eric Mottram Papers, Special Collections Library, King's College, The University of London. Ref. 5/45/1-23.

3.3 Concrete Poetry's Machine Author

In the previous section of the chapter I discussed how sound poetry drew on the notion of the author as a decentred body of instinctual energy rather than the author as idealised presence of mind. In this section of the chapter I want to develop this idea that Concrete poetry involved a different and non-traditional concept of an author by discussing how the author was re-invented by Concrete poetry in Britain through technology in that self-expression was mediated through technology and made material.

The expressive ideology, in which the self communicates a presence, persists in the gestural mark of the body. Writing, painting, and drawing are linked by the gestural mark of the body which was central to the calligraphic work of Gysin and the Lettriste movement. Lettrism in Paris had began in 1945 by Isidore Isou and was the most self-expressive visual poetry of the post-war period with letters, words, and phrases painted with oil on to canvas. Gysin during the Second World War learnt Japanese for two years through which he was able to adopt a spontaneous approach in the application of ink onto paper and in his performance called 'Let the Mice In' at the ICA in December 1960 I would suggest that it was the spontaneity of self-expression in the six foot calligraphic picture that Gysin painted, with Sommerville casting projections over Gysin as his texts played on tape, that became the focus of the event as a happening. I would suggest that the action painting, though, which Gysin's calligraphic painting was a version of, had become historical by the nineteen sixties. The exhibition, 'The Mysterious Sign', at the ICA from 26th October to 3rd December 1960 displayed the visual-verbal paintings of Gysin alongside Schwitters, Tobey, Michaux, Mathieu, and Pollock. The compromised position of Abstract

[213] Michael Schmidt, *British Poetry Since 1960: A Critical Survey*, ed. by Michael Schmidt and Grevel Lindop (Oxford: Carcanet Press, 1972), p. 2.

Expressionist painting by the nineteen sixties had, according to the art critic T. J. Clark, begun by the late nineteen forties through the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock. According to Clark, the spontaneity of expression in the action painting becomes reified through Pollock who in the post-war period had invented 'a repertoire of forms in which previously marginalized aspects of self-representation – the wordless, the somatic, the wild, the self-risking, the spontaneous, the uncontrolled, the "existential," the beyond or before our conscious activities of mind – could achieve a bit of clarity, and get themselves a relatively stable set of signifiers' so that '[a] poured line with splatters now equalled spontaneity, etc.'[214] Abstract Expressionist painting had informed the development of Cobbing's Concrete poetry as a participant of the Hendon Experimental Art Club which began in July 1951. This became known as the Hendon Group of Painters and Sculptors in 1954 and Group H in 1957 for which Cobbing was the secretary. According to the artist John Rowan's account of this group it became more influenced by Abstract Expressionist painting after 1958,[215] and like such painting, Cobbing's visual-verbal prints convey the process of their own production.

With action painting having become familiar by the post-war period and the ideology of self-expression in the arts made unconvincing as a result, I would suggest that Concrete poetry turned towards technology as a means of re-inventing the expressive author as an objective subjectivity. One way that Concrete poetry achieved this was via the typewriter which mediated the machine with the gesture of the body. In Houédard's lecture on typewriter art at the ICA in 1965 he discussed the common origins and mutual developments of painting and writing in their use of instruments, comparing the brush and pen with type and the typewriter. Houédard in a 1967

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[214] T J Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 308.

statement describes his use of the Olivetti lettera model typewriter as a painting machine. He writes:

> the ribbons may be of various ages – several ribbons may be used on a single typestract – inked-ribbon & manifold (carbon) can be combined on same typestract – pressures may be varied – overprints & semioverprints (½ back or ½ forward) are available – stencils may be cut & masks used – precise placing of the typestract units is possible thru spacebar & ratcheted-roller – or roller may be disengaged (sic).[216]

This use of the typewriter to make graphic patterns from its mechanics and its keyboard of verbal and non-verbal signs follows on from the paintings of the Lettriste group. These abstract designs made on a typewriter were called typestracts, which was a term Morgan gave to them. The geometrical forms in Concrete art, and later Minimal art, eliminated any expressive sign of the physical artist. I would suggest that the typestracts, though, were a kind of type-action painting responding to the demise of action painting. The typestract was a means of creating images in ink with the hand but without the trace of the immediate gestural subjectivity of the body. In an unpublished 1963 prose poem about his typewriter called, 'can yr t/ writer wiggle its ?ears: long line version (sic)', Houédard intimates that the subjectivity of the poet using the machine is displaced by it for it imparts an expression of its own. Describing the typewriter in the poem he says that it 'writes innerness poetry with a note of/ authority performs poetrygraphs & eyepoems with abso/lute unrepeatability// its junkey prayerlife is the total silence of a nothing/ contemplative construction shooting

[215] John Rowan, *Group H* (London: Writers Forum, 1966), pp. 1-23.
[216] Dom Sylvester Houédard, Untitled statement, *An Anthology of Concrete poetry*, ed. by Emmett Williams (Something Else press, 1967), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1.

out the din of its soul/ at work'.[217] The machine had an intentionality of its own through its relationship of objective otherness to the poet.

For Houédard it was the Beat poets who were a post-war group that had been trying to achieve an objective subjectivity. Houédard first encountered Wittgenstein in the nineteen forties at Oxford University where a realist conception of language was popular. Having encountered Beat poetry in the nineteen fifties, he makes an unconventional link between the two. Speaking about the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg in an interview with Mottram, Houédard says that Ginsberg was a poet who 'could treat language as any artist treated any material' and that Houédard made a connection between this and logical positivism, for as he goes on to say: 'at Oxford in the forties there had been this whole sort of move towards Wittgenstein and that sort of area in thought and philosophy and this new conception of what language was, and here it was being translated into real living forms by poets'.[218] Rather than describing Beat poetry as expressionist with its emphasis on spontaneity, Houédard describes it as materialist. I would suggest that it is this perception of an expressionist poetry as objective which informs Houédard's conception of kinetic poetry and the use of the machine for poetry. Kinetic art emerged as a neo-Concrete development going beyond Concrete art's rationality by sending aesthetic structure into movement, and it is the kinetic development of Concrete poetry which Houédard refers to as a post-Beat poetry, or poetry modelled on an expressionist means of rational order.

For Gysin, on the other hand, kineticism's response to the cultural absorption of spontaneous expression was to reassert the subjective via the machine. In 1958 Gysin,

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[217] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'can yr t/ writer wiggle its ?ears: long line version', (Unpublished, 1963), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1. Microfiche transcript and poems by Dom Sylvester Houédard 1927 – 1963, Hyman Kreitman Research Centre, Tate Britain. Ref. TAM 28.
[218] Dom Sylvester Houédard, Conversation with Eric Mottram at the Poetry Society (Unpublished, 9th April, 1973), pp. 1-53 (p. 5). Eric Mottram Papers, Special Collections Library, King's College, The University of London. Ref. 5/115/1-14.

whilst travelling along an avenue of trees against a setting sun with his eyes closed, experienced an intense vision of patterns and colours. He later found out that he had been subjected to flickering light which causes the electrical oscillations of the brain to change which in turn causes patterns and visions to be seen. Gysin told Burroughs and Sommerville about this experience and in early 1960 Sommerville made a machine which produced continual flickering light. Gysin used this machine as a prototype for what he would call the 'Dream Machine'. This was a rotating cylinder with slots around it and a light source in the middle. A precursor to the 'Dream Machine' can be seen in Hausmann's designs in the nineteen twenties and thirties for what he called an 'Optophone' and which he had patented in Britain. This was to be a machine with a hundred keys that could produce an array of coloured light and sound when pressed. The 'Dream Machine', though, as kinetic art was not about being an aesthetic reality but about trying to excite the subjective human mind. As Sommerville writes: 'The Dream Machine began as a simple means to investigate phenomena whose description excited our imaginations – our faculty of image-making which flicker was said to stimulate.'[219]

Cobbing's response to the demise of spontaneous expression in the post-war period was a mediation between the subjective and the objective which he called 'treatment'. This is a description of working which Cobbing implies in a 1968 letter to Zurbrugg could serve in advancing experimental art. He writes: 'I envisage the poet of one poem, who spends his life devising variations on it, increasingly complicated, increasingly simple. Material now is unimportant; treatment is all.'[220] The idea of the treated text was the theme behind the sixth issue of *Stereo Headphones*. In his

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[219] Ian Sommerville, 'Flicker', *The Best of 'Olympia'*, ed. by Maurice Girodias (Paris: The Olympia Press, 1966), pp. 25-27 (pp. 26-27).

[220] Bob Cobbing, 'Letter to Nicholas Zurbrugg', (Unpublished, 9th January 1968), p. 1 of 1. Bob Cobbing Papers, British Library. Box. 3: Correspondence 2; Envelope 1-3, 1970's.

introduction to this issue, Zurbrugg lists five types of treatment for the visual-verbal text: '1. the addition of verbal matter 2. the subtraction of verbal matter 3. the addition of graphic matter 4. the addition of photographic matter 5. the modification or transmutation of the page'.[221] These are the labour processes conducted upon pre-existing textual material which have been either appropriated by an author from another source or have been made at an earlier time by the author. In the treated text an artist or poet uses pre-existing material as opposed to beginning with a blank canvas or sheet of paper. For Cobbing, though, treatment meant the mediation of material through the machine which he would carry out with a Gestetner duplicator and the use of typed, thermal, and brush stencils. In a letter to Houédard, Cobbing describes the relationship between the machine and the treatment process in how he makes his visual-verbal prints when he writes:

> When I have finished duplicating such mundane items as notices of meetings,
> writers forum poems for criticism evenings, I reverse the stencil on the
> duplicator (ink side out), tamper with it in some way (folding, blotting, scoring)
> and print off one or two impressions. These form the basis of my works – which
> are completed by further over printings or as collages, or in other ways. I
> suppose every one has gone through a slightly different process, a series of
> processes in different order.[222]

Treatment for the Concrete poet meant using the machine to transform material with, through which the poet's subjectivity would be mediated by the objectivity of the machine's processes. For Cobbing treatment also implied advance for Concrete poetry and a poem by Furnival makes a statement about the machine in Concrete poetry in

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[221] Nicholas Zurbrugg, 'Treating the Text', *Stereo Headphones*, No. 6 (Summer, 1974), pp. 3-4 (p. 3).
[222] Bob Cobbing, Letter to Dom Sylvester Houédard (Unpublished, 13th April, 1965), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1. dsh Archive, Collection of Modern Literary Archives, The John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester.

relation to the temporal. In Furnival's poster poem 'Machina', published in issue seven (March, 1971) of the German poetry magazine, *Neue Texte*, the expression of the machine and of the self are identified with two different temporalities which relate dialectically. The poem shows two diagrams of a see-saw one above the other. The see-saw at the top has the phrases 'machina cogito', or 'machine mind', on one side, and 'deus sum', or 'I am god', on the other and where the slant of the see-saw is tipped downwards. The see-saw at the bottom has the phrases, 'future sees' on one side and where the slant of the see-saw is tipped downwards, and 'past saws' on the other. The phrases are being represented as weights and it is up to the reader to play with how they conceptually balance. Given that the phrases 'machina cogito' and 'future sees' are on the left hand side and those of 'deus sum' and 'past saws' are on the right there is an implied correspondence between the two see-saws that suggests the technological awareness of the Concrete poetry movement allows it to keep up with cultural advances whilst the subjectivity of the poet is there to ensure that any advance is authentic by undercutting a passive, or unmediated, use of technology. This reading is emphasised by the fact that the phrases 'deus sum' and 'future sees' are indicated to be the heaviest.

I have discussed how the notion of the expressive author was re-invented by the Concrete poetry movement in that it was abstracted by the use of technology. I want to continue this discussion by describing in particular how the use of technology in the sound poem re-invented the self-expressive author. Sound poetry arrived as a challenge to two aspects of authorship which are acknowledged in a two part discussion at the ICA that took place on the 16th February 1971 between Houédard and Cobbing called 'Kroklok: A Survey of Sound Poetry – Part 1 – Phonetic Poetry for the Single Unaided Voice' and on the 23rd February 1971 between Cobbing and

Claire called 'Multivoice Poems and Electronic/ Computer Poetry'. These talks covered the two related paths of development in sound poetry which Cobbing describes as:

> One, the attempt to come to terms with scientific and technological
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> development in order to enable man to continue to be at home in his world, the
>
> humanisation of the machine, the marrying of human warmth to the coldness
>
> often associated with pure electronically-generated sound. The other, the return
>
> to the primitive, to incantation and ritual, to the coming together again of music
>
> and poetry, the amalgamation with music and dance, the growth of the voice to
>
> its full physical powers again as part of the body, the body of language.[223]

The latter path of development for sound poetry described here relates to what has been discussed in the last section as sound poetry's somatic displacement of lyric poetry's voice. The former path of development for sound poetry described here relates to what I suggest is the mediation of expression by the machine. Cobbing suggests here that this use of technology by the Concrete poet was for the purpose of making the machine more human. I would suggest, though, that the use of technology by the Concrete poet was also to make the human more machine-like so that subjectivity was objectified. The theorist Felix Guattari suggests in *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm* that the achievement of Concrete poetry was in its sound poetry. He writes:

> It seems to me that this art doesn't involve a return to an originary orality as it
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> does a forward flight into machinations and deterritorialised machinic paths
>
> capable of engendering mutant subjectivities. What I mean by this is that there
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> is something artificial, constructed, composed – what I call a machinic

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[223] Bob Cobbing, Untitled Statement, *ICA Bulletin* (February, 1971), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1.

processuality – in Concrete poetry's rediscovery of orality.'[224]

It is ambiguous here whether Guattari is using the term machinic in a literal sense or in the figurative sense of his theorising where it refers to any systematic assemblage which in this case would refer to sound poetry's destablising relationship with traditional poetry, but this quote helps to suggest that Concrete poetry was a re-invention of oral expression through technology.

Houédard sees the technically unaided voice in sound poetry as limited with regards any re-invention of oral expression when he writes in his 1972 essay, 'Supertonic Boom or Babbling as Artform', that 'a sound poet who is liberated from the tyranny of set words in a set language is not thereby liberated from a given set of sounds made possible to him by the muscle training etc he received in his echolalia'.[225] The technological manipulation of the voice, on the other hand, became a means of helping the body to free itself from its biological limitations and re-invent its expressivity. It was recording technology, though, which allowed for the mouth and the throat to be taken away from their muscular habits so that the voice could escape the verbal and make sounds that might express something that verbal language could not. The electronic manipulation of the voice in sound poetry which escaped the verbal was called 'poesie sonore' which in English means sound poetry. This was Chopin's term for electronic sound poetry and distinguishable in meaning from 'poesie phonetique', or phonetic poetry, which consists of the sound of words and letters by the human voice or the sound of breath and throat. Poesie sonore, on the other hand, was characterised by the electronic technology of tape recording and electro-acoustics and began in 1953 with the commercial availability of tape

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[224] Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm* (1992), trans. by Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Sydney: Power Publications, 1995), p. 90.

[225] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Supertonic Boom or Babbling as Artform', *Stereo Headphones*, No. 5 (Winter, 1972), pp. 42-44 (p. 44).

recording technology when the French poet Francois Dufrêne used a tape-recorder to manipulate his voice.

Poesie-sonore was not made by a British poet until 1968 when Chopin became a British citizen, sixteen years behind Germany and France. Sound poetry as poesie-sonore first appears in Britain in 1960 with the arrival of Gysin and the recording of his permutation poems at the B.B.C. The British poet George Macbeth who worked at the B.B.C. had heard of the cut-up experiments and Gysin's 1960 recording of cut-up prose called 'Poem of Poems' and invited Gysin to London in late 1960 to give a live reading on B.B.C. London radio of his manifesto-poem for the cut-up method called 'Minutes to Go'. After his reading on the radio, Gysin was later invited back to the B.B.C. and with the help of the technician Douglas Cleverdon spent three days working in its special effects studio where he recorded a number of Concrete poems. These were later broadcast in a half-hour programme by the B.B.C. in August 1961 called 'The Permutated Poems of Brion Gysin' and which received the second lowest audience rating at the time. Gysin's sound poetry belonged to what he coined in 1962 as 'machine poetry' to describe the use of a machine such as a tape-recorder, computer, film, duplicator, typewriter, or amplifier that was integral to the composition of a poem, and in 1962 his permutated poems were fed into a computer programmed by Sommerville to produce 2420 lines of text. The role of specifically the technology of the recording machine in the arts was addressed at an exhibition organised by Hugh Shaw at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London between 12th November and 20th December 1970 of films, video-tape and sound poetry in which the material was created in the moment of being recorded.

The live reading of Gysin's permutated poems were part of a theatrical performance that used visual projections that he had developed in 1959 in

Montparnasse with Sommerville whilst working together on the Dream-Machine. During the war Gysin had worked designing scenery for theatre and costumes for Broadway musicals and this was reflected in his poetry performances where tapes of his permutations would be played whilst he would recite them live and wear either white or black clothes so that colour slides could be projected onto him. Gysin's permutation poems took Gomringer's earlier constellation poetry into the field of electronic sound poetry, although on the page they can be read in the context of kinetic sculpture as Beiles suggests when he writes in his essay 'Gysin Permutates/ Takis Ace of Space' published in *Signals* how they involve 'the drawing of words into an electro-magnetic structure crystalline in shape [. . .] a kind of armature on which words are hung'.[226] When Gysin's permutation poems were recorded they made use of relatively sophisticated special effects for the time which took the permutation into sonic abstraction and loosened the bound form of the permutation's serialism. In the recording of the poem 'I am that I am', which consists of forty eight lines of this phrase in different word orders, the voice was subjected to echo, high-pitch frequency, distortion and superimposition to create an elementary narrative of verbal order leading to non-verbal disorder and back again. In 'Pistol Poem' Gysin counts through permutations of the numbers one to five in varying degrees of loudness alongside the rhythmic pulsing of gun shots that had been recorded at distances of one to five metres away.

Chopin began to use a tape-machine in 1955 having been inspired by his contact with pre-modern culture. Whilst a prisoner in a Russian concentration camp during World War Two and as a soldier in Vietnam in 1949 he encountered the voice in a pre-literary context of chant and extra-verbal communication. Poesie-sonore in

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[226] Sinclair Beiles, 'Gysin Permutates/ Takis Ace of Space', *Signals*, Nos 3 & 4 (October/November, 1964), p. 8.

France took the form of either Bernard Heidsieck's (b.1928) 'poemes-partitions', which were poems of rapidly delivered phrases juxtaposed with pre-recorded sounds, or of Chopin's 'audio-poemes' which processed words and the sounds of the mouth and throat through multiple recordings and alterations to the speed of the voice to create a superimposition of strange noises. Chopin's poesie-sonore developed the sound poem by taking further Concrete poetry's condensation of language so that the vocal became distorted. As Chopin explains in a 1995 interview with Zurbrugg poesie sonore was concerned with a technological mediation of the voice that would reduce it into alien micro-particles of sound. Chopin says that through electronic sound poetry the poet 'discovered the way in which the tape recorder's microphone could become a means of multiplying the voice, just as the microscope multiplies our medical awareness of blood'. Electronic technology had 'revealed there are thousands of variations to the voice' and that it is not a consistent entity in the same way that through science blood is no longer a singular entity because, as Chopin says, 'we are aware of thousands of blood cells'.[227] Poesie-sonore was about taking sound poetry further into a materiality of language through technology which led to going beyond a conventional recognition of the human voice and in this respect it brought about a re-discovery of the body's physical identity as de-centred. At a literary conference in Geneva in September 1975 Burroughs remarks that the 'most characteristic thing about the person [. . .] is his voice'.[228] In the machine-made sound poem this seemingly essential trait of the individual is dispersed and made unfamiliar. Burroughs was also able to contribute to 'poesie sonore' whilst in England during the nineteen sixties by taking the cut-up text into a more reductive direction. In his book

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[227] Henri Chopin, 'Interviewed by Nicholas Zurbrugg', *Art & Design*, Vol. 10, No. 11/12 (November/ December, 1995), pp. 21-55 (p. 21).
[228] William Burroughs, 'The New Reformers: William Burroughs and Brion Gysin in Geneva', *Kontexts*, No. 8 (Spring, 1976), pp. 8-11 (p. 11).

The Electronic Revolution he writes how in 1968, with the aid of Sommerville and Balch, he took a section of his recorded voice and spliced it into smaller sections of one twenty-fourth of a second using film tape and then rearranged the order of these sections so that the original words become meaningless but new kinds of words are made. Vocal sound is described here as a material object being treated by recording technology that permits it to be experimented with as expression outside of its human source.

<u>3.4 Concrete Poetry's Reader as Author</u>

In the previous sections of this chapter I have considered Concrete poetry as an experiment with the notion of the author in terms of the abstract nature of the text. In this section of the chapter I want to discuss how the reader in the Concrete poem helped to displace the notion of the author as a grounded reality for a text. The realist convention of the reader as passive receiver of textual authority was replaced in the Concrete poem with the reader as participator through which they contributed to the poem's significance.

The displacement of the author by the reader through textual participation is argued theoretically by Barthes with his concepts of the 'writerly' and the 'readerly' text proposed in *S/Z*, or what he also refers to as the 'open' and 'closed' text. The 'closed' text which Barthes identifies with realist literature is that which encourages the belief in the author as univocal meaning. The 'open' text which Barthes identifies with modernist literature allows the reader to experience a richness of signification. For Barthes it was the reader who by engaging with the social codes governing textual meaning could realise the multiplicitous reality of a text and decentre the author as univocal meaning. As he says in 'Death of the Author', 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author'.[229]

Displacement of the author by the reader was a consequence of the non-realist novel for Barthes. At the end of the nineteen sixties a displacement of the author by the reader became an intention for the Concrete poetry movement in France and which was reported in Britain. The second and third issue of *Stereo Headphones* in Spring 1970 was entitled 'The New French Poetries – The Death of Concrete' and contained the work of sixteen poets who each contributed a response over whether

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[229] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image-Music-Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142-148 (p. 148).

Concrete poetry originating with Gomringer and the Noigandres group had come to an end. These responses were reviewed in Zurbrugg's essay 'Towards the Death of Concrete Poetry' in the second issue of *Pages* magazine in Winter 1970. What *Stereo Headphones* magazine called the new French poetries was by implication being shown as a next stage of development in the Concrete poetry movement and which emphasised the reader's active role as significant. A short statement called 'The Reader as Creator' which had been compiled by Jamie Poniachik and Rose Kenig for issue eleven and twelve of the French Concrete poetry magazine, *Agentzia*, was made up from a number of quotations from the French poets Gerald Rocher, Jean-Francois Bory, Moineau, Julien Blaine and Jochen Gerz. The introduction to these quotations reads:

> The reader-spectator is not the artist's slave; on the contrary, starting from the
>
> writing or the outline of the author he can reach new personal significations,
>
> thus new meanings which could not previously have been expressed emerge,
>
> meanings which were not implicit, but only suggested. We are more interested
>
> in proposals capable of releasing such progressions than purely and simply
>
> giving a message.'[230]

This emphasis on the reader as realising the work drew on cybernetic theory. Bory says that 'information is primarily a code, if one does not know the code there is a certain struggle before one discovers it' so that the 'work of the creator consists of giving material reality to information' and the 'work of the reader consists of decoding this information.'[231] Blaine draws on cybernetics to suggest that this attempt to make the reader active was motivated by an intention to negate the elitist identity of the poet as individual, writing that what the French Concrete poets 'want is for

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[230] Jamie Poniachik and Rose Kenig, 'The Reader as Creator', *Stereo Headphones*, Nos. 2&3 (Spring, 1970), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1.

everybody to become poets', which means that they 'will not give precise information which reduces the reader to a nonentity in the field of poetry.'[232]

I would suggest that the concept of action in the Concrete poetry movement that had emerged in France and been associated with performance becomes identified in the late nineteen sixties with a belief in an active process of reading through a predominantly expressionist photo-montage visual poetry. Moineau proclaims a displacement of the author by the reader in this issue of *Stereo Headphones* when he states that 'the reader writes' and that there is only 'action' (left to the 'reader') and the poem as 'the proposition, the process ('written' but as: meta-language)',[233] whilst Gerz states that action is 'the vital movement of the reader searching for meaning.'[234] The involvement of the reader proposed here also meant making the reader more self-conscious of their role and their productive capability in the realisation of the text itself. Gerz is quoted as saying: 'we are trying to reduce, to volatilize the difference of level that exists between the reading and the creative process; not merely making the reader participate with something already existing but also with the creative process.'[235]

I have described so far how the Concrete poetry movement intended to displace the author by making the reader a participator with the concept of action. I now want to describe in what way the Concrete poem was understood to be participatory. Barthes's theory of the active reader emphasises that the reader displaces the author, but the concept of the 'open' and 'closed' text is not adequate enough to account for the nature of the active engagement by the reader with the Concrete poem. As has already been seen in some of the statements by the French Concrete poets, the

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[231] Jean-Francois Bory, ibid.
[232] Julien Blaine, ibid.
[233] Jean-Claude Moineu, Untitled Statement, ibid.
[234] Jamie Poniachik and Rose Kenig, 'The Reader as Creator', ibid.

Concrete poetry movement understood the reader as participator of the text in terms of information theory. The U.S. happening artist Nam June Paik (1932-2006) compares the thought of the cybernetic theorist Norman Weiner with that of the cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan in a 1967 essay in the *ICA Bulletin* which can explain how information theory would account for the active reader. In explaining the concept of indeterminism, Paik quotes Weiner's description of the relationship between probability and information which states that 'the more probable the message, the less information it gives. Clichés, for example, are less illuminating than the great poems.'[236] The greater the indeterminacy meant the more information was given. For McLuhan, this was also the case, but for him if a text gave a high amount of information and was not that indeterminate then it demanded less involvement from the reader. What McLuhan would call a 'cool media' is a term which describes the text which needed a lot of information to be filled in by the reader and McLuhan's term 'hot media' describes the text which needed little information to be filled in by the reader. Speech for instance was a cool medium according to McLuhan because, as Paik writes, 'so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener.'[237] What Barthes calls a 'readerly' text would be a 'hot media' and so low in indeterminacy, high in information, and requiring little involvement by the reader. The 'writerly' text would be a 'cool media' and so high in indeterminacy, low in information, and requiring more involvement by the reader.

For the Concrete poet it was a non-linear and simplified text, rather than a linear and complex text as Barthes would favour, which could elicit an engaged and complex reading experience. Although the Concrete poem was a reduced poetry it

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[235] Jochen Gerz, Untitled Statement, ibid.

[236] Nam June Paik, 'Norbert Wiener and Marshall McLuhan', *ICA Bulletin* (September, 1967), pp. 7-9 (p. 8)

[237] Ibid.

was not aiming for redundancy in the sense intended by information theory. Redundancy is a term used to mean high probability and rich in information. In Haroldo de Campos's essay, 'The Informational Temperature of the Text', the Concrete poem is argued to be aiming for redundancy in the sense of giving low information. The 'high informational temperature of the text' as Haroldo de Campos puts it, is 'linked to something like a craftsman's manipulation of poetry and prose' where 'the creative artist exhausts the possibilities of diversification and nuance in his linguistic arsenal, holding redundancy to a minimum, and elevating to the maximum the number of syntactic-semantic options'[238] Concrete poetry, on the other hand, as he says, 'rejects the airs and graces of craftmanship – in spite of the seriousness with which it considers the artisan's contribution to the stockpile of extant forms – from the *art of verse* to the elaborate diversification of vocabulary in prose', and because of this the Concrete poem 'limits *entropy* (the tendency to dispersion, to disorder, to the maximum informational potential of a system), fixing the informational temperature at the minimum necessary to obtain the aesthetic achievement of each poem undertaken.'[239] In what may appear to be a counter-intuitive reasoning, a reduction in language in terms of giving low information in the text was seen by the Concrete poet as being able to reinvigorate language. The isolation of the word in the Concrete poem prevented the designative function of language from efficiently taking effect and allowed for free-floating associations to be made. The use of cybernetics here gives an account of how the Concrete poem in the nineteen sixties was conceived as anti-realist but without being an autonomous artefact. I would suggest that by emphasising the role of the reader, the Concrete poem could be conceived as anti-realist without being reduced to the presence of an aesthetic thing.

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[238] Haroldo de Campos, 'The Informational Temperature of the Text', trans. by Jon M. Tolman, *Poetics Today*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Summer, 1982), pp. 177-187 (p. 179).

For the Concrete poetry movement the consequence of a non-linear text that does not follow conventional grammar and does not follow the unicity of the referent is that the reader becomes active in meaning. Where this notion of the reader as participator is different from Barthes's theory is that for him the reader is to actively engage with the rational codes of symbolic systems. For Houédard, on the other hand, the reader is to actively engage with a text in a more subjective capacity. In his 1963 essay, 'Concrete Poetry & Ian Hamilton Finlay', he describes the reading experience of the Concrete poem as follows: 'Every word an abstract painting, read quickly in a phrase words get lost: in concrete, eye sees words as objects that release sound/ thought echoes in reader.'[240] Here the reader's active engagement is an openly conceptual and personal experience rather than an engagement in the rational codes governing social meaning. For Barthes, the author as person communicates through a common grammar by drawing on a repertoire of literary conventions or codes and the reader engages with these to produce meaning. The reader engages in a production of semantic meaning regulated by the communal and rational codes. As he says in *S/Z*, '[t]o interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it.'[241] Houédard, though, suggests that the participation of the reader invited by the Concrete poem is more libertarian in spirit with the reader free to participate in the poem as they wished.

The German poet Ferdinand Kriwet, intimates in his essay, 'The Disintegration of Literary Unity or Notes on Visual Literature', which was the title for a lecture he gave on 11th February 1965 at the ICA, that the subjectivity evoked in the reader by the

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[239] Ibid.

[240] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Concrete poetry & Ian Hamilton Finlay', *Typographica*, No. 8 (December, 1963), pp. 47-62 (p. 49).

[241] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 5-6.

non-linear visual poem was one that was also experienced as mediated by the text. The purpose of the visual text was, as he says, 'to make the reader conscious of a new, undiminished and active freedom, allow him to move freely within and about the text, enter them where he wishes in order to re-encounter in them an aspect of his own personality'.[242] I would suggest that this dialectical experience of reading the Concrete poem was a development of an original tenet by Gomringer.

The active role of the reader in the Concrete poem had been first suggested by Gomringer in his 1954 manifesto, 'From Line to Constellation', when he writes: 'The constellation is ordered by the poet. He determines the play-area, the field of force and suggests its possibilities, the reader, the new reader, grasps the idea of play, and joins in. In the constellation something is brought into the world. It is a reality in itself and not a poem about something or other.'[243] As this quote implies, Gomringer conceived a type of poetry which involved breaking with the realist conventions of the author and reader. Instead of meaning being passed from the world of an author to a reader, in the Concrete poem the reader was partly responsible for engaging with the text in order to create the autonomous reality of the poem. The poem as a reality in itself was not due solely to the material properties of the text but required the reader in a dialectic engagement with the text.

I have explained how the reader as a participator in the Concrete poem was accounted for by the movement and I now want to describe how the nature of the reader's participation was conceived as a type of use by the Concrete poetry movement. In the nineteen sixties the Noigandres group developed this readerly participation as use in one of Concrete poetry's experimental genres known as the

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[242] Ferdinand Kriwet, *Decomposition of the Literary Unit* (San Francisco: The Nova Broadcast Press, 1971), p. 2.
[243] Eugen Gomringer, 'From Line to Constellation' (1954), trans. by Michael Weaver, *Concrete poetry: A World View*, ed. by Mary Ellen Solt (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 67.

semiotic poem, an example of which was given in the last chapter. The theory behind the semiotic poem was first publicised in the December 1964 issue of the Brazilian magazine, *Invencao*, by Luis Angelo Pinto and Pignatari in an English translation of the essay, 'New Language, New Poetry', in which they suggest that the semiotic poem goes a stage further than the constellation poem in its challenge to the linearity of language. As far as the constellation poem was concerned they write that 'this language in the plane still uses signs issued from a spoken language, whose form is fit to a linear writing process'[244] and thereby does not go far enough in revealing the inherent limitation within verbal language, with its fixed set of signs and syntactical relationships, or thereby realising the artificially created language that Concrete poetry tried to achieve.

Pinto and Pignatari applied the semiotic theory of the U.S. philosophers Charles Sanders Peirce and Charles Morris to the constellation poem to create the semiotic poem. Semiotics, or the science of signs had been an implicit context behind the constellation poem. Gomringer advocates in his 1960 essay, 'The Poem as Functional Object', that Concrete poetry should be constructed out of the contemporary landscape of signs to create texts that would be, as he says, 'as easily understood as signs in airports and traffic signs'.[245] An intention behind the semiotic poem was to extend the Concrete poem's premise of clarity and speed of communication in an environmental urban context and with the poet acting as a designer of symbolic systems. In comparison, though, to the constellation poem the semiotic poem meant a broader conception of what language may include, for by drawing on semiotic theory any group of graphic marks given meaning could be used so that all the idioms of a

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[244] Luis Angelo Pinto and Décio Pignatari, 'New Language, New Poetry', *Invencao*, No. 4 (December, 1964), pp. 81-84 (p. 83).

verbal language as well non-linguistic signs such as traffic signalling systems, diagrams, schemas, and the codes of mathematics and logic could be used for a poem. To this extent, the semiotic poem reflected the influence of the 'hypergraphic' poetry of the Lettriste group when in 1952 they started using all sign systems whether they were real, such as the Latin alphabet, or imaginary, as well as an abstract language of lines and shapes from modern painting. The semiotic poem in practice was associated with the Brazilian poems where various geometric shapes were given a specific meaning in a lexical key so their spatial relationship to one another in the poem resulted in a play of meanings.

In an essay called the 'The Wider Concrete', originally published in the October 1965 issue of *Link*, Houédard specifically describes the semiotic development of the Concrete poem in terms of use. He writes:

> it is the artists-poets-musicians-&c produce the signs – if the audience/ viewer
>
> is to USE these signs & turn them into language & help human race live
>
> together it can do so either by learning the rules imposed by the artist (eg
>
> learning the lexical key supplied by the semiotic poets) or by helping EVEN
>
> TO FRAME THE RULES – jasper johns saw this ('the meaning of the painting
>
> is what YOU do w/ it') (sic).[246]

Kinetic art which emphasised the involvement of the spectator had influenced Concrete poetry's involvement with the reader as one of physical use. The critic Ceril Barret in his essay, 'Lygia Clark and Spectator Participation', writes of Kinetic art that it 'breaks down the barrier between the object and the subject or spectator, and

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[245] Eugen Gomringer, 'The Poem as Functional Object' (1960), trans. by Irene Montjoye Sinor, *Concrete poetry: A World View*, ed. by Mary Ellen Solt (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 69-70 (p. 69).
[246] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'The Wider Concrete' (extracts), *Ceolfrith 15* (Durham: Ceolfrith Arts Centre, 1972), pp. 52-53 (p. 52).

enables him to enter into a closer, more intimate relationship with the object.'[247] He goes on to make a distinction between those kinetic art-works which physically move where participation was negligible in comparison to work evolving from Moholy-Nagy to Clark which was to be literally moved by the spectator. The poem to be physically used influenced the work of British Concrete poets and is apparent in the kinetic poem. Houédard, for instance, had designed for his exhibition organised by the Victoria and Albert Museum at the Laing Gallery in Newcastle from 5th November to 4th December 1971 a wooden tower block and a wall with illuminated recesses where poems would be made to mechanically swivel.

In the semiotic poem, though, the reader as user meant conceptual activity by being presented with graphic codes. In what was known as the process poem which followed the semiotic poem, the reader as user meant being faced with a predominantly visual text for which, as Houédard describes above, the reader was to provide their own meaning to the graphic material in the way they used it. In the first essay to appear in the U.S. about the Concrete poetry movement in 1965 called '3 Short Notes in Re Kinkon R Op/ Popcrete' published in *Insect Trust Gazette*, Houédard suggests that the reader's participation with the Concrete poem is one which displaces the author through a notion of textual use. In describing the Concrete poem in the context of how the language philosophy of Wittgenstein had discredited the traditional expressive theory of language and self as supported by empirical philosophy it follows that the author no longer determines meaning. He writes:

> mental life no longer takes place in empiricists private (nonpublic) world of
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> head – in that view we got information abt surrounding bodies thru our sense
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> but had no access to any mindlife going on in those bodies – it made sense to

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[247] Cyril Barrett, 'Lygia Clark and Spectator Participation', *Studio International* (June, 1967), pp. 84-87 (p. 85).

doubt if there was any mindlife going on inside them – language was like clicks – we listened to the noise & guessed at what went inside – speech was how I conveyed ideas from my mind to yours – ideas (thought units) were generated in the privacy of my mind – a word had meaning if it stood for an idea in my mind – & tho I hoped it stood for the same idea in yours no one cld tell if it did or didn't – since wittgenstein a word no longer 'has meaning if it stands for an idea' but 'to have an idea is to know the meaning of a word' – & knowing the meaning of a word is being able to use it properly in communication (sic).[248]

For empirical philosophy verbal language could have meaning only if it corresponded with a thing in the world outside of language that had been experienced. For Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) and later works, as the quotes by Wittgenstein in the above extract suggest, language was autonomous in that the meaning of a word was not determined by a reality outside of language, and instead Wittgenstein proposes the concept of a language-game, or activity determined by rules, so that it was in the context of the rules governing different language usages through which a word came to have meaning.

The reader's participation in the Concrete poem meant that the text would be used according to the individual's context and so would potentially exist as a number of different language games. The Concrete poem as a materially independent realm of language meant a new type of author and reader in which the role of the poet was to serve the reader by creating a language game for the reader to use in that their own involvement was a legitimate realization of the poem as independent of an author. Houédard's essay proposes to explain Concrete poetry in terms of linguistic philosophy, aesthetics, and techniques. For Houédard, Wittgenstein provided a

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[248] Dom Sylvester Houédard, '3 Short Notes in Re Kinkon R Op/ Popcrete', *Insect Trust Gazette*, No. 2 (1965), pp. 24-28 (p. 24).

theoretical account which explained the Concretist project of breaking down the divide between art and reality as anti-realist in its poetry and the concept of language use is extended by Houédard in this respect to the reader whose use displaces both author and the self-sufficient text itself in that the poem would now be conditioned by its pragmatic context.

Chapter Four: Concrete Poetry as Politically Radical

4.0 Concrete Poetry's Politics of Abstraction

In the previous chapter I discussed how Concrete poetry existed as an abstract poetry in an avant-garde challenge to a realist concept of an author. In this chapter I suggest that Concrete poetry as an abstract poetry understood itself to be on the side of libertarian politics, that is the radical politics of socialism and anarchism, in a post-modern understanding of the relation between abstraction and the political. Guattari writes in his 1976 essay 'Meaning and Power' that 'meaning never comes from language as such, from profound symbolic structures or the mathematics of the unconscious' and that instead '[m]eaning is determined by very real social power formations'.[249] In the last chapter I have understood Concrete poetry to be without an author in the sense that it foregrounded the material properties of language and disrupted the referential function of language through which meaning appears to pre-exist the text. There is, though, for the Concrete poetry movement in the nineteen sixties a political reality outside of the text which is inherent within the form of language. Language is understood by the Concrete poetry movement to be an institution that may appear to be politically neutral but is actually involved in a power struggle so that it is by subverting the conventional forms of language communication, rather than expressing a subversive content, through which dominant power can be undermined. Dominant society is being understood to exert its power through forms of language which fix meaning and help to naturalise hierarchical relationships rather than through the content of language. The first two sections of the chapter discuss the libertarian political context behind the Concrete poetry movement

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[249] Felix Guattari, 'Meaning and Power' (1976), trans. by Rosemary Sheed, *The Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), pp. 163-172 (p. 169).

in Britain whilst also situating this within left-wing political theory and its account of the relationship between abstraction and politics.

I want to begin by discussing how an abstract aesthetic was understood to be on the side of a libertarian politics by the Concrete poetry movement in Britain. Concrete and Beat poetry were seen by Houédard to be on the side of libertarianism in its opposition to realism. He writes in his 1966 essay, 'The Flip Side of Language':

> if psychologically war is attack on the social image (society's objected MOI)
> kinkon & vietniks embody an identical concern that makes eg a specifically
> 'religious' art as intolerable now as the myth of 'encounter' w/ reality or as pre-
> *wittgenstein* models of communication – it is not so much iconoclasm as the
> recognition & acceptance of images & facades for what they are – a destruction
> more of false identities of the god-novelists' hero of the poetego of the cant &
> insincerity & of any human rut & grove entrenchment – ie of things seen & felt
> as hitlerian & paranoiac in the trad garbage we inherit (sic).[250]

Houédard is saying here that it is through representation whether in art or religion that the interests of a dominant power are served because it reinforces the ideology of the autonomous self, and so it was by being anti-representational, then, that the arts could be politically engaged. In Houédard's essay, 'Parameters & Paramitas', published in *Pages* magazine he discusses concreticism in relation to the theatrical and suggests in reference to Cage that the political dimension of an avant-garde should be communicated outside of the discursive and through form. He writes:

> cage says 'art simply facilitates *persuading* one that this is the case' (my
> emphasis) – put that way it makes art like it's a political speech – like its some
> form of religion indoctrination [. . .] that artists are trying to 'persuade' me –

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[250] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'The Flip Side of Language', *Isis* (February, 1966), pp. 13-14 (p. 13).

that I as a poet am trying to 'persuade' others is something I take unkindly to –
there is a famous distinction between catachesis & kerygma – the first is an
ingroup reinforcement – a partyline imposition – the second is announcement
fanfare & proclamation exuberantly made to anyone in earshot – it is lyric &
appeals to the fruitful dharma depths in others from which wild independent
things are hoped for – to spring up & resound (sic).[251]

This advocation for a libertarian politics that is evoked through potentially abstract
and unpredictable means is a concept conveyed by Guattari, a politically active
psychoanalyst in France. Left-wing political theory according to Guattari needed to be
pragmatic in a new way and in a 1980 interview he argues that 'theoretical
expressions' 'should function as tools, as machines, with reference neither to an
ideology nor to the communication of a particular form of subjectivity.'[252] Traditional
Marxism believed that the proletarian class needed to be educated by reading
particular key texts in order to achieve class consciousness and be motivated into
action. Ideological communication works at a slower speed in effecting the world in
comparison to what Guattari calls machinic communication which is concerned with
raising the political consciousness of the reader through indirect and abstract means.
'Think about May 1968', he writes, '[t]here was no ideological transmission, but
rather the repercussion of events. There was a "It doesn't work that way," which was
transmitted at machine speed, and not at the speed of ideological intelligibility.'[253]

Guattari's account of raising political consciousness outside of dictatorial
representation is reflected in Houédard's response to a 1965 anthology called 'The
Golden Convolvulus' which sees it as expressing libertarian politics through the non-

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[251] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Parameters & Paramitas', *Pages*, No. 1 (Autumn, 1970), p. 24.
[252] Felix Guattari, 'I am an Idea-Thief' (1980), trans. by Chet Wiener, *Chaosophy*, ed. by Sylvere Lotringer (New York: Semiotext[e], 1995), pp. 37-50 (p. 38).
[253] Ibid.

discursive means of montage. This anthology was a collection of newspaper-cuttings, graffiti, street songs, and poetry intended as a literary reportage on sexuality and published by Cuneliffe's 'Screech Publications' which faced prosecution when the anthology was seized by the police. The anthology was the subject of a three day trial and judged indecent but not obscene. The anothology contained an introduction by the illustrator Arthur Moyse which Houédard saw as an important contribution to the intellectual and artistic world for its moral insight. Houédard and McCarthy amongst other poets defended the anthology in *Poetmeat* magazine because it did not moralise from one political perspective but presented a range of conflicting ones including those of the authorities. A 'true' political position is not given by the anthology and instead as Houédard writes in his letter to *Poetmeat*, the anthology's 'social validity is its intended prompting of its readers into a re-examination of their own attitudes and prejudices in comparison with those (good and bad) expressed in the anthology.'[254] Through a juxtaposition of texts the reader was encouraged to react politically by way of the immediacy of presentation.

I have described how Houédard understood the Concrete poem to be on the side of libertarian politics in that it was free of representation as a tool for dictating a view of the world and had the potential to evoke a spontaneous impulse, and both of these reasons will be encountered in a different way in my description to follow of the libertarian politics of what was called action poetry.

One of the means of opposing the power believed to be inherent within representational language for the Concrete poetry movement was by questioning the use of verbal language itself. Opposing the power inherent in verbal language motivates Chopin's poetics in particular for whom it was necessary to make a poetry

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[254] Dom Sylvester Houédard, Untitled statement, *Poetmeat*, No. 11 (1965), unpaginated, p. 1 of 2.

outside of language and meaning. In Chopin's 1967 essay, 'Why I Am the Author of Sound Poetry and Free Poetry', he describes his poetry as an attack on what he refers to as the 'Word' of meaning which grounded oppressive political power. He writes:

> The Word has created profit, it has justified work, it has made obligatory the confusion of occupation (to be doing something), it has permitted life to lie. The Word has become incarnate in the Vatican, on the rostrums of Peking, at the Elysee, and even if, often, it creates the inaccurate SIGNIFICATION, which signifies differently for each of us unless one accepts and obeys, if, often, it imposes multiple points of view which never adhere to the life of a single person and which one accepts by default, in what way can it be useful to us? I answer: in no way.'[255]

By the notion of the 'Word' Chopin is referring to Western symbolic systems of meaning that claim to be neutrally representing the world but which are in fact naturalising the conditions for social alienation. Post-Structuralist theory critiques what it calls the logocentrism inherent in symbolic systems that creates the illusion that meaning has presence by being grounded in a reality outside of the text and argues instead that meaning never achieves closure. This argument is implicitly critiqued by Chopin's anarchist politics which suggests instead that it is meaning itself which needs to be challenged regardless of whether it is thought of as fixed and bound or not. The Marxist arts movement called Situationist International (1957-1972) in France declared in 1963 that 'poetry must be understood as direct communication within reality and as real alteration of this reality', and as 'the revolutionary moment of language, inseparable as such from the revolutionary moments of history and from

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[255] Henri Chopin, 'Why I Am the Author of Sound Poetry and Free Poetry' (1967), trans. by Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete poetry: A World View*, ed. by Mary Ellen Solt (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 80-83 (p. 80).

the history of personal life'.[256] What they describe as the necessity for language to be 'breaking its rigid significations and simultaneously embracing words and music, cries and gestures, painting and mathematics, facts and acts',[257] is reflected in Chopin's own electronic sound poetry of vocal particles, except that for Chopin such poetry was free from the authoritarian language of a systematic politics such as traditional Marxism. Chopin's sound poetry was about creating an existential dimension for an audience in which the body was to be affected by feelings and sensations evoked by signs as material entities rather than representational ones which channelled somatic energy. As he says, the achievement of action poetry is in the context of the social alienation it is reacting against: 'That is why a suggestive art which leaves the body, that resonator and that receptacle, animated, breathed and acted, that + and –, that is why a suggestive art was made; it had to come, and nourish, and in no way affirm. You will like this art, or you will not like it, that is of no importance! In spite of yourself it will embrace you, it will circulate in you. That is its role. It must open our effectors to our own biological, physical and mental potentialities beyond all intellect'.[258]

Chopin called his abstract poetry which communicated outside of verbal language, action-poetry, and this took the form of typewriter and electronic sound poetry. This was a term Chopin used in his 1969 essay 'Concrete poetry?' published in *Stereo Headphones* which describes action-poetry as either a visual or a sound poetry. He writes: 'there are only two roads open for poetry, the latter (objective poetry), and the stage, with the word sustained by its phonic extensions and associations; two roads,

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[256] Situationist International, 'All the King's Men' (1963), *Situationist International Anthology*, trans. by Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981; 3rd repr. 1995), <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/8.Kingsmen.htm> [accessed 28th May 2006] (para. 4 and 5 of 13).
[257] Ibid., para. 5

one plastic, leading to the discovery of new worlds and skies in full movement, the other phonic and at the amplitude of human expression. Poetry no longer speaks, it acts.'[259] The term action-poetry was discussed in the last section of the previous chapter to refer to a new type of reading activity, but it was mostly associated with the live performance of electronic sound poetry. The concept of action poetry came about in 1960 when Chopin launched his poetry group, 'Poesie Ouverte', which included Heidsieck, Gysin, and Dufrêne and was presented in Paris, Belgium, Czechoslovakia and Sweden. Another French action-poetry group formed in 1962 called 'Le Domaine Poetique', which came out of the Paris instrumental group 'Le Domaine Musicale', and was led by John Clarence Lambert and included Gherasim Luca, Robert Filliou, Dufrêne, Heidsieck, and Gysin. This group was introduced into England at an event called 'Machine Poets' at the ICA on the 28th March 1963 which was organised by Gysin. The event also comprised of an English group that included Christopher Perret, John Esam, Daevid Allen, and Gysin who gave a performance of his Concrete poems alongside projections of his paintings. Gysin also showed the film 'Towers Open Fire' written by Burroughs and produced by Balch. Another evening of action-poetry was held at the ICA on the 12th May 1964 that had been organised by Houédard and Chopin, although by this time 'Le Domaine Poetique' had dissolved. This event had been made to coincide with the first issue of *OU* in the Spring which contained a ten inch record of poems by Gysin, Chopin, and Heidsieck in an envelope designed by the artist Bertini and with illustrations by Jean Bertheir, Jean Depuy, James Guitet, and Gysin. This event also presented the films 'L'Ecluse' by Kramer and Ramsbott, 'Ghosts at No. 9' by Balch and Gysin, and 'Peche de Nuit' by Chopin which was first

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[258] Henri Chopin, 'Why I Am the Author of Sound Poetry and Free Poetry' (1967), trans. by Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete poetry: A World View*, ed. by Mary Ellen Solt (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 80-83 (p. 80).
[259] Ibid.

shown in England in 1963 at Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire when Chopin visited Houédard.

I would suggest that it was in the context of left-wing politics that action poetry as the theatrical performance of a visual-verbal poetry had most significance. In the turmoil of the events in May and June 1968 in France where students and workers were rebelling against the bourgeois establishment it seemed as if a socialist revolution might be possible, and the Concrete poetry movement was seen by Chopin and Heidsieck to align itself with this potential. This political outburst meant that action poetry separated from any context associated with 'high art' and tried to become more of a democratic art. In a letter to Cobbing in June 1968, Heidsieck writes that '[a]t last, Poesie-Action has gone down into the street'.[260] For Chopin, though, it was the actual events themselves which achieved an authentic action poetry that was outside of art and indistinguishable from reality and its politics. He writes: 'I saw this **poetry of action** created, above all in 1968, in Prague and France.'[261] Concrete art's tenet of dissolving the boundaries between art and reality becomes realised by Chopin in a negation of dominant political reality.

Chopin became part of the Concrete poetry movement in Britain when he left France for England on 25th June 1968 and became a British citizen that year. For Chopin, as he says in a 1972 autobiographical essay, the 22nd June 1968 'saw the triumphant return of Gaullism after the events of May and June.'[262] Whilst the events of May and June 1968 'represented', as he says, 'a freeing from the tutelage, both from de Gaulle and from the French Communist Party', 'those two forces worked

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[260] Bernard Heidsieck, Letter to Bob Cobbing, (Unpublished, 16th June 1968), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1. Bob Cobbing Papers. British Library: Correspondence 2; Box 3; Envelope 4-5 1960s.

[261] Henri Chopin, 'Concrete poetry?' (18th June, 1969), *Stereo Headphones*, Nos 2&3 (Spring, 1970), unpaginated, p. 1 of 2.

[262] Henri Chopin, 'An Autobiographical Essay', trans. by Jean Chopin, *Ceolfrith 18* (Durham: Ceolfrith Arts Centre, 1972), unpaginated, p. 2 of 2.

together in agreement to regain power'[263] and it was this which caused him and his wife to leave France. If the revolutionary political climate of France had helped define action-poetry, then it was in Britain which Chopin felt to offer a liberalism in contrast to the conservatism in France after the events of 1968 which helped to develop action-poetry.

Chopin organised an event called 'The First Three Days' which took place in 1969 on the 10th, 11th, and 12th April in the grounds and little theatre of his home in Ingatestone, Essex which was to celebrate the continuation of an authentic avant-garde in Britain under the leadership of a poetry of action. The programme for the event reads:

> These first three days are to launch an Art Centre for today, presenting today's art and not yesterdays, in a free country, destined to become the capital of the arts, without a background of police and with no speeches dating from the eighteenth century or even earlier/ the art of TODAY is visual, sound, tactile, kinetic, burning, moving – it is addressed to all prehension whether of earth or space – it is beyond all nationalities, beyond any particular narrow formulation/ Therefore in the programme of the first three days: a) films show today's art, far removed from the commercial cinema and the films that tell a vague story; b) happenings recreate theatre to bring it to life [. . .] c) sound poetry transforms the pitches of the voice, which is cramped by the power of words alone [. . .] d) music that is still called electronics, but which has gone further since we have succeeded in making electronics a means and not an aim for man; e) present-day publications, which can be handled, are sound, visual and tactile; f) the posters of man, of the "I" who insists in being in the world and says so to the

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[263] Ibid.

whole earth/ EVERYTHING HERE PROCLAIMS THE INTENSE LIFE of

our first century which no longer belongs to the hazy twentieth century!!!/ WE

ARE THE BIRTH OF A NEW ERA AND NOT A CONTAMINATION AS

LIBITUM OF THE RENAISSANCE OR OF HUMANISM [. . .] Paris

witnessed and experienced Cubism, Abstraction, Futurism, Dadaism, Nunism,

Surrealism, Electronic Poetry, but . . . during that period, the 3rd and 4th

Republics witnessed and experienced only the classic authors [. . .] So PARIS

was the Capital of the arts in spite of its rulers and now that the latter govern

thought, too, with an old 18th century style of the 5th Republic type, PARIS no

longer exists. This is why I proclaim: long live Great Britain, the Capital of the

Arts and thought is within your reach. Get hold of it and keep it (sic).[264]

The rhetoric of this programme conveys Chopin's intention for action-poetry to be a

dominant force in radical arts by becoming an amalgamation of art forms related to

Concrete poetry and the means of consolidating an anarchist avant-garde which was

under threat by a growing cultural conservatism. Around 600 people attended this

event in what was a significant international contemporary arts occasion to take place

in England at the time. Those who attended included Cobbing, Houédard, Furnival,

Phillips, the writer B. S. Johnson, the Belgian concrete poet Paul de Vree, the French

electronic composer Jacques Bekert, the Beat authors William Burroughs, Brion

Gysin, and Claude Pelieu, the Italian artist Luc Ferrari, Hausmann, Dutch authors

from Hilversum-Radio, the Chelmsford Arts Laboratory, and the musician Hugh

Davies.

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[264] Henri Chopin, Programme for 'The First Three Days' (April, 1969), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1. Bob
Cobbing Papers. British Library: Box 1; Envelope 4-5, 'Fliers, Posters, Events and Programs'.

Another event to follow this one had been planned by Chopin called 'For the Fourth Day' which was to take place a year later on 13th June, 1970. The programme for this event reads:

> this is the first century/ so we shall present – far from prisons, police, and especially from that political RUBBISH called heads of state – a race that has fortunately disappeared – new languages, sensorial and electronic/ revolutionary documents from Cuba France Britain Czechoslovakia USA Italy/ Plans for the creation of a living museum (sic).[265]

The optimism expressed here belies the reality experienced by Chopin for whom the election of the Conservative Party in Britain on 18th June 1970 was seen by him to herald 'a new kind of capitalism'.[266] The rhetoric behind Chopin's programmes make out that such events mark a new historical time and act as if trying to oppose the negative impact of the international economic crisis that began to take place at the beginning of the nineteen seventies. I would suggest that the purpose of 'The First Three Days' event was the same as that of Chopin's book of typewriter poetry called *Chronique 1974* which attacks Western imperialism and capitalism. This book is described by Chopin as coming 'ten years before the fateful 1984' so as to make 'the first move, so as to avoid, if possible, its coming.'[267]

By way of Chopin's poetics, I have begun to describe the left-wing political context behind Concrete poetry's abstraction, and I will now develop this further by situating Concrete poetry's abstraction within the left-wing political theory of Neo-Marxism. Mottram in a letter to Cobbing criticises Burroughs and Chopin for their opposition to the tradition of the Academie Francaise and their support of electronic

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[265] Henri Chopin, Programme for 'For the Fourth Day' (April, 1969), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1. Ibid.
[266] Henri Chopin, 'An Autobiographical Essay', trans. by Jean Chopin, *Ceolfrith 18* (Durham: Ceolfrith Arts Centre, 1972), unpaginated, p. 2 of 2.
[267] Henri Chopin, *Chronique 1974*, trans. by Jean Chopin (Chelmsford: Collection OU, 1975), p. 56.

sound poetry. With reference to Chopin's record, *Audiopoems*, the sleeve of which quotes Burrough's commenting on the arbitrariness of language, Mottram criticises electronic sound poetry. He writes:

> Words are part of the historical dialectic of body and societies, body and the world – part of a language which is the first to be eroded by forms of Control into slogans and other aspects of coercion into minimal life. Burroughs mentions the Academie francaise, and of course the language cannot be processed in that kind of formaldehyde like a living corpse. But in fact languages are themselves dialectics between constant and changing. The Academie is impotence. The extreme of Chopin and Burroughs, and on the other hand the Academie francaise, begin to look like forms of parallel destruction.[268]

Mottram is arguing from the perspective of a Marxist defence of Modernist 'high art' and accusing Chopin and Burroughs of not sufficiently mediating the objective material of language through an aesthetic dimension. The technological reduction of the voice into micro-particles of sound beyond the verbal word as a means of undermining the Word, or of meaning itself, does implicitly make a simplified association between Word and verbal words. Although I would suggest that this simplification was avoided somewhat by Burroughs for whom the permutation poem and the cut-up text were meant to upset the linear form of language through which political power was seen to control consciousness.

Having been influenced during the nineteen sixties by the concept of 'General Semantics' by the philosopher Alfred Korzybski which criticised the Western philosophical concept of identity, Burroughs believed that the form of language

controlled conscious experience. Informed by this philosophy, Burroughs in his 1968

essay, 'The Invisible Generation,' which was later published in Britain by Chopin as

The Electronic Revolution in 1971, describes three errors inherent within Western

language which he calls the 'IS of identity', the 'definite article THE', and the

'concept of Either/ Or'.[269] All three of these characteristics of language are associated

with a critique of language as a representative medium that helps to normalise a

power-based interpretation of the world. Realist language alienates the self from the

world with its reified interpretative model determining what can be experienced and

Burroughs speculates that a non-verbal ideographic language potentially offers, as he

says, 'a total language closer to the multi-level structure of experience'.[270]

The cut-up and the permutation poem were reactions against the power supposed

to underlie metaphysical systems. Gysin says in a 1972 interview: 'Rub out the word

was essentially to do with the fact that all the religions of the "peoples of the book"

that is the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims, all then three religions are based on

the idea that in the beginning was the word. Everything seems to be wrong with what

was produced from these beginnings and so lets rub out the word and start afresh and

see what really is going on. The methods were first of all a disruption of the time

sequence produced by cut-ups and one had the idea of rubbing out the word itself, not

simply disrupting its sequential order and finding some other way.'[271] Although it was

the permutation poem's repetition of a phrase in different word orders which gestured

at an escape from the presence of meaning, in 1959 Gysin had begun to use visual

signs on the keyboard to replace words, so that where the cut-up had rearranged the

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[268] Eric Mottram, Letter to Bob Cobbing (Unpublished, 30th June, 1978), unpaginated, p. 2 of 2. Eric Mottram Papers, Special Collections Library, King's College, The University of London. Ref. 5/45/1-12

[269] William Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution* (1968), (Cambridge: Blackmoor Head Press, 1971), p. 37.

[270] Ibid.

linear temporal sense of progression of the sentence, the permutation poem as suggested here was a stage further that tries to communicate outside of verbal language to upset habitual experience.

The authors of such action poetry were anarchist in their politics in comparison to Mottram which meant they rejected any totalizing theories such as Marxism. In *Minutes to Go* Gysin rejects both Marx and Freud, referring to them respectively as the 'Communist Panic' and the 'Freudian Conspiracy'.[272] I now want to discuss, though, neo-Marxist theory in relation to abstraction in literature as a means of accounting for Concrete poetry as a poetry on the side of left-wing politics because it is such theory which has developed political analysis of aesthetic abstraction. In the post-war period revolutionary theories revisited the works of Marx and Freud and I now want to consider the theoretical debate over the Neo-Marxist politics of breaking with the convention of representation. Libertarian thinkers were divided over the relationship between anti-representation in the arts and radical politics and this divide will be shown in a description of the theories of the Frankfurt School and of Jean-Francois Lyotard. These theories are on the side of a social, cultural, and economic revolution and can be labelled as Neo-Marxist which is a label which can be given to a group of left-wing theories which take a more open approach to the transformation of the capitalist status quo in comparison to traditional Marxism. The theorist Herbert Marcuse lists in *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia* some of the traits of Neo-Marxism as 'neo-anarchist tendencies', 'a deep mistrust of old leftist parties and their ideology', and 'not bound to the old working class as the sole revolutionary

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[271] Brion Gysin, Interview, *Rolling Stone* (May, 1972), pp. 49-53 (p. 53).
[272] Brion Gysin, Untitled essay, *Minutes to Go* (1960) (San Francisco: Beach Books, 1966), pp. 42-46 (p. 43).

agent.'[273] Neo-Marxism in the post-war period was a response to the failure of socialism in the Soviet Union under Stalin and what was perceived to be the absorption of working class ideology into capitalist ideology. I would suggest that the Frankfurt School divides the modern arts between a good modernism and a bad avant-garde with respect to radical politics. Usually the Frankfurt School's defence of the 'high art' of modernism as politically progressive is seen within the context of debates in Germany during the nineteen thirties and forties over whether it was modernism or realism which was the most suitable aesthetic for Marxism. These debates obscure the difference that the school tended to imply within the modern arts themselves between 'high' modernist art and avant-garde anti-art and which is partly demonstrated in its approach to Concrete poetry.

The Frankfurt School was a group founded in 1923 and associated with the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt and included Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, Theodore Adorno, and Ernst Bloch. The school's claim that modernist art and literature was politically radical stemmed from its critique of traditional Marxism which began to turn away from the scientific account of a socio-economic determinism in the later writings of Marx and back to his earlier works which had been influenced by Hegel's philosophy of consciousness and were more libertarian in spirit. Because the school paid more attention to the ideology of the superstructure where the arts were located meant that the arts and the concept of the aesthetic took on greater significance for the school in speculating changes about the socio-economic base and in shaping a potentially revolutionary consciousness. The role that the cultural and social superstructure played in capitalist life and how

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[273] Herbert Marcuse, *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia* (London: Allen Lane, 1970), p. 83.

through largely a mass culture it was able to block a revolutionary subjectivity became an important object of analysis behind the theorising of The Frankfurt School.

The Frankfurt School defended modernist 'high art' because it believed that a work of art can only be relevant to the political dimension if it is an autonomous work and autonomy here means meeting standards of aesthetic form. For the Frankfurt School, the work of art has to open up a world which is held to possess more truth in its otherness to the alienated reality of the everyday which it could only do by conforming to the autonomous realm of the aesthetic and its standards. The defence of aesthetic qualities which were believed to have political power through their negation of the real world meant that a failure in aesthetic quality involved a capitulation to the status quo, which is what Mottram accuses Chopin and Burroughs of. As Marcuse says in *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, '[t]he release (*Entschränkung*) and desublimation which occur in anti-art [. . .] abstract from (and falsify) reality because they lack the cognitive and cutting power of the aesthetic form; they are mimesis without transformation.'[274] The avant-garde from the perspective of a Frankfurt School defence of modernism has abandoned autonomous aesthetic form and so as a consequence, as Marcuse says, 'succumbs to that reality which it seeks to grasp and indict.'[275]

The Concrete poetry of the Stuttgart group is specifically targeted by Adorno for failing at being aesthetically autonomous. The Stuttgart group of Concrete poets in Germany formed in the late nineteen fifties around Max Bense, a science and philosophy academic at the Technische Horchschule, and Hansjörg Mayer, a typographic artist. The work of Bense and the Novissim group in Italy had concentrated on stochastic, or chance-generated, texts which involved feeding words

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[274] Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 51.

and phrases of already published works into programmed computers to generate phrases. Bense's essay, 'Generative Aesthetics Projects', which was published in the September 1968 *ICA Bulletin*, describes such texts as part of an analytic process of making which meant applying rules and theorems to a disorganised set of material. The Stuttgart group with their emphasis on cybernetics would seem to have been brought to the attention of Adorno in what he condemns in his 1962 essay, 'Commitment', as 'literature known in a repellent jargon as 'texts'' which 'drift to the brink of indifference, degenerate insensibly into mere hobbies, into idle repetitions of formulas now abandoned in other art-forms, into trivial patterns.'[276]

In Britain, the first exhibition at the ICA after it moved location was called *Cybernetic Serendipity* from the 2nd August to 20th October 1968 and explored artists engaging with science and scientists engaging with the arts. A range of computer-generated graphic design, film, music, verse and texts were exhibited alongside mechanical devices and environments as works of art, remote control robots, and painting machines. This international exhibition was covered in the August and September 1968 issue of the *ICA Bulletin*. The poet Andrew Rawlinson contributed a system for generating poetry by chance where a select group of words could be arranged on a star-shaped structure and Margaret Masterman from the Cambridge Language Research department contributed computer generated haiku. The engagement by the movement with technology in its most reified forms did at least have the potential of demystifying the creative act. Masterman worked with computer programming to create randomly generated haiku and for her the computer meant that 'the process of poetic creation would be accelerated, simplified and made self-

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[275] Ibid., p. 49.
[276] Theodore Adorno, 'Commitment' (1962), trans. by Francis McDonagh, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 4th repr; 1990), pp. 177-195 (p. 191).

conscious.'[277] The lack of aesthetic merit which Adorno accuses Concrete poetry of was the consequence of what he saw as a literature which 'undialectically confuses itself with science and vainly tries to fuse with cybernetics'.[278] The specificity of the literary medium central to modernist 'high art' was threatened in Concrete poetry's relationship with communication theory. Concrete poetry was not politically progressive for Adorno because by being an impure literature through its relationship with communication theory it was aesthetically compromised and so failed to be truly autonomous.

Adorno's criticism of Concrete poetry is directed at what he perceives to be the poetry's ideology of technological determinism. I would suggest that this criticism can be re-stated in the words of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze who criticises the technological determinism of McLuhan's thinking for whom it was inevitable that audio-visual media should become a substitute for books based on the assumption that they contain all the creative potential of the literature which they replace. The only way for Deleuze that audio-visual media could replace literature would be by suppressing the creative potential of literature which would also be to the detriment of creativity in audio-visual media. As Deleuze writes, '[i]t's not a matter of comparing different sorts of medium. The choice isn't between written literature and audiovisual media. It's between creative forces (in audiovisual media as well as literature) and domesticating forces.'[279] Different kinds of aesthetic expression for Deleuze and Adorno are to be judged in their relationship to social and cultural power and not by their technological status.

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[277] Margaret Masterman, 'Computerised Haiku', *Cybernetics: Art and Ideas*, ed. by Jasia Reichardt (London: Studio Vista, 1971), pp. 175-183 (p. 177).
[278] Theodore Adorno, 'Commitment' (1962), trans. by Francis McDonagh, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 4th repr; 1990), pp. 177-195 (p. 191).
[279] Gilles Deleuze, 'Mediators' (1985), *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. by Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) pp. 119-134 (p. 131).

The Concrete poetry movement, however, was also critical of its relationship with cybernetics. In a letter to Houédard the Belgian poet Alain Arias-Misson (b. 1936) describes Concrete poetry's reductionism not as a product of technological society but as a potential means of poetry 'reaching back through too many layers of intellectualization to the sources of poetry, poetry as making, as a force'[280] so as to avoid itself 'falling into a pseudo linguistic discipline'.[281] Structural linguistics reduced the complexity of the world to the terms of a binary code which could be communicated in a mathematical language acceptable to the logic of the computer. The Structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss believed that linguistic problems were potentially answerable, as he writes in *Structural Anthropology*, through 'modern calculating machines',[282] with their capability to 'computate all the combinations of phonemes constituting the word of 'n' syllables existing in the vocabulary'.[283] 'With a machine', he says, 'would be "fed" the equations regulating the type of structures with which phoneme usually deals, the repertory of sound.'[284] I would suggest that this proposal to examine the rules of language with a machine finds its parody in Houédard's prototype poems for kinetic machines which permutate the letters of words according to algorithms.

So far I have discussed the Frankfurt School's defence of modernist 'high art' against more experimental work. I want to now present the early neo-Marxist theory of Lyotard as a context to suggest that Concrete poetry's abstraction as experimental work was on the side of radical politics. Lyotard (1924-1998) was active in trade-unionism in Algeria between 1950 to 1952 and supported the liberation movement.

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[280] Alain Arias-Misson, Letter to Dom Sylvester Houédard, (Unpublished, 8th April, 1969), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1. dsh Archive, Collection of Modern Literary Archives, The John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester.
[281] Ibid.
[282] Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (London: Basic Books, 1963), p. 57.

He was co-editor of *Socialisme Ou Barbarie* between 1956 to 1964 and was involved in the events of May 1968. Lyotard's argument that abstraction in art is radically political is contained in his 1970 essay, 'Notes on the Critical Function of the Work of Art'.

Lyotard's argument alludes to theory within the Frankfurt School and in the course of discussing this essay I will refer to Marcuse's account of the politics behind avant-garde poetry as a means to further elucidate Lyotard's argument. In Lyotard's history of the arts there is a fundamental change in communication at the beginning of modernity. The arts of what Lyotard refers to as archaic society last up until the nineteenth century with its increase in economic production. In archaic society art served a religious function of bringing individuals together as a community by allowing them to communicate through plastic and rhythmical forms. It was religious and primitive societies which could communicate via an artistic dimension. Through forms and rhythms, rather than verbal language, 'a "communication" of sorts', as Lyotard says, 'on the level of the individual unconscious'[285] was available through which people could identify with themselves as a society. Marcuse writes in *One-Dimensional Man*, that a transcendent dimension within the real world was believed to be communicated before modernity by the arts, such as by the Symbolist poets. He refers to the Symbolist conception of poetry as speaking 'of that which is of this world, which is visible, tangible, audible in man and nature – and of that which is not seen, not touched, not heard.'[286]

What for the Frankfurt School is the aesthetic dimension is called figural reality by Lyotard. Figural reality is related by Lyotard to the primary processes of human

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[283] Ibid.

[284] Ibid.

[285] Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Notes on the Critical Function of the Work of Art' (1970), trans. by Susan Hanson, *Driftworks* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1984), pp. 69-83 (p. 71).

psychology, that is, to the unconscious and desire, and the dominant reality of the status quo is related to the conscious and reason. These two different types of reality corresponded to primary and secondary processes of the mind respectively where the latter follows logic and grammatical rules governed by the reality-principle, and the former draws on a condensation and displacement of images. The figural reality is not to be represented as a perceptible object in the real external world or as one which can be conveyed in verbal discourse. The figural is a field of desire, or desublimated instinctual energy, which exists outside the everyday reality of communicative language and practical activity and so cannot be represented. Because it is unconscious the figural is that which is absent from ordinary reality which unlike the figural is a set of perceptions which can be communicated through verbalisation.

The crisis in poetry in the modern period communicates the fact that the traditional function of the arts can no longer communicate the invisible because this realm always exists in commodified reality and so is already reified. Marcuse explains cultural absorption as 'the total mobilisation of all media for the defense of the established reality' which 'has coordinated the means of expression to the point where communication of transcending contents becomes technically impossible.'[287] He goes on to say how in the post-modern world '[t]he soul contains few secrets and longings which cannot be sensibly discussed, analyzed, and polled'; that '[l]ogical and linguistic analysis demonstrate that the old metaphysical problems are illusory problems' that 'the quest for the "meaning" of things can be reformulated as the quest for the meaning of words, and the established universe of discourse and behaviour can provide perfectly adequate criteria for the answer.'[288] Culture appropriates the arts and divests them of their otherness by recontextualising them so that they are made to

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[286] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1986), p. 67.
[287] Ibid.

signify in terms of the dominant codes. Marcuse writes in *One-Dimensional Man* that the post-war arts are not able to effectively negate reality as they did in the past because of the increased power of an integrating society. As he says '[t]he efforts to recapture the Great Refusal in the language of literature suffer the fate of being absorbed by what they refute.'[289]

According to Lyotard, for verbal language to try and communicate the unrepresentable experience of the figural into its own terms is ideological in so far that it denies the otherness of the figural. To deny the figural is to sublimate and deny the desire of instinctual energy by fulfilling it through phantasy. Falsely universal modes of communication within modern society were phantasies which had entrapped desire and repeated themselves. In a capitalist society, individuals are brought together through common communication around the exchange value of the commodity. To create the illusion of a universal and integrative communication is ideological, as is to create the illusion that the figural can be communicated through ordinary verbal language or be presented as ordinary reality.

It is when this figural reality is communicated as a signified that this becomes an ideological representation. As Lyotard argues, it is 'when this figural reality is given as something other than what it is, when it is given reality, one speaks of ideology in so far as the fulfilment of desire is functioning.'[290] The paraphrase of a modern poem is to turn figural reality into a signified so that it can be consumed and exchanged with other meanings. The material aesthetic of Concrete poetry prevented the figural as desire from being fulfilled by not giving a representative identity as phantasy. A line from an unpublished 1956 prose poem by Houédard called, 'of the apophatic

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[288] Ibid., pp. 70-71.

[289] Ibid., p. 70.

[290] Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Notes on the Critical Function of the Work of Art' (1970), trans. by Susan Hanson, *Driftworks* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1984), pp. 69-83 (pp. 70-71).

apophthegmata or the bitty contemplative's alphabetic fragments', reads: 'artistic ability's needed to create each separate negation/ yet there's something that's nothing that's needed for negating those/ acts of creation'.[291] It is the otherness of a materiality which is required to impose itself in the creative act of a self in order to allow the work to escape from the self's phantasy.

The arts were on the side of revolution for Lyotard if they broke with the concept of representation trying to establish the illusion of a transcendent communication. Representation in a capitalist culture was the attempt to establish a dominant mode of signification, or in other words, a pseudo-religious type of communication that purports to convey truth. The purpose of an art on the side of political revolution 'is always', as Lyotard says, 'to unmask all attempts to reconstitute a pseudo-religion; in other words, every time the reconstitution of a kind of writing, a "graphy" – a set of forms that produce a psychic resonance and reproduces itself – is undertaken, the function of anti-art is to unmask it as ideological; in the Marxist sense of the term, to unmask it as an endeavour to make us believe that there are in our societies "primary" modes of communication of this type'.[292] Lyotard is elaborating upon the notion of the modern art-work as politically radical in its break with communication by arguing that this break with communication has to be an ongoing process. To attack representation, or transcendent communication, is to attack capitalism with its reliance on representation and this is a task that continually requires new types of abstraction so as to resist the process of cultural absorption. The figural as that which is not present in the empirical reality, which cannot be logically confirmed by the senses,

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[291] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Of the Apophatic Apophthegmata or the Bitty Contemplative's Alphabetic Fragments' (Unpublished, 1956), unpaginated, p. 1 of 2. Microfiche transcript and poems by Dom Sylvester Houédard 1927 – 1963, Hyman Kreitman Research Centre, Tate Britain. Ref. TAM 28.

[292] Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Notes on the Critical Function of the Work of Art' (1970), trans. by Susan Hanson, Driftworks (New York: Semiotext(e), 1984), pp. 69-83 (p. 72).

was believed to be communicated according to the Romantic tradition and constituted the cognitive substance of art. When the absent reality of the figural, though, is given stable signification then it is turned into something that is logically expressible and real which it is not.

It has already been said that for the Frankfurt School it was Modernist 'high' art which could only authentically communicate this break with communication and be on the side of revolutionary politics. Although both modernist and avant-garde poetry were alien to the experience of established reality, it was the former which met the standards of a repressed aesthetic realm and so was able to more effectively negate capitalist reality.

Marcuse's position though is not always consistent with this position. With the shift from the Frankfurt School in the nineteen thirties and forties as the dominant centre of politically revolutionary thought to the New Left in the nineteen fifties and sixties came a greater sympathy towards experimental art from left-wing thought. Marcuse's lecture, 'Art in One-Dimensional Society,' given to the New York School of Visual Arts in March 1967 states that the *'real, reality*, is becoming the prospective domain of art, and art is becoming technique in a literal, "practical" sense: making and remaking things rather than painting pictures; experimenting with the potential of words and sounds rather than writing poems or composing music.'[293] Concrete poetry is described here as a type of poetry which anticipates the potential for aesthetic form to play a role in a new society by becoming part of the real and transcending the alienated realm of art.

I would suggest that Marcuse's explanation of modern literature as on the side of radical politics through its rejection of the rational totalising language of capitalism

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[293] Herbert Marcuse, 'Art in the One-Dimensional Society' (1967), *Radical Perspectives in the Arts*, ed. by Lee Baxandall (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 53-67 (p. 65).

specifically locates Concrete poetry within such a context. The communication by the arts of that which is invisible was according to Marcuse dependent on a transcendent communication: 'For the expression of this other order, which is transcendence within the one world, the poetic language depends on the transcendent elements in ordinary language.'[294] Avant-garde literature, though, renounces the collective structure of discourse which in the history of Western culture had otherwise connected both literary and ordinary expression. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse uses Barthes's analysis of poetry in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) in the context of his own Neo-Marxist political explanation of literature. For Barthes, according to Marcuse, the unit of meaning behind the propositional basis of language which had traditionally provided the medium for both literary and non-literary uses of languages was the sentence. It follows on from this that avant-garde poetry, by repudiating the 'unifying, sensible rule of the sentence', as Marcuse says, 'explodes the pre-established structure of meaning and, becoming an "absolute object" itself, designates an intolerable, self-defeating universe – a discontinuum.'[295] Avant-garde poetry creates alienation between the reader and a commonplace experience of the world for a 'subversion of the linguistic structure implies a subversion of the experience of nature',[296] as Marcuse says, which is to say that language is no longer treated as a transparent medium through which the visible and invisible worlds can be communicated. Avant-garde poetry is an autonomous, but alienated, realm of aesthetic form which acknowledges that the unknown, a world beyond empirical reality, cannot be expressed is not possible in the modern age. In order to express the inability for a transcendent dimension to be communicated avant-garde poetry attacks the sentence as the means through which literature had once been able to communicate a

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[294] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1986), p. 68.
[295] Ibid., p. 69.

transcendent dimension and shows that communicating a transcendent world is no longer possible. As Marcuse states, the 'truly avant-garde works of literature communicate the break with communication'.[297] For a literary work to be anti-representational means for it to not communicate something outside of conceptual understanding. Transcendent communication is the totalising language of capitalist absorption and which Concrete poetry refuses through its non-linearity and fragmentation of the sentence. I would suggest that Chopin describes action poetry in his manifesto as quoted from above as the language of the figural which refuses the transcendent Word of capitalism.

For Lyotard, communicating the break with communication also constituted what was politically revolutionary in the arts, but it was not confined to Modernist 'high' art and nor was it compromised in the post-war period through cultural absorption. Instead, this break with communication had to be an ongoing process. For Lyotard, capitalism tries to create the illusion that the unconscious and the art-like means of communication common to primitive societies still exists for its own purposes of reproducing capital. Part of the means of trying to create the ideology of a primary mode of communication is by presenting all objects of experience within the dominant frames of reference of a signifying reality. Although a primary mode of communication no longer exists in the modern age ordinary verbal language acts on behalf of capitalism with its principle of exchange value to create the illusion that a transcendent communication exists. Ordinary verbal language converts everything which is other into its frame of reference, that of commodified reality, and thereby denies the otherness of what Lyotard calls figural reality. Marcuse describes the arts in the pre-modern period as '[n]aming the "things that are absent"', which 'is

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[296] Ibid., p. 68.
[297] Ibid.

breaking the spell of the things that are', and, 'moreover, it is the ingression of a different order of things into the established one'.[298] For Marcuse it is to be regretted that the transcendent dimension of otherness can no longer be communicated, whereas for Lyotard, however, naming the things that are absent is always ideological.

Marcuse's view that art has suffered through cultural reification means that he is pessimistic with regards experimental art whereas Lyotard is not. What for Lyotard is an act of desublimation in art where abstraction releases the libidinal forces of aesthetic form trapped by representation is for Marcuse always already an act of sublimation in art because a break with tradition is inevitably absorbed. As he says: 'Artistic alienation is sublimation. It creates the images of conditions which are irreconcilable with the established Reality Principle but which, as cultural images, become tolerable, even edifying and useful.'[299] Where Lyotard saw the experimental arts in the post-war period as an authentic avant-garde, Marcuse and the Frankfurt School turned towards modernist 'high' art and a belief in universal aesthetic value as offering a more authentic source of potential negation in response to the powerful nature of cultural absorption. Art always had to be new rather than meet some aesthetic value for Lyotard, though, in order to continually resist being absorbed into an arts tradition. Marcuse would see Concrete poetry's fragmentation of language as misunderstanding a true grasp of the nature of social reality which was for him as he says in *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* 'experiencing, not the destruction of every whole, every unit or unity, every meaning, but rather the rule and power of the whole, the superimposed, administered unification.'[300] It was not fragmentation of society which characterised the post-war

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[298] Ibid.
[299] Ibid., p. 72.
[300] Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 50.

world of capitalism but a totalizing control over its sectors and so from Marcuse's

perspective it was only the aesthetic form of modernism which was capable of

resisting this integration of power by way of its autonomous difference to the world.

I would suggest that Houédard was a poet who recognized that the communication

of a transcendent tradition was compromised in the post-war period. In a 1967 letter

to Medalla he explains his objection to the use of the Noh in an intended performance

piece by 'The Exploding Galaxy' dance troup called 'The Cosmic Typewriter'.

Houédard writes: 'there is this problem – the BEAUTY of the noh is subtle

allusiveness that depends on a common culture – this we dont have'.[301] Finlay, on the

other hand, would consider himself to be a poet of taste whereby communication of

universal truths is still a possibility. As he says to Houédard in a 1964 letter: 'I can

only write or talk to people in a CONTEXT of culture (meaning, human

communication and goodwill)'.[302] This context of culture for Finlay is an ontological

reality for which the Concrete poem is a method through which language can realise

this reality. He goes on to say in his letter to Houédard: 'I feel a growing interest in

reaching some sort of SPACE in which my own concrete is set (stands) I mean, this

space is much more to me than a device, it is an equivalent of an experience on the

level of being.'[303]

Although Houédard sees Concrete poetry as anti-representational, he still believes

in the presence of an absent reality which would mean that the Concrete poem

becomes a new type of literary representation. In a 1972 essay called,

'Architypestractures?', Houédard describes the purpose of his typestracts as posing a

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[301] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Letter to David Medalla' (10th July 1967), *12 Dancepoems from the Cosmic Typewriter* (Sherborne: South Street Publications, 1969), unpaginated, p. 1 of 2.
[302] Ian Hamilton Finlay, Letter to Dom Sylvester Houédard (Unpublished, 2nd November, 1964), unpaginated, p. 3 of 5. dsh Archive, Collection of Modern Literary Archives, The John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester.
[303] Ibid.

series of questions which are 'what is communication? – what is visual communication? – how and why communicate visually? – does it even occur? – what do I communicate visually & otherwise?'.[304] This level of questioning appears to reflect Lyotard's call for the arts to challenge the institutional rules of art, but Houédard suggests here that this attitude of investigation is for metaphysical ends. As he says:

> the level at which I ask these questions is not that at which there are answers at
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> all but the level at which they are mysteries to which the appropriate response
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> can never be an 'answer' but has to be a growth of awareness & awe – gratitude
>
> depth & pleasure – that is an awareness of the questions as being essentially
>
> those mysteria to which there is no possibility of reply in clear Cartesian
>
> concepts – those mysteria that lie behind & even help to constitute those
>
> parameters of what it means to be human'[305]

Concrete poetry's investigation of what is understood as poetry and art is described by Houédard as having an epistemological purpose in questioning a rational understanding of the world as inherited from the Enlightenment, although this is in the name of a metaphysical reality.

The underlying conservatism in Houédard's theory is more explicit in Houédard's later essays after the Concrete poetry movement. He writes in his paper for a 1980 symposium at Ampleforth called 'The Dimension of the Dimensionless' the following: 'Actually 'finding' the centre by mind-stilling (whether by benedictibe taoist shaman buddhist or yogi) is probably the one & only 'experience' that can be taken as unequivocally identical in every mystical tradition: & this is because it is the

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[304] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Architypestractures?', *Art Without Boundaries 1950-70*, ed. by Philip Thompson (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), pp. 134-135 (p. 134).
[305] Ibid.

intuition of essential human nature.' [306] It is the belief in a reality, albeit one which can only be known through what it is not, which underpins Houédard's belief in Concrete poetry as a true poetry, and Houédard writes in retrospect that the abstract arts were a means of trying to restore a lost world of religious experience. He speaks of the post-war arts of 'Kandinsky, Cage, Merce Cunningham, the constructivists & concretists in general' as serving 'the western recoveries of the eroded dimension (of the apophatic apathetic imageless & dimensionless)'.[307]

For Lyotard the investigation of the rules of art which leads to new forms is both philosophical and also politically radical. Breaking the rules of tradition for Lyotard is political because the philosophical concept of art is held open and the belief in a reality denied. As he says:

> If the painter and the novelist do not want to be, in their turn, apologists of what exists (and minor ones at that), they must question the rules of the art of painting and narration as learnt and received from their predecessors. They soon find that such rules are so many methods of deception, seduction and re-assurance which make it impossible to be "truthful". An unprecedented split occurs in both painting and literature. Those who refuse to re-examine the rules of art will make careers in mass conformism, using "correct rules" to bring the endemic desire for reality into communication with objects and situations capable of satisfying it.'[308]

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[306] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'The Dimension of the Dimensionless' (Unpublished, 1980), pp. 11-29 (p. 12). dsh Archive, Collection of Modern Literary Archives, The John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester.
[307] Ibid.
[308] Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'To Thomas E. Carroll Milan, May 15, 1982', *The Post-modern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985* (London: Turnaround, 1992), pp. 11-25 (p. 15).
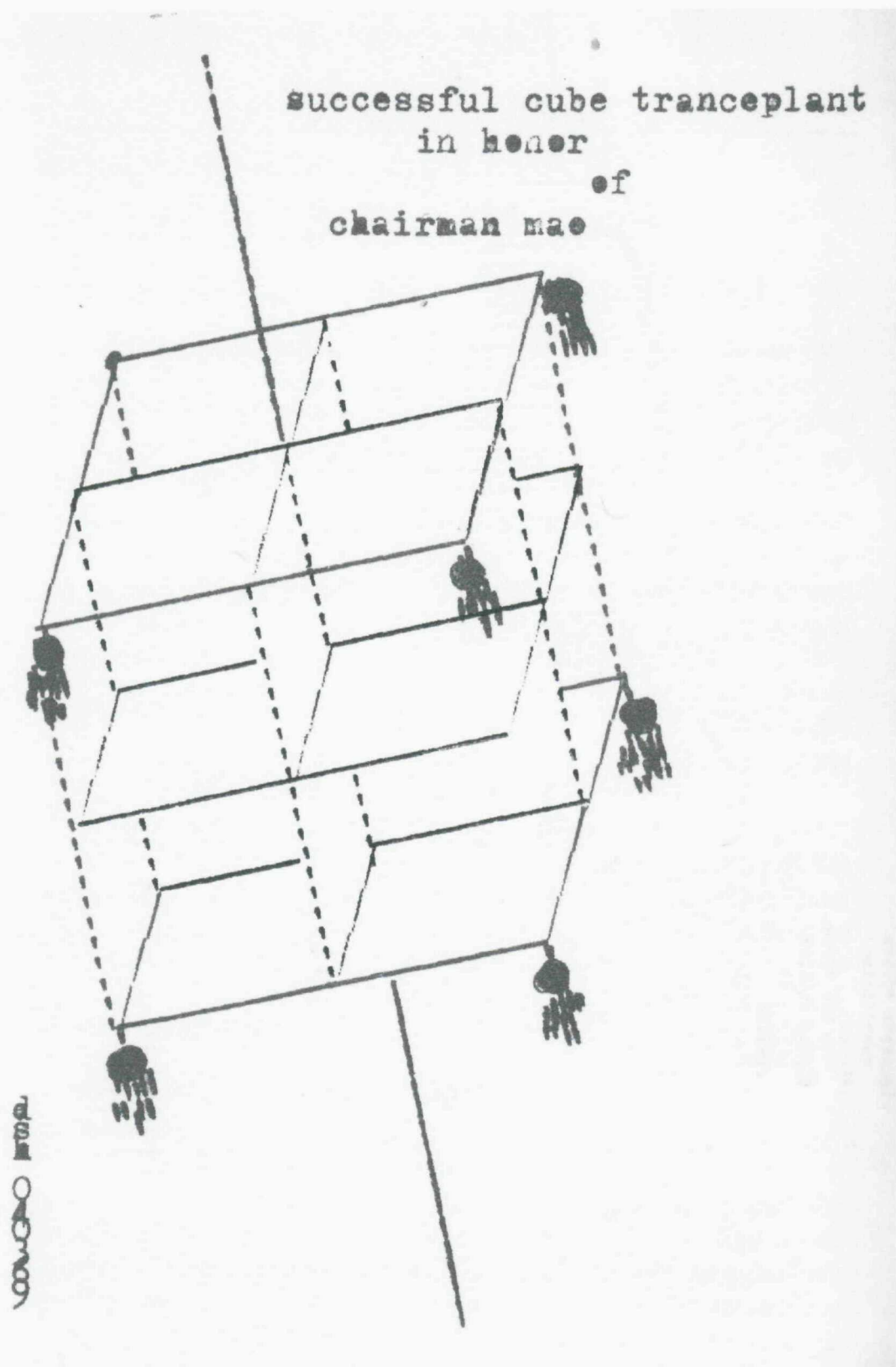
The politics of Lyotard's understanding of avant-garde art comes about through it being more concerned with challenging the tradition of form rather than saying something meaningful through it.

The abstract work is on the side of left-wing politics because it is alien to the social reality and for Lyotard abstraction is in relation to time. What Barthes describes as the author is what Lyotard would describe as the universal subject or metanarrative which acts as a foundation for meaning. To experience the figural in a text for Lyotard means to experience abstraction and this means to experience the absence of an author as fixed meaning and it is the new in art which destabilises a fixed sense of meaning. Lyotard in his essay, 'Beyond Representation', describes the authentically new work of art in terms of an experience of desublimation in which the individual can transgress their ordinary existential state. He writes that 't]he power of the written, the painted, the played, is proportional to its originality' and that '[t]he thesis of first editions, first versions, far from being foolish, compels the reader, if he is willing to go as far as it will lead him, to abandon the safe harbour offered to the mind by the category of "works of art" or of signs in general, and to recognise as truly artistic nothing but *initiative* or *events*, in whatever domain they may occur', and that it is this which causes an experience of the figural as 'the displacement potential of libidinal energy, the encountering of unexpected forms, and finally the ephemeral and unique character of the emotional power produced by this encounter.'[309]

For Houédard it was the creative act itself through which one could experience freedom but it was the passage of time which always threatened it being affirmed as such. In his 1969 essay, 'Liberty – Freedom', he writes that for him 'an experience of freedom (as opposed to an experience of the desirability for freedom) is never so

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[309] Jean Francois-Lyotard, 'Beyond Representation', *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 155-167 (p. 165).

Figure 8

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intensely given as in a transforming moment of creativity – yet even here the awareness is given almost certainly as a historical fact – ie as a memory that 'then' (maybe one second or less) was such an experience – & yet with that awareness there is invariably involved a linguistic impossibility of deciding how (precisely) an experience of that sort can be labelled (confidently) as an experience of freedom (sic).'[310] This freedom of creativity is implied in the above typestract to be an unalienated activity suitable for a revolutionary society, but this realisation of an authentic human nature can never be truly grasped because of the condition of time that prevents the present from being truly grasped. The compromised state of communicating an unalienated experience is the consequence of physical time. For Marcuse and Lyotard, the compromised communication of the aesthetic realm was a consequence of cultural absorption.

I would suggest, though, that a typestract by Houédard can be read as showing that the politics of the aesthetic is related to historical time. In Houédard's 1969 typestract, 'Successful Cube Tranceplant in Honor of Chairman Mao', 'Figure [8]', which was first published as number seven in the card series by Openings Press, an abstract art is suggested to serve political ends by appealing to the structural laws underlying aesthetic sensibility. Where, however, for the Russian Constructivists it was an abstract art of rational forms which served a new socialist state, the coalescence between the revolutionary party and aesthetic form is implied by the title of this typestract to only come about through the risk of experiment, so that there is no pre-existing aesthetic form that is known to relate to a revolutionary society and might be rejected just as a body might reject a new organ.

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[310] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Liberty – Freedom', *Janus* (March/ May, 1969), 31-32 (p. 32).

A 1970 one-word poem called 'Ode to Colonels' by Houédard published as number eight of the Openings card series conveys a struggle over historical reality at the time. The poem refers to the Greek republic with the word 'héllas' inscribed on a card. The first 'l' in this word has been transposed and is set at a slant above the 'e'. Its space has been replaced by a gap cut into the card. I would suggest that the poem comments on the military 1967 coup d'état and its subsequent rule in Greece with the 'l' slanted above the 'e' which plays on the French word 'hélas', meaning 'unfortunately', and which visually suggests a cannon or a pair of marching legs. The poem reminds the reader that revolutionary power can be used for right-wing political ends, and it also invites the reader to see the power struggle in Greece as connected to their own context with its gap where a printed 'l' should be. In order to read the word 'héllas' the absent 'l' siginifies through the poem's otherwise material context of card and reality visually seen through the gap. The poem plays with its existence as the word 'hélas' in print and as the word 'héllas' in material context.

I have discussed so far the contrasting Neo-Marxist theories of the Frankfurt School and of Lyotard as a means of positioning the material aesthetic of Concrete poetry in a political context. Although these two theoretical approaches disagree over whether the experimental arts are on the side of revolutionary politics they both assume the aesthetic of art to be a tool for social change by altering consciousness. Marcuse writes that 'a work of art can be called revolutionary if, by virtue of the aesthetic transformation, it represents, in the exemplary fate of individuals, the prevailing unfreedom and the rebelling forces, thus breaking through the mystified (and petrified) social reality, and opening the horizon of change (liberation).'[311] For both the Frankfurt School and for Lyotard art only could be on the side of revolution

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[311] Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. xi.

if it was abstract and not realist. As Marcuse goes on to say: 'Literature can be called revolutionary in a meaningful sense only with reference to itself, as content having become form. The political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimension. Its relation to praxis is inexorably indirect, mediated, and frustrating. The more immediately political the work of art, the more it reduces the power of estrangement and the radical, transcendent goals of change.'[312]

I have so far discussed how it is within the politicised context of Lyotard's theory of the figural that the Concrete poetry movement invites itself to be situated within from how it understands its abstraction to be related to libertarian politics. I want to conclude this section of the chapter by describing the theorist Michel Foucault's critique of the theories, like that of the Frankfurt School and of Lyotard, which argue that the abstract arts can potentially be on the side of left-wing politics and serve as a tool for social intervention and change. Foucault argues in an interview entitled 'The Functions of Literature' that this revolutionary claim for art supports realist ideology and reinforces the bourgeois institution of the university. I want to suggest that Concrete poetry in Britain, however, supported a revolutionary alternative to the university. From Foucault's Neo-Marxist perspective a change in the world can only come about through an appropriate ideological change and avant-garde writing for Foucault is mistaken in believing that this change can be accomplished through the arts or the aesthetic. The modernist text is seen by Foucault as one stage in a process of demystifying literature as realist. Modernist writing when it emerged in the early twentieth century provided a valuable truth about literature. For Foucault, the self-conscious foregrounding of the linguistic medium in modernist literature was important in redressing the notion of the author at the centre of the text, that is, of an

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[312] Ibid., pp. xii-xiii.

underlying reality whether of self or historical world which is thought to express itself through the text. All literature is intransitive for Foucault, in that as language it does not reflect reality in some given way, and the modern period made this apparent in the self-conscious handling of language of its literature. As Foucault says: 'The main point is the importance of this principle: the intransitivity of literature. This was, indeed, the first step by which we were able to get rid of the idea that literature was the locus of every kind of traffic, or the point at which all traffic came to an end, the expression of totalities.'[313]

The truth for Foucault that 'literature is concerned only with itself'[314] is a formalist position but not to the extent of arguing that literature reflects transcendent aesthetic ideals which deny politics. Literature as concerned with itself means for Foucault a way of upsetting realist assumptions, although a literary formalism was eventually used in the fetishisation of literature as a special group of texts. According to Foucault a formalist approach developed out of modernist literature in the post-war period, which can be seen in Structuralist literary criticism, as 'a kind of exaltation, both ultra-lyrical and ultra-rationalizing, of literature as a structure of language capable of being analysed in itself and on its own terms.'[315] The nineteen sixties were a time, then, when texts which had once appeared to question the traditional realist mode of literature began to be fetishised as literature themselves. The claim that modernist writing could itself be politically revolutionary belonged to this fetishism whereby a text was valorised as literature, that is, as a special group of texts believed to be at the centre for all types of historical and psychological reality.

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[313] Michel Foucault, 'The Functions of Literature', trans. by Alan Sheridan, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. by Lawrence Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), 307-313 (p. 309).
[314] Ibid.
[315] Ibid.

A preoccupation with literary form can become politically regressive from Foucault's perspective and he argues that the next stage of literary desacralization would be 'to try to see how, in the general mass of what was said, it was possible at a given moment in a particular mode, for that particular region of language to be constituted.'[316] The desacralization of literature begun by modernism can be taken further by the politically motivated act of critical interpretation which is a task for the reader and not so much for the writer. The arts could for Foucault provide enlightened critique of Western thought. In *This is Not a Pipe*, visual poetry is described by him to carry out an epistemological critique of language. With reference to Apollinaire's visual poetry he writes that 'the calligram aspires playfully to efface the oldest oppositions of our alphabetical civilisation: to show and to name; to shape and to say; to reproduce and to articulate; to imitate and to signify; to look and to read.'[317] It is the pun common to Concrete poetry which according to the critic Murray Krieger resists the closure of meaning in that 'it houses opposed meanings within a single phonetic entity, thereby forcing them into a substantive identity that at once sustains and dissolves the polarity of difference'.[318]

The belief that literature is politically revolutionary is from Foucault's perspective a means of ensuring exploitative power relations in society continue rather than a potential disruption to them because such a belief reproduces the humanist ideology of establishment institutions. Foucault discredits the claim that the way one writes can itself be politically revolutionary. Such a claim that was made in the nineteen sixties Foucault describes as one which believed that 'literature in itself was so emancipated from all determinations that the very fact of writing was by itself subversive, that the

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[316] Ibid., p. 310.

[317] Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, trans. by James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, repr; 1983), p. 21.

writer, in the very gesture of writing, had an inalienable right to subversion', which meant that '[t]he writer was, therefore, a revolutionary and the more writing was writing, the more it sank into intransivity, the more it produced, by that very fact, the movement of revolution!'[319] Foucault locates this claim as arising in the nineteen sixties by way of the belief that abstract literature, because of its appearance of autonomy, was free from the socio-economic conditions of the capitalist system. This position which Foucault is criticising is reflective of that which has been described of Lyotard and the Frankfurt School with their argument that the abstract arts are revolutionary. No literature can be of itself revolutionary for Foucault and the intransitive writing of abstract literature is not in itself revolutionary because it does not involve in itself political action.

Concerning the claim that modernist writing is revolutionary, Foucault writes '[t]he fact that someone declares it to be so in this or that literary review, is of no importance and has no effect.'[320] Not only is abstract literature not in itself politically revolutionary but its relationship with the institution of the university has been central in making it support the illusionary belief that it is revolutionary and in turn the status quo. The claim that modernist literature is politically revolutionary is from Foucault's perspective bourgeois ideology propagated by the institution of the university. It is no coincidence for Foucault that 'so-called avant-garde literature is read only by university teachers and their students'[321] because the belief that literature is politically revolutionary reflects the literary ideology within the entire educational apparatus which teaches the message, explicitly or not, that the history of a culture is reflected

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[318] Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (London: The John Hopkins University, 1992), p. 184.

[319] Michel Foucault, 'The Functions of Literature', trans. by Alan Sheridan, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. by Lawrence Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 307-313 (p. 310).

[320] Ibid.

in works of literature and that literature is a significant artefact because it is able to express some sort of reality outside of the text. The belief that literature has some connection with historical reality is where as Foucault says '[t]he the so-called avant-garde groups and the great mass of university teachers are in agreement.'[322]

The Brazilian Concrete poet Maocy Cirne in her essay, 'The System and Revolutionary Openings', published in the *ICA Bulletin* argues that from the perspective of radical politics it is both the critical reception of literature which must change as well as literature itself. It is both '[p]oets and critics', she writes, who must 'participate in the same common battle – guerrilla warriors fighting old languages', and she describes '"[l]iterary" criticism as it stands', as 'a projection of the linear system imposed by the ruling classes'.[323] From Foucault's perspective, however, the bourgeois institution must be challenged directly and the political claims made for aesthetic form only dismiss its determining pragmatic social context. For Foucault, modern writing does not challenge the institution but reinforces its position by circulating within it as one its legitimising discourses. False consciousness does not exist in a text itself but in how it is received and used. It was not possible for there to be an inherently ideological type of literary text which could then be replaced by an inherently revolutionary text. The debates in Germany as to whether it was realist or modernist literature which was on the side of political revolution were not relevant to Foucault's position which denies the aesthetic any real significance.

Modernist writing speaks from the position according to Foucault of the university which as a bourgeois institution would preclude any revolutionary function that may be argued for a literary text. The modernist text serves the literary studies paradigm of

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[321] Ibid., p. 309.
[322] Ibid., p. 310.
[323] Maocy Cirne, 'The System and Revolutionary Openings', *ICA Bulletin* (October, 1968), unpaginated, p. 1 of 3.

the university. According to the critic Anthony Thorpe in *Literary into Cultural Studies* the paradigm of literary study is organised around five assumptions which are as he says: '1 a traditionally *empiricist* epistemology; 2 a specific pedagogic practice, the '*modernist*' reading; 3 a *field* for study discriminating the canon from popular culture; 4 an *object* of study, the canonical text; 5 the assumption that the canonical text is *unified*.'[324] It is this paradigm upon which the modern bourgeois literary academy was established and which was reflected in a formalist literary criticism that began with the New Critics and continued throughout the nineteen sixties. As Thorpe says, '[f]rom Empson to Culler in 1975 (his position has since changed) the modernist reading maintained itself for fifty years with sufficient consistency to earn being referred to as paradigmatic.'[325] The formalist assumptions of the literary studies paradigm grounded the very belief that a particular text had a stable identity and was justified in being identified as a particular type, such as for instance, a poem and not prose. The literary studies paradigm was superseded by what Thorpe calls the cultural studies paradigm whereby formalist assumptions are destabilised through social and historical contextualised readings. All paradigms of the literary academy, however, whether they take a formal or cultural approach to a text, belong for Foucault to what he calls the discourse of literature which he describes as a series of material functions, that is, of 'an interplay of selection, sacralization, and institutionalised validation, of which the university is both the operator and the receiver.'[326] The claim that abstract writing was politically revolutionary was itself one of the ways that literature was sacralized.

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[324] Anthony Thorpe, *Literary into Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 165.
[325] Ibid., p. 16.
[326] Michel Foucault, 'The Functions of Literature', trans. by Alan Sheridan, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. by Lawrence Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 307-313 (p. 309).

I would suggest that the Concrete poem was resistant to an easy reproduction of bourgeois ideology in its relationship to the literary studies paradigm, and that it was moreover outside the bourgeois discourse of literature. Although formalist ideology partially informs the thinking within the movement in terms of its claim to being self-sufficient and autonomous, Concrete poetry also came to destabilise both the object of literature and the boundary between text and context; it was outside the canon of modernist 'high art'; and it did not circulate within the literary academy.

I have described Foucault's argument against the claims that abstract writing could be on the side of left-wing politics because this reinforced realist ideology and the bourgeois institution of the university. I now want to describe how the Concrete poetry movement was involved in a revolutionary realisation of the university institution called The Anti-University of London. The Anti-University of London was a revolutionary conception of education outside the establishment which opened in Rivington Street on the 12th February 1968 in London and was the instigation of the psychiatrist David Cooper as part of his Institute of Phenological Studies. It was an attempt at revolutionary activity from within education and was the realisation of Trocchi's proposal in 1964 for a 'Spontaneous University'. In his 1964 essay, 'Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds', Trocchi writes: 'At a chosen moment in a vacant country house (mill, abbey, church, or castle) not too far from the City of London we shall foment a kind of cultural "jam session"; out of this will evolve the prototype of our *spontaneous university*.'[327] Cobbing was the university's financial co-ordinator and gave two courses with Lockwood on the relationship between sound, music, and poetry and on the technical capabilities of Concrete poetry and electronics. By July 1968 Cobbing had resigned in protest over the university's lack of funding

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[327] Alexander Trocchi, 'Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds', *City Lights Journal*, No. 2 (1964), pp. 14-26 (p. 22).

and absence of any responsibility over the day to day running of the premises and the university closed shortly afterwards.

This experiment with the university had been a response as Cooper says to what was perceived at the time as the intellectual emptiness within established education in the West. The Anti-University of London course prospectus includes three lectures by Nuttall called 'The Nature of Vision', 'The Importance of Difficulty', and 'The Function of Failure', and Cooper's talk at the Cultural Congress in Havana called 'Towards Revolutionary Centres of Consciousness'. The courses at the Anti-University of London were not credited and did not lead to any formal qualifications but sought to develop ideas and activities for dealing with post-war society. Meetings had no fixed plan or time limit and relied on the meeting itself to develop its content. The teaching was conducted through a series of courses given as lectures, forums, and artistic events by its fifty four faculty members and eighteen visiting speakers. These included the poets John Keys, Lee Harwood, Edward Dorn, and Harold Norse, the artists John Latham, Richard Hamilton, Jim Dine and Jim Haynes, and the publishers Montgomery and Ava Benveniste who gave courses on poetry, typography, and book publishing.

Concrete poetry as a poetry which blurred the categories between literature, visual art, and music, existed outside the official academy but was felt to be one experimental form amongst others necessary to comprehend and change post-war society, and was by implication reflective of the non-specialist education that such a university was trying to achieve. Cooper states that the teaching should place an emphasis upon a 'diversity of approach', whilst at the same time seeking 'to unify widely disparate perspectives' and 'to do away with artificial splits and divisions

between disciplines and art forms and between theory and action.'[328] The number of fields of knowledge taught by the university included political activism, psychotherapy, poetry, film-making, painting, and musical composition. The university also wanted to remove the categories of 'student', 'teacher' and 'course' through a policy of open membership and through an engagement in what it called 'action study' in a wide variety of subjects in conjunction with the work of its faculty members.

Concrete poetry was introduced here as a poetry for participation which contrasted with an elitist view of Concrete poetry implied by Weaver's suggestion that a specialised reader of the Concrete poem was necessary because the Concrete poem involved, as he says, 'a learning process of quite a special order' due to its 'material which is serially structured' and 'not already organised into probable forms like material which is naturalistically structured.'[329] Concrete poetry at the Anti-University of London meant undermining the bourgeois institution of art with creativity as practical human activity.

Concrete poetry as a collective activity had also been promoted by Cobbing at a country house in Brazier's Park in Oxfordshire as part of a group of writers, artists, and psychiatrists organised by Nuttall for a weekend conference in July 1964. This event, like DIAS, the International Dialectics of Liberation Congress, and the Anti-University of London, was motivated by the revolutionary ideas of the New Left which was an international political reaction to traditional socialism between the nineteen fifties and sixties and represented a wide range of left-wing tendencies with an emphasis on direct action. Cobbing would later give two workshops with his wife

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[328] David Cooper, Introduction, *The Anti-University of London* (London: Poets' and Painters' Press, 1968), unpaginated, p. 1 of 3.
[329] Mike Weaver, 'Concrete poetry', *The Journal of Typographical Research*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (July, 1967), pp. 293-326 (p. 317).

the artist Jennifer Pike on Concrete poetry as part of the School of Integrative Social Research at Brazier's Park. 'New Dimensions in Sound and Vision' from the 6th to 8th November 1964 covered the aesthetic developments after 1945 in, as Cobbing says, '[e]lectronic music, concrete and machine poetry, assemblage, jazz poetry and prose, happenings, hard edge, Kinetic Art, theatre of the absurd, the cut-up in literature, programmed art, new waves in film and serial music' in order to show that they were 'open to understanding'.[330] 'Kinetic/ Concrete' from the 5th to 7th November 1965 intended to examine the potential of Concrete poetry and its relationship with Kinetic art.

Despite being a revolutionary realisation of the university, I would suggest that The Anti-University of London was still motivated by bourgeois consciousness as Foucault would see it. This anti-university's activities were at the service of a belief in spontaneity as action realised outside of cultural and social conditioning and a manifestation of an authentic human nature that would lead towards a revolutionary society. In his talk Cooper says: 'The new realisation is that we have to erode the power of the ruling elite by a new form of revolutionary activity that contains in itself, from its very beginning, the impulse to transform human relationships. It is not a matter of State A in human reality, then revolution, then State B – the New Man. The New Man has to be forged by New Men.'[331] It was for this reason that revolutionary centres would, as Cooper says, 'destructure a 'false consciousness' (Hegel) in all forms of aesthetic and intellectual expression'.[332] A demystification of establishment language was deemed necessary to realise a new sensibility for a new society. To

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[330] Bob Cobbing, Broadside for 'School of Integrative Social Research' (1964), unpaginated., p. 1 of 1. Bob Cobbing Papers, British Library. Correspondence 2: Box 3; Envelope 4-6, 1960s.
[331] David Cooper, 'Towards Revolutionary Centres of Consciousness', The Anti-University of London Course Prospectus (London: Poets' and Painters' Press, 1968), unpaginated, p. 3 of 4.
[332] David Cooper, Introduction, The Anti-University of London (London: Poets' and Painters' Press, 1968), unpaginated, p. 1 of 3.

bring about social transformation meant changing the individual's mind from within the present system and not by a violent overthrow of the material bourgeois institutions, and in this respect Cooper says that '[t]he key word here is spontaneity: but spontaneity that opens itself to essential discipline. Spontaneous movements of autonomous self-assertion with only minimal planning'.[333] The understanding of spontaneity by Cooper should be distinguished from its common usage at the time. For Guattari it was a belief in spontaneous expression which weakened the effectiveness of radical left-wing politics. Of the nineteen sixties counter-culture he writes that it was responsible for 'misjudging the constraints relative to effectively taking the sphere of political interests into account in favour of an often muddled exaltation of spontaneity.'[334] The Anti-University of London, however, was intended as Cooper suggests to re-invent the notion of spontaneity as a language of immediacy mediated by political necessity.

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[333] Ibid.

4.1 Concrete Poetry's Politics of Style

In the previous section of this chapter I situated Concrete poetry in relation to left-wing political perspectives on literary abstraction. In this section of the chapter I want to discuss the relationship between the formal and non-formal styles of Concrete poetry as specific aspects of its abstraction in relation to revolutionary politics. This will suggest that it was through such styles that the Concrete poetry movement had a more conscious understanding of the relationship between radical politics and its abstract poetry. The divide between formal and non-formal styles can be situated within the clash between a rational and non-rational aesthetic in the concrete arts that had emerged in the dispute between Bill and the Danish artist Asger Jorn. Jorn was a member of the international arts group COBRA from 1948 to 1951. After this group of artists had disbanded, Jorn went onto form the International Movement for an Imagist Bauhaus (IMIB) in 1953. This movement was made in reaction to his correspondence with Bill during 1953. As Bill was the head of the Bauhaus-influenced Hochschule für Gestaltung, Jorn had wanted him to be involved in a communal project between painters and architects. Jorn's belief in creative spontaneity, however, clashed with Bill's rationalism. He had intended his academy to replace art of the illogical imagination with pure technical expertise. For Jorn psychic and physical automatism were organically linked and this belief came partly as a critique of Surrealism.

I want to begin by discussing how the formal aesthetic of Concrete poetry was seen in Britain to be on the side of political conservatism because it did not make any gesture at challenging established society. The U.S. poet George Dowden criticised Concrete poetry in issue seven of the British Beat poetry magazine *Poetmeat* in his

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[334] Felix Guattari, 'Jean-Jacques Lebel: Painter of Transversality' (1988), trans. by Melissa McMahon www.artcles.monash.edu.au/globe/issue8/jjltxt.html [accessed 30/09/07, para. 2 of 4].

essay, 'The Roots of Concrete poetry as the New Anti-Poetry', for being formal which in turn made it an 'anti-poetry, and not in the vanguard of poetry.'[335] Taking up the distinction between a classical and romantic aesthetic, 'the "romantic"', Dowden writes, 'calls for revolt against and destruction of conformist precepts, rules, restraints, and censures which inhibit the free growth of consciousness', whilst '[s]ociety, the mass of leaders and followers desiring stability and security above all else, embraces, or at least lives with, the "classical" artist'.[336] Here a romantic or non-rational style of poetry is being associated with political radicalism whilst a classical or rational style of poetry is being associated with support for a status-quo. *Poetmeat* began in 1963 and by 1965 had become dedicated to publishing U.S., South American, and British post-modern poetry mostly in the style of Beat poetry. The rational style of the Concrete poem for Dave Cuneliffe and Tina Morris as editors of the 1965 *Poetmeat* anthology, 'The New British Poetry', was also seen as reactionary. In their introduction to the anthology they write: 'Such recent significant movements as the flourishing Concrete one are not represented because we regard them as factions, or aspects of the Academy.'[337]

For *Poetmeat* magazine Concrete poetry was a formal aesthetic and so on the side of the establishment. This account of Concrete poetry, however, does not include the non-formal aesthetic of sound poetry. Sound poetry involved the creative act with the body which was opposed to the formalism of the printed text. As Cobbing writes in his 1970 manifesto 'Music for Dancing' published in *Kroklok*, 'COMMUNICATION

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[335] George Dowden, 'The Roots of Concrete poetry as the New Anti-Poetry', *Poetmeat*, No. 7 (1965), unpaginated, p. 1 of 11.
[336] Ibid., p. 2 of 11.
[337] David Cuneliffe and Tina Morris, 'The New British Poetry: An Explanation', *Poetmeat*, No. 8 (1965), unpaginated, p. 1 of 3.

is primarily a muscular activity' and 'potentially stronger than everyday speech, richer than those monotonous seeming printed words on the page.'[338]

The performance of poetry by a number of post-war poets in Britain during the nineteen sixties was associated with an anti-formalism through its interaction with other media. When the 'Poetry and Jazz Revival' from North America reached Britain in the nineteen fifties there was a wide-spread rediscovery of mixed-media performance that began to take shape and quickly spread throughout the whole country. At Horovitz's 'Live New Departures' events at the ICA the poem might be recited alongside free-form and innovative jazz or to other types of music or improvised as a so-called 'jazzpoem'. Such post-war poetry was also performed with other art forms, such as 'plays, mime, new music, electronics, speeches, film, light/sound projections, sculpture, (and) dance'.[339] The intention behind these events was to disturb the art of the self-sufficient experience, for as Horovitz says in a statement for the *ICA Bulletin*, he aimed to create a 'Gesamtweltbild – an environment for art media to inhabit – however unsettled in one place.'[340] The emphasis on performance for the poem meant that unlike the traditional poem it was not confined to being as Horovitz says 'the words on the page'[341] and became less of the discrete object supported by the formalist ideology of the New Critics.

I have described how sound poetry was anti-formalist which in the context of Dowden's essay would position it against the status-quo, and I will now discuss how an anti-formalist abstraction motivated by left-wing politics arrives in Britain at the end of nineteen sixties as a critique of Concrete poetry. At the end of the nineteen

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[338] Bob Cobbing, 'Music for Dancing' (1970), *Kroklok*, No. 2 (1971), p. 33.

[339] Michael Horovitz, 'Afterwords', *Children of Albion: Poetry of the Underground in Britain* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), pp. 316-377 (p. 321).

[340] Michael Horovitz, 'Live New Departures', *ICA Bulletin* (December, 1964), p. 8.

[341] Michael Horovitz, 'Afterwords', *Children of Albion: Poetry of the Underground in Britain* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), pp. 316-377 (p. 316).

sixties all forms of Concrete poetry are criticised for being politically conservative because of what is perceived to be their inherent formalism by French Concrete poets who had experienced the riots of May 1968. Essays by Chopin, Blaine, and Jean-Marie Le Sidaner are published in issue two and three of *Stereo Headphones* which criticise the political context of formalist Concrete poetry. Blaine, who edited the magazine *Rhobo*, identifies Concrete poetry in his essay, 'Your Days are Numbered', as conforming to a formalised aesthetic through its methods of visual repetition, punning, graphic design from letters, and random computer-generated texts. In Blaine's 1970 manifesto, 'Basic Platform for the Night and Day Awakeners', published in the first issue of arts magazine *Pages*, the need to go beyond all Concrete poetry is argued on the grounds of radical politics and he proposes what he calls 'BiPoint Poetry' as an alternative to all forms of experimental poetry that had been produced so far and which was to engage with class struggle. He writes:

> Convinced of the foolishness and of uselessness of linear poetry, of the
>
> foolishness and of the pretension of concrete, visual, lettrist and spatial poetries,
>
> of the foolishness and of the mediocrity of neo-dadaist, neo-futurist and neo-
>
> cubist poetries. Convinced of the foolishness, of the uselessness, of the
>
> retention and of the mediocrity of all those who try to take a new-look in
>
> moving from one Ecole to another and to give themselves a new youth in
>
> paraphrasing Carroll, Mallarmé, Apollinaire, Roussel, Schwitters *et al.* the
>
> Night and Day Awakeners decide [. . .] to apply to reality the new methods of
>
> transformation formerly situated at the language level [. . .] materially
>
> commenting on the landscape and seascape but able all, through an efficient
>
> creativity, through a positive imagination and through the action becoming
>
> reality itself, – in transforming the surroundings – in modifying the places
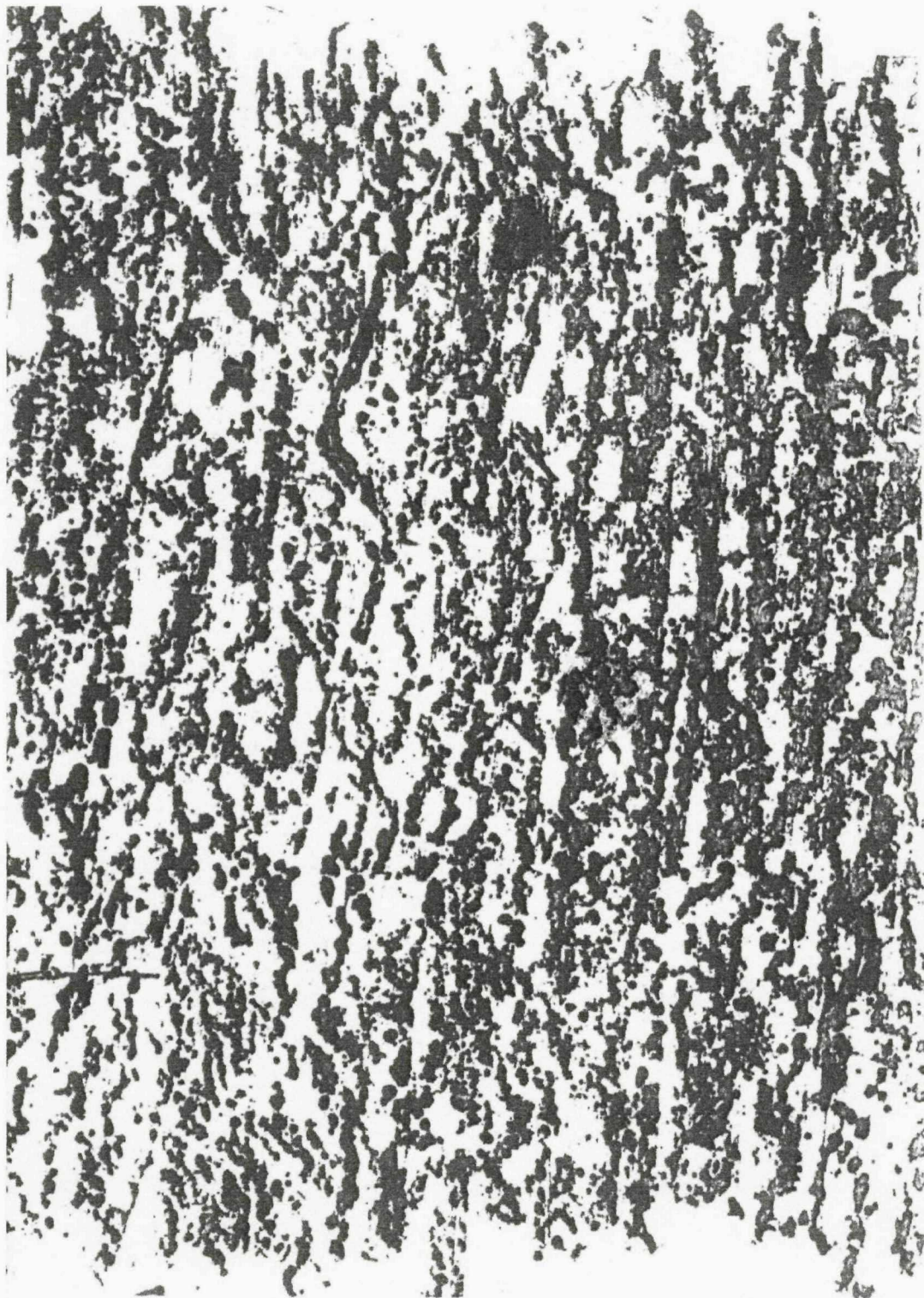
where people buy, where people rest, where people play . . . – in diverting the

means of oppression and of communication of the power from their initial

purpose in order to use them against this power – in creating situations which

brutalize the customs of the people and oblige them to act – in taking

possession of the scenery and in disturbing the unfolding of people's lives to

make them conscious of the surrounding reality – in boycotting the idols,

fetishes and the Establishment in order for people to free themselves little by

little and to take their position in the world – in awakening them[342]

I would suggest that the call here for a creation of conceptual and processual works of

art motivated by left-wing politics emerges in Britain within a community of artists

known as Fluxus England West. This community was established in 1971 around the

Beau Geste Press based at a farmhouse in Cullompton in Devon by the Mexican artist

Felipe Ehrenberg (b. 1943) and his wife out of a discussion with the U.S. performance

artists Carolee Schneeman and Anthony McCall. Other artists associated with the

press were Ulises Carrión (b. 1940), Allen Fisher (b. 1944), David Mayor (b.1949),

and Chris Welch. This community was a loose affiliation of individuals where

visitors, as Fisher writes in his essay on the press, would also contribute to the

performances, to the organisation of papers, to the preparation of food, and to

production of the press's publications which were made with duplicators, an offset

lithograph and letterpress.[343] The international identity of the house and the press was

made apparent in its magazine edited by Mayor called *Schmuck* (1972-76) with each

of its eight issues dedicated to work of artists from Iceland, Japan, France,

Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

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[342] Julien Blaine, 'Basic Platform for the Night and Day Awakeners', *Pages*, No. 1, (Winter, 1970), p. 31.

[343] Allen Fisher, 'Beau Geste Press', *Poetry Information*, No. 17 (1976), pp. 74-78 (p. 74).

Figure 9

I will now discuss how Concrete poetry's formal style was seen as supporting an ideology of aesthetic autonomy and was attacked by the left-wing politics of Fluxus England West. The Fluxus movement had first appeared in Britain at the 'Festival of Misfits' exhibition between 23rd October to 8th November 1962 at Gallery One in London and at the 'Fluxclinic' performance on 15th November 1968 at Gallery Number Ten in London which since its opening in May 1966 had been notable for visual poetry determining its exhibition and small press output and its 'Project 67' imprint which introduced a Fluxus sensibility to international visual poetry. Weaver and the U.S. artist Ken Friedman organised a touring exhibition between October 1972 to August 1973 called Fluxshoe which included contributions from Chopin and Gibbs. By 1975 the Fluxus movement in England had come to an end according to Fisher who describes it in a letter to Mottram as 'a platform that doesn't exist in this country',[344] even though the first issues of *Spanner* magazine started by Fisher in 1974 were intended to be used for Fluxus related work submitted between 1972-73 as he says in the introduction to its first issue.

Fluxus England West developed with a similar social activist consciousness as Fluxus in the U.S. had led by Maciunas and whereby one of the consequences of such work was, as Fisher says in his letter to Mottram, to lead into a 'discussion of socialist action' and make one 'socially aware'.[345] Two printed copies of ink rubbings, 'Figure [9]', taken from the surface of roads in London by Dick Miller, and which resemble some of the duplicator work of Cobbing, make up two sections of an intended book printed in the tenth issue of *Strange Faeces*. Fisher writes about this work that '[w]hat is least important' about it is that 'it/ they are published' and that 'what is of prime matter is that the process was thought of – thought out – recorded – carried out', so

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[344] Allen Fisher, Letter to Eric Mottram (Unpublished, 17th June, 1975), unpaginated, p. 1 of 2. Eric Mottram Archive, Special Collections, King's College, University of London. Ref. 5/86/1-90.

that 'this book will tell you nothing about the artist nothing about london nothing about anything in particular short of the realisation of this that it is done that it is recorded that it is not history (old sense)' and that the reader's 'event is its purchase' and 'derivations', for 'without record of your own reactions this book will be nothing to you' and that 'if you repeat this event/s today you will extract different results'.[346] The date and precise location of where the ink rubbing was taken is given as well as a note to say that the poet 'ate two garibaldi biscuits/ currants caught top right 2nd tooth'.[347] These prints are then situated within a performative context which extends to the reader and their use of the text. Such work continues what the Fluxus artist Walter De Maria describes as the Fluxus movement's interest in making 'meaningless work' 'which does not make you money or accomplish a conventional purpose',[348] except that in this work the meaninglessness is the result of an activity which is reacting against official art's belief in progressive history and its belief in the aesthetic presence of the text. I would suggest that Fluxus England West continued the social politics of Fluxus that had been one of the motivations behind the movement in the U.S. during the nineteen sixties.

Benjamin argues in his 1929 essay 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia', that the Surrealists as a left-wing arts movement were, as he says, 'the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the 'outmoded', in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable

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[345] Ibid.

[346] Allen Fisher, 'Dick Miller's London', *Strange Faeces*, No. 10; Part A (1975), unpaginated, p. 1 of 3.

[347] Ibid., p. 2 of 3.

[348] Walter De Maria, 'Meaningless Work' (1960), *An Anthology of Chance Operations*, ed. by Jackson Mac Low and La Monte Young (1963), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1.

restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them.'[349] According to this, the Surrealists with their use of found objects for art tried to give expression to the ruins of urban life as such, that is, the commodities that have become outdated, so that this everyday world might be seen anew for its potential historical time. A similar argument could be made for Fluxus England West in its use of printed material and the book. The Fluxus movement in the U.S. during the nineteen sixties had been primarily about performances, whilst Fluxus England West which was centred around a press meant that its activity was primarily about printed material. An essay by Carrión, a Mexican artist living in England during the early seventies, called 'The New Art of Making Books' published in issue six and seven of *Kontexts* (1975), addresses the significance of the book becoming an art object. It is print culture which takes on a different sense of historical time in the nineteen sixties with the emergence of audio-visual media, and like the print work of Cobbing, this value of printed material is realised by Fluxus England West as an anti-formal materialism to be found in its occupation with the cognitive processes and the procedure itself of printing such texts.

A revolutionary sense of historical time in printed material is most apparent in work by Fisher and Ehrenberg. Ehrenberg's *Generacion Libro I Book I* (1973) consists of portrait photographs of him and his family over fourteen years using out-dated cameras. Like the piece by Miller, the meaning of this work is to be found in its lack of intentionality and the emphasis that this places on the reader's contribution. In the introduction he writes that '[t]he existence of this text is as arbitrary as the existence of the following photographs themselves. And as accidental as the chance

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[349] Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (1929), *Marxist Literary Theory* , edited by Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, repr; 2000, 2002), pp. 70-80 (p. 71).

that placed this book in your hands. That is why it is important'.[350] The importance of the random made out for the book here is in the context of impending world destruction which Ehrenberg reads into U.S. occupation in the East at the time. The lack of purpose behind the book is then seen, as Ehrenberg says, as a desparate attempt to offer the reader a moment of respite from oppressive power.

Allen Fisher's 1972 book, *Ffacece*, also communicates political content through a concrete medium. It consists of an image of the face of Genaro Vasquez Rojas, a Mexican guerrilla fighter who was killed that year, which is repeated on each page until only its outline is left. Fisher describes this book in its preface as a 'statement towards the way literature is' and as 'a document recording the nature of things'.[351] The presence of insurrectionary groups in Latin-American countries are symbolized by the disappearing face of Rojas in *Ffacece* and through this symbolic encounter the reader is invited to think about the state of the revolutionary working class in a global context. The contents of the eighth and tenth issues of the magazine, *Strange Faeces*, are situated in a context of political dissent. Issue eight ironically poses in its front cover as the 'Investors Chronicle and Stock Exchange Gazette'. Issue ten, part A, of *Strange Faeces*, entitled 'A Quick J. Edgar', features an image of the F.B.I agent J. Edgar Hoover on its cover who was persecuting the U.S. underground press at the time and his image is repeated after each contribution from Glen Baxtor, Hans Jurgen Bulkowski, Clark, Ehrenberg, Dick Miller, Rot, Chuck Santon, Wolf Vostell, Fisher and Fisher's persona Thomas Net.

The Marxist politics which informs the work of Fluxus England West meant that the formal work of art was not politically neutral. Political conflicts during the nineteen sixties had helped encourage a criticism of the way that art was invested with

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[350] Felipe Ehrenberg's, Introduction, *Generacion Libro I Book I* (Cullompton: Beau Geste Press, 1973), 1-4.

Figure 10

love is a bitter mystery
love is a bitter mist
love is a bitter
love is a bit
love is a

the interests of economic capital. In an essay by Mayor in the third issue of *Spanner* he explains the politics behind the work of the press in describing what it was partly reacting against. He writes:

> Art is now about art, for an audience of artists or professional and academic connoisseurs. Now it is the critics and gallery owners who are the high priests of art. Art is big business – as its meaning and value has lessened for the general public, its financial value has increased like everything else in a capitalist society, art has become mere commodity. What may be genuinely new is made to seem familiar, safe, is smothered in the approval of the arbiters of taste on behalf of the art market.[352]

The anti-formalist aesthetic of the press was involved in the politics of reacting against the ideology of autonomy inherent within the formal work of art which was implicitly on the side of political conservatism in its use to sustain the commodification of art. The belief that the formal art object was involved in right-wing politics contributed to the decline of the Concrete poetry movement and its absorption into Fluxus art. A visual poem, 'Figure [10]', by Fisher published in *Strange Faeces* consists of a collage of visual-verbal fragments appropriated from various sources. This includes most notably two Concrete poems which are 'Woman' by Jean-Francois Bory and a 1965 poem by the German poet Reinhard Döhl, both of which have human emotion as their content given through formal means and which find themselves in ironic tension by being used as found material in an anti-formal composition. In his letter to Mottram, Fisher says how he saw other poets 'concerned with work about itself' which was for him like 'firing a rifle with a bent barrel' in that

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[351] Allen Fisher, *Ffacece* (London: Aloes Books, 1972), unpaginated.
[352] David Mayor, 'What David Mayor Said', *Spanner*, No. 3 (May, 1975), pp. 28-39 (p. 28).

'they too easily take the foundation of the field for granted.'[353] The Concrete poems here with an expressionist content find themselves in the meta-language of a poem that is literally anti-formal in its content. The poem as context decentres these formal Concrete poems by treating them as scrap material to show that they are only relative to context and so draws attention to an ideology of autonomy otherwise supporting their formalism.

For Fluxus England West the formal art-work had been appropriated by capitalism as a commodity and supported an ideological assumption of autonomy that supported the status-quo. An argument against Concrete poetry and how its formalism supports the status quo is made by Ehrenberg. He reviews in issue five of *Kontexts* an inter-arts periodical called *Hexagono '71* by the Argentine concrete poet Edgardo Antonio Vigo of the Diagonal Cero group, and criticises it for having avoided the economic and political troubles of Argentina where it was produced. The politics of this publication is called into question when Ehrenberg writes:

> It has been produced in Argentina, a country of the under-equipped world with the onus of 3rd World political strife. Vigo (like many others of the Latin American avant-garde) manages to exquisitely skirt the issues at stake – artists and their society. In doing so they submit themselves as the pets of the liberal minority of the reactionary establishment. Their work, solidly backed by such institutions as Di Tella and now the CAYC (both in Buenos Aires and both under the benign and watchful tutelage of OAS' Jorge Romero Brest) is at best bland and internationalist. They've become the fallacious spokesmen of Latin-American culture.[354]

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[353] Allen Fisher, Letter to Eric Mottram (Unpublished, 17th June, 1975), unpaginated, p. 1 of 2. Eric Mottram Archive, Special Collections, King's College, University of London. Ref. 5/86/1-90.
[354] Felipe Ehrenberg, Untitled review, *Kontexts*, No. 5 (1973), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1.

A similar case could be made against the work of the seventeen British Concrete poets that included Cox, Edmonds, Furnival, Houédard, Lijn, Sharkey and the artist Richard Loncraine (b. 1946), which was intended to be exhibited at the Institute Torcuato Di Tella in December 1968. Nichol responds to Ehrenberg's review in the following issue of *Kontexts* as one which attacks Concrete poetry for appearing to be independent of social concerns through its formalism and argues that Concrete poetry could be considered to be a revolutionary poetry because of its rational aesthetic. He writes of Ehrenberg's article:

> It makes inherent assumptions about what is revolutionary art . . . I could posit the opposite from Ehrenberg . . . & praise Vigo for his revolutionary zeal in undermining bourgeois notions of language as commodity & in sticking it to the OAS by having them actually publish it a political coup i am left you see with the distinct feeling that Ehrenberg sees "concrete" et al as fashionable & not revolutionary (sic).[355]

Nichol defends Concrete poetry as politically engaged and not a socially benign trend in poetry because of its formalism. He goes on to say that one of the reasons for this belief shared by Ehrenberg that Concrete poetry is not involved in political struggle at the formal level of language is because the poems are judged as pictorial rather than literary. This was one of the problems facing the visual poetry being exhibited in galleries. Nichol writes:

> It is that element of the art gallery the exhibitions that gives to concrete the big marketplace feel what has been an albatross for the painters and sculptors et al overlaps into an area where it has never been before & I have heard so many judgements made on works by various people not on the basis of what they are

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[355] bp Nichol, 'Letter to Michael Gibbs', *Kontexts*, No. 6&7 (1975), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1.

doing <u>with</u> language (in fact I read almost <u>nothing</u> on what they are doing with

language) but as picture & worst of all a judgement on them as "pretty" pictures

people do seem to have forgotten the title of that first exhibit in london

"between poetry and painting" [. . .] you get rejections of Finlay's work because

its pretty without anyone bothering to go into the language revolution that's

involved in what he's doing [. . .] people shouldn't get sucked in to thinking

concrete is fashionable because that's just a way of dismissing it of not having

to come to terms with what its attacking (sic).[356]

I would suggest that in Britain, Concrete poetry as a formal poetry was disseminated

as an autonomous ideology through the magazines *Image*, *Form*, and *P.O.T.H.* For

Nichol, though, the formalism of Concrete poetry meant a rational poetry which was

at the same time part of an experimentation in language which questioned the linear

conventions of language and where its revolutionary political dimension was to be

found.

Through the theory of the poet and critic Steve McCaffery, who collaborated with

Nichol, the left-wing politics claimed by Nichol for Concrete poetry's

experimentation with language can be elaborated upon. McCaffery's argument that

poetry can be a Marxist political activity when it opposes realist conventions is made

specifically in the context of the poetry of the Language School group in the U.S.

during the nineteen seventies and eighties, but his arguments are helpful in

understanding how Concrete poetry's experimentation with language can be

considered to be on the side of left-wing politics. In his essay, 'Language Writing:

from Productive to Libidinal Economy', McCaffery argues that capitalism is reflected

in language through conventional grammar and through a referential fetishism.

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[356] Ibid.

Grammar in language can be shown to have ideological characteristics which reproduce and reinforce those of a capitalist socio-economic system. He writes of grammar:

> As a transcendent law, grammar acts as a mechanism that regulates the free circulation of meaning, organising the fragmentary and local into compound, totalized wholes. Through grammatical constraint then, meanings coalesce into meaning. Denied independent and undetermined discharge through a surface play, the controlled parts are thrust into an aggregated phrase that projects meaning as a destination or culmination to a gaze. Like capital (its economic counterpart) grammar extends a law of value to new objects by a process of totalization, reducing the free play of the fragments to the status of delimited, organising parts within an intended larger whole. Signifiers appear and are then subordinately organised into these larger units whose culmination is a meaning which is then invested in a further aggregation. Grammar's law is a combinatory, totalising logic that excludes at all costs any fragmentary life. It is clear that grammar effects a meaning whose form is that of *a surplus value generated by an aggregated group of working parts for immediate investment into an extending chain of meaning.* The concern of grammar homologizes the capitalistic concern for accumulation, profit and investment in a future goal.[357]

Grammar behaves as an overarching law that controls the otherwise liberated flow of meanings by coercing the small and fragmentary units of meaning into wholes. The potential autonomy, or lack of determination, of linguistic units and the free play of meanings which could arise is suppressed by grammatical rules which ensure that all fragmented meanings are managed for the good of a singular and 'higher' meaning.

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[357] Steve McCaffery, 'Language Writing: from Productive to Libidinal Economy' (1980), *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986* (New York: Roof Books, 1986), pp. 143-158 (p. 151).

Grammar enables language to serve a capitalist social-economic structure through its means of hierarchical organisation which reflects the way that dominant social power operates.

McCaffery goes on to say how commodity fetishism is reflected in language in the way that conventional language use encourages a belief in representation as the unmediated reflection of extra-textual meaning through the text. He writes:

> Fetishism is a mechanism of occlusion that displaces and eclipses the true nature of commodities as the products of human labour and interaction, detaching them magically from their productive bases and presenting them as self-perpetuating "things" that take place within social circulation as an exchange value. The referential fetish in language is inseparable from the representational theory of the sign. Proposed as intentional, as always "about" some extra-linguistic thing, language must always refer beyond itself to a corresponding reality. [. . .] The referential fetish thrives on the myth of *transparent signification*, on words as innocent, unproblemative sign-posts to a monological message or intention; it wants a message as a product to be consumed with as little intention as possible drawn to the words' dialectical engagements.[358]

Concrete poetry does not follow the traditional linear structure of the sentence which has been discussed in the last chapter and for a poem to be ungrammatical in such a way where the experience of the text is not grounded by a dominant meaning is for McCaffery a way of resisting the legitimisation of capitalist power by conventional referential language. McCaffery's argument is that the poetry of the Language School takes the disruption to univocal meaning by modern poetry a stage further by freeing

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[358] Ibid., pp. 151-152.

instinctual bodily energy otherwise controlled by the symbolic codes of capitalism. McCaffery, though, had already made this argument during the time of the Concrete poetry movement as has been seen when speaking about sound poetry. McCaffery is nevertheless suggesting, here, that post-modern poetry after the nineteen sixties is a strategy of desublimation against capitalist sublimation, and I will suggest later on in this chapter that Concrete poetry was a strategy of desublimation against a specific type of cultural absorption which can be identified as capitalist institutionalized desublimation.

Whilst it has been assumed that the formal poem was on the side of a conservative society, the argument of Nichol, and the theory of McCaffery which has been suggested to apply to the Concrete poem, means that the formal poem engages with language in a way that can be seen as opposed to the capitalist status quo. As has been described in the context of Fluxus England West, the formal work of art was critiqued by left-wing politics on the grounds that it supported the ideology of the work of art as autonomous and divorced from history. I want to now suggest that within the Concrete poetry movement in Britain a formal aesthetic was seen as politically opposed to the capitalist status quo. Dowden's essay in *Poetmeat* which criticised Concrete poetry was a response to Sharkey's essay, 'An Explanation of Poesie-Concrete in a 1000 Words? In One Word? The WORD', in the previous issue of *Poetmeat*. The poet Chris Torrance in his essay, 'Oral & Visual Poetry' in *Poetmeat* had also responded to Sharkey by describing Concrete poetry as in danger of becoming an 'obsessional backwater of preoccupation with technique and paraphernalia'[359] Sharkey had described Concrete poetry in Britain as arising out of a

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[359] Chris Torrance, 'Oral & Visual Poetry', *Poetmeat*, No. 7 (1965), unpaginated, p. 2 of 2.

reaction against what he saw as an ineffectual beautiful aesthetic in both traditional and modern verse that reflected society's control over language. He writes:

> nearly all "modern poetry" & "poetry of the day" written and printed throughout the western hemisphere is decadent. A regression backwards in time to the poetic problems & era of pound/ eliot/ c. williams. Included in this category is the so-called avant-garde of "beat poetry" and its decadent offshoot "english beat poetry" – the first through williams back to whitman, the latter through the former back to georgian nature verse. POETMEAT is a good example of this: words words and more words set in pretty verse patterns & called poetry (sic).[360]

For Sharkey post-modern lyrical verse did not have social relevance in comparison to the formal Concrete poem and its attempt to re-invigorate poetic language as what he saw as a confrontation with consumer culture's appropriation of language through advertising and mass media. He goes on to say that '[p]eep outside and poetmeatpoets will see the adman's succinct unconscious take-off of haiku on any billboard', to which 'amiddle the entangled word-jungle of little & large magazines; newspapers; adman's drivel; radio; television & telstar, poesie concrete aims (if it has any aims) to revitalise the language anew by concentrating on the word as symbol of itself (sic)'.[361]

The belief that rational and irrational styles corresponded to right and left-wing politics respectively is challenged further by Houédard for whom I will suggest the formal aesthetic of the Concrete poem is considered to be a specific break with representation and so the side of left-wing politics. At a symposium on destruction in art on the 23rd May 1966 organised by Peter Holliday at the Ravensbourne College of Art and Design, Houédard suggests that the formal aesthetic of Concrete poetry came

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[360] John Sharkey, 'An Explanation of Posie-Concrete in a 1000 Words? In One Word? The WORD', *Poetmeat*, No. 6 (1964), unpaginated, p. 1 of 3.

as a progressive development in the anti-realism of abstract art. This symposium was called 'Change as Creative Destruction' and involved Houédard and the artists Boyle, Metzger, and Ivor Davies. The discussion covered the themes of destruction, creation, obsolescence, change, auto-creation, self-destruction, and violence in the arts, as listed in a record and essay about the symposium by Houédard called *Aesthetics of the Death Wish?*. A photo-documentation of the symposium was published in issue six of Wolf Vostell's magazine *Dé-coll/age* (July, 1967). Metzger's manifestos on machine, auto-creative, and auto-destructive art in issue 32 of *Ark: Journal of the Royal College of Art* magazine (Summer, 1962) were an influence on Houédard's move into Concrete poetry.

In Houédard's account of the symposium he describes the turn to destruction in the post-war arts as part of a historical development of Constructivism. As he says in *Aesthetics of the Death Wish?*, 'it seems the west has reached the point where it can no longer avoid exploring the destructive envelope to constructive art'.[362] Houédard sees creative destruction as a logical progression within the Constructivist tradition after the development of its structural aesthetic had become exhausted in the West by the late nineteen fifties. Bill's use of the term 'concrete' as a description of the image becoming completely non-referential is a description of art intended to become, as Houédard says, 'an addition to nature rather than the imitation of anything else in its environment'[363] and where art as object becomes undermined anyway in that, as he goes on to say, it is 'matter that is convertible into energy'.[364] Realist art which attempts 'to make an image of the static essence of a thing' or tries 'to capture &

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[361] Ibid.
[362] Dom Sylvester Houédard, *Aesthetic of the Death Wish?* (London: Destruction/ Creation, 1966), pp. 1-10 (p. 1).
[363] Ibid.
[364] Ibid.

freeze one moment of its history'[365] is countered by the non-referentiality of Concrete art. Kinetic art and Concrete poetry are then seen by Houédard as post-Concrete art developments because through the temporal they expand on his reading of Concrete art as a critique of realist art with its attempt to try and make permanent a version of reality through the referential image. Kinetic art and Concrete poetry 'defreeze the object'[366] as Houédard says by introducing either apparent or actual movement into the art-object so that perceptual experience for the viewer is that of continual change.

Creation and destruction in art are two sides of the same coin for Houédard and appear in realist art, where creation in realist art involves a death-like stasis, and in the abstract art of Kinetic and Concrete poetry where creation involves change and so the death of consecutive states which constitutes its dynamic. As Houédard says: 'the frozen (in art as in society) is death – but life implies change & the death of successive states – it implies the transformation of past into future thru an ephemeral constantly destroyed present'.[367] It is in the rational aesthetic of Constructivism that Houédard finds an abstract aesthetic concerned with change and the temporal. Constructivist art in its auto-destructive and post-Concrete mode can give rise to an art of actual destruction or a representation of destruction. Auto-Destructive art, as Houédard says, 'can destroy images or create images of destruction – can destroy illusions or reality'.[368] Kinetic Art and Concrete poetry is described in the essay as a non-realist art which uses movement and time to destroy a sense of the permanent. Houédard in the symposium discussion describes destruction as 'fundamentally past-present-future' and that the introduction of the temporal 'in concrete poetry [. . .] was

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[365] Ibid.
[366] Ibid.
[367] Ibid.
[368] Ibid.

reached through the sequence: matter-kinetic-change-destruction (sic)'.[369] Houédard reads destruction in art as a concept for the destruction of, and the release of aesthetic experience from, the control of representation. This destruction is presented as a description of time, which in the case of Concrete poetry, takes place in the otherwise formal work of art.

I would suggest that one reason that prevents a simple association of the Concrete poetry movement's formal aesthetic with the conservative ideology of aesthetic autonomy was that the formal work of art for both Concrete poetry and Kinetic art movements did not necessarily mean autonomy as supposed by Fluxus England West. I would suggest that Fluxus England West made a simplistic association between the ideology of aesthetic autonomy with stylistic formality, and this association cannot be sustained when it comes to kineticism whereby the informal is made to interrupt the formal. The otherwise rational aesthetic of Kinetic art involved an ideological shift from the work of art as stable and self-sufficient object to the work of art as process in that it involved the phenomenon of movement which upset an understanding of the work of art as physically consistent in space and time. A dematerialization of language became the subject of the kinetic poetry of the U.S. artist Lilliane Lijn who moved to London in 1966. Two of her machine sculptures from 1963 and 1968 which were exhibited at the exhibition 'Arlington Quadro' from 3rd August to 15th September 1968 were moving cone shaped structures with words painted on their surface. At one end the words could be read whilst at the other end the words would become indecipherable with the movement of the cone. Lijn writes in her manifesto, 'Poem Machines = Sound Vision', that the materiality of the language is transformed into energy. She says: 'When I put words on cylinders and cones and make

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[369] Ibid., p. 6.

Poemmachines, I want the word to be seen in movement, splitting itself into pure vibration until it becomes the energy of sound.'[370] For Lijn it was language itself which existed in both formal and informal states and so could be used as material for challenging artistic autonomy from within formal structure. Her kinetic poetry took visible language and destructured it with movement until it became analogous to the informal state of sound.

I now want to suggest that Houédard sees the formal aesthetic of Concrete poetry as anti-representational which he figuratively calls destructive and attempts to re-situate the concept of destruction outside the social protest ideology in which Metzger had intended for auto-destructive art and discuss it as an anti-representative art. Before I situate this description of the formal aesthetic of the Concrete poem within left-wing politics, I want to explain the context behind Houédard's essay and describe how destructive art arrived as a non-formal and political protest art in Britain which the Concrete poetry movement was involved with.

In 1959 the German-British artist Gustav Metzger published his first manifesto on what he called auto-destructive art which was a type of art which destroyed itself. He gave his first demonstration of this in 1960 at the Temple Gallery in London by painting acid on to nylon which disintegrated. Metzger's lecture and demonstration in October 1960 at the Heretics Society at Trinity College, Cambridge University was organised by Sommerville and attended by Burroughs and Gysin who also gave a lecture and performance on the cut-up. A three day event called the Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) took place in the Africa Centre in King Street, London on the 9th, 10th, and 11th September 1966 organised by Sharkey and Metzger and with Houédard and Cobbing as members of the symposium's honorary committee. The others
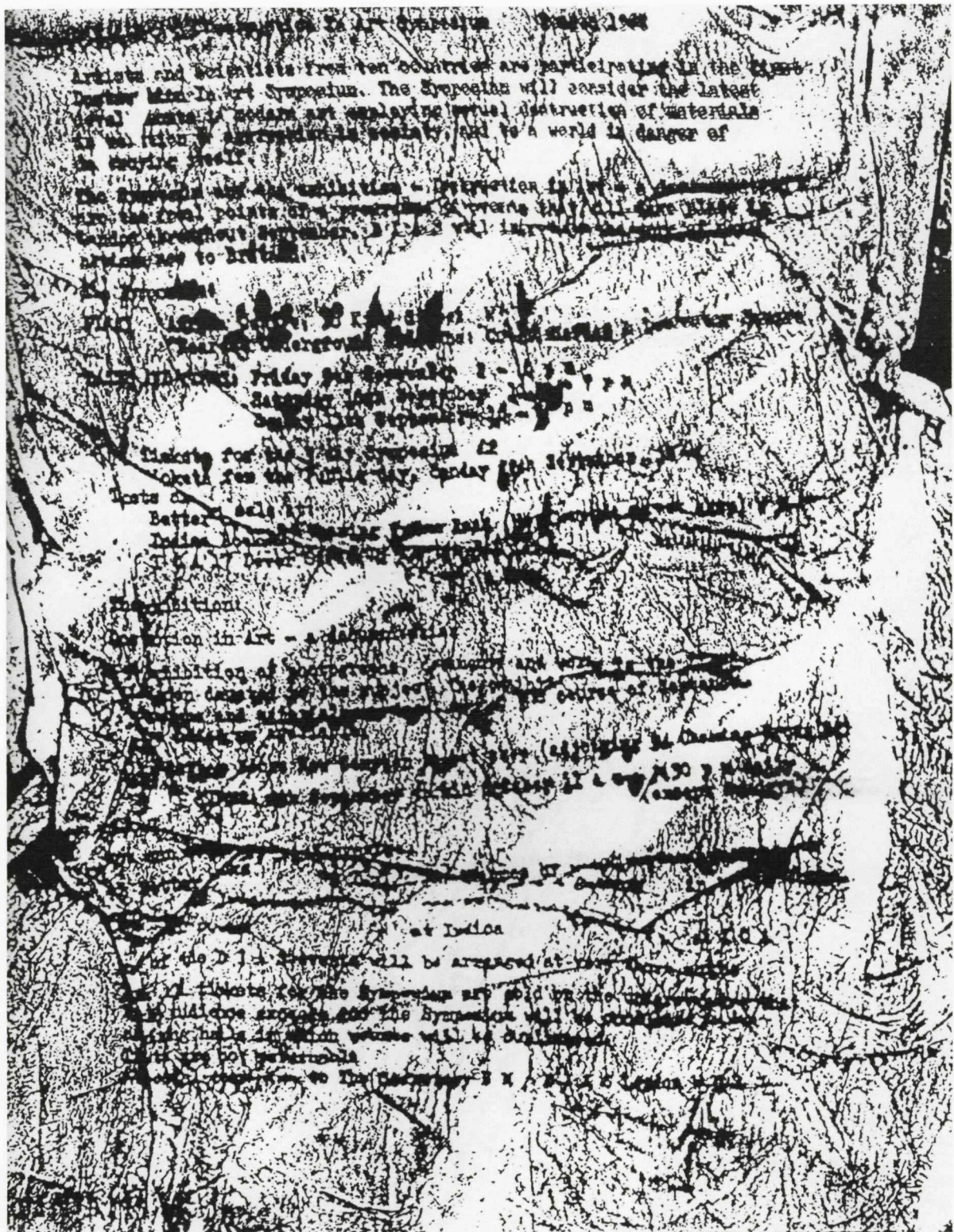
[370] Liliane Lijn, 'Poem Machine = Sound Vision', *Arlington-Quadro* (Sherborne: South Street Publications, 1968), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1.

members were Mario Amaya, Roy Ascott, Enrico Baj, Ivor Davies, Jim Haynes, Barry Miles, Frank Popper, and Wolf Vostell.

The symposium was part of a larger focus on destruction in art that had been taking place since May 1966 with the Ravensbourne symposium and which had been officially launched on the 31st August 1966 with a discussion on destruction at the St Bride Institute chaired by the artist Ralph Ortiz. DIAS was the largest international gathering of modern artists in Britain since Surrealism and Constructivism of the nineteen thirties. It included thirty events by over twenty artists, and twenty-eight more artists, writers, and composers sent work around the theme of destruction. DIAS received coverage in the daily press, on radio, and on television. Extracts from selected papers given at the symposium were published in the December 1966 issue of *Studio International*. An article reporting on DIAS in *The Guardian* newspaper draws attention to its destruction of literature, observing that the 'destroyers-in-art include writers who obliterate words cut odd words out of dictionaries and paste them up haywire and tear books apart and shuffle the pages so that the narrative now reads surprisingly'.[371] Better Books in London hosted some of the discussions and performances which included a presentation of films by Cobbing called 'Meditation on Violence', Jean Toche's 'Typewriter Destruction', talks on censorship and violence by John Calder and Jeff Nuttall, Anthony Scott's presentation called 'On Chopped Writing', and sound poetry by Blaine and Chopin. On 30th September there was a final event at the Mercury Theatre which included a tape from the 'Destructive Art Group of Buenos Aires' called 'Ideas for Destruction Applied to Music and Poetry' and a tape by Carl Fernbach-Flarsheim called 'Pages from an Instruction Manual'. A documentation exhibition of the symposium was held at Better Books

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[371] The Guardian, 'Art that is Ripe for Destruction' (9th September 1966), *Destruction in Art Symposium: Preliminary Report* (London: DIAS, 1967), p. 1.

Figure 11

from September to October 1966 and Cobbing organised its destruction in the basement. Cobbing would later hold a series of destructive art events at Better Books called 'Bookplumbing' in 1967.

The Surrealist writer George Bataille describes his concept of 'informe' as a materialism of formless raw matter which avoids becoming an idealism of material because it includes an engagement with a human and historical reality. He writes in his 'Critical Dictionary': 'Materialism will be considered as a senile form of idealism to the extent that it fails to ground itself directly on psychological or social facts, rather than on abstractions such as artificially isolated physical phenomena.'[372] This quote is helpful in suggesting that it was not so much in the act of destruction that destructive art was politically engaged but in a mediation with historical reality that the materialism of the destroyed object provided. Cobbing, who had printed the programme of events for DIAS on his duplicator machine, destroyed the stencils for this programme on the machine in stages and printed them as a set of five hundred versions to record the process, 'Figure [11]'. This type of visual poetry represented the object in the state of destruction although as auto-destructive art it was the actual process of the printing as opposed to it being turned into a finished work of art which constituted its aesthetic significance, and a work whose material processuality might be continued if used as a script for vocal performance. I would suggest that in the context of destructive art as an art for political and social awareness, Cobbing's visual-verbal collages avoid a fetishism of materiality. Cobbing's prints of destruction for DIAS are material traces of his service to bureaucracy and the duplicator machine's conventional bureaucratic use to facilitate economically useful work being subverted.

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[372] George Bataille, 'Critical Dictionary' (1929-1930) (extract), *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 483-484 (p. 484).

DIAS was intended as a means of social protest against the destruction waged by the dominant culture. A press release by Metzger in May 1966 announces the event as the following: 'The cataclysmic increase in world destructive potential since 1945 is inextricably linked with the most disturbing tendencies in modern art, and the proliferation of programmes of research into aggression and destruction in society.'[373] The symposium gathered together artists, writers, psychologists, and sociologists in order to discuss destruction in society and the arts. DIAS as part of its social protest against an aggressive post-war society meant challenging a segregation between specific disciplines which was illustrated in Sharkey's poster for the event which depicted a target board made from three circles representing the themes of the arts, destruction, and the sciences which the symposium as an arrow was to find links between. DIAS was followed by the International Dialectics of Liberation Congress at the Roundhouse in Chalk Farm, London held from 15th July to 30th July, 1967 which was organised by the psychiatrists Ronald Laing, Joseph Berke, Leon Redler, and David Cooper. This was also concerned with the demystification of violence in society and in developing different kinds of political action. A series of lectures, films, and discussions had also taken place on violence from January to June 1964 at the ICA.

DIAS was symptomatic at the time of the arrival of non-formalist arts as a radical assault on social sensibility in what can be said to be a re-discovery of Dada. The Concrete poetry movement's involvement in this type of art meant for Finlay, as he says in a letter to Houédard in 1965, that his attitude towards the movement changed since its rational purity was compromised. He writes:

I feel, now, that concrete has become something very far from my own

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[373] Gustav Metzger, *Destruction in Art Symposium: Preliminary Report* (London: DIAS, 1967), p. 2.

aspirations (I don't say achievements), and indeed the whole picture of things

has changed greatly. I think it would be best, and perhaps essential for me, to

work away on my own and forget movements, critics, responses etc., for I no

longer understand what so many of my friends are doing. . To give some

examples, I can't understand your chronology. . that you should for instance

seriously list the Polluted Lakes, which are almost wilfully ugly. . . or that,

having listed them, John Willett should praise your 'verve' in the same breath

(almost) as calling POTH 15 'second-rate'. . There is some standard, or lack of

standard, here, which I cannot see. . Again, you list your article in The Insect

Trust, yet you must know that the editor of that cannot even have READ it,

since he printed your directions etc. in the text. . All this is quite beyond me,

and has nothing – that I can see – to do with the pure intention that concrete

once was . . . Again, I find the new 'opening' hideous, and I really feel that you

would all praise Auschwitz if it was presented to you as 'a happening', and the

hydrogen bomb if was presented as a piece of auto-destructive art. . . I cannot

say I like things which I detest, and I begin to feel that all the praise of each-

other's work, within concrete, is something more ruthless than any kind of

blame [. . .] It becomes obvious that my own sense of things is outside of

what's going on, and that I had better try to work away on my own, like I used

to in the old days before concrete, when after all, it never occurred to me that

anyone could like my work and when I did work, it was purely, and without

hope. I ought to try to do that again, however difficult it seems. It could not be

more difficult than feeling so much sheer misery, and stupid anger, at what

concrete has become . . at the way it has been made into something fashionable,

to accommodate the lowest levels and the scrapings of the international gutter [.

. .] So I think it's better if I don't write for a time, and try to find the kind of sense of things I had before. [. . .] I've got a desperate need to work in some way that clearly doesn't fit the way things have become . . and I cannot take part in things I don't like just for 'practical' reasons of getting published or whatever.[374]

Finlay's letter comes in reaction to Houédard listing Levy's 'Polluted Lake' series of Concrete poetry books in a chronology of visual poetry he compiled for the 'Between Poetry and Painting' exhibition, criticism from the editor John Willett about Finlay's magazine *Poor.Old.Tired.Horse* (*P.O.T.H.*), the publishing format of presses such as *Openings Press*, and the violence of the happening. The movement appeared to Finlay to have had its formalism compromised and to have come to an end because of this by 1965. It is this emergence of anti-formalism in Britain during the mid-nineteen sixties caused by the discovery of the Dada movement in Britain and the U.S. which for Finlay meant the end to Concrete poetry and its search for autonomous form. Finlay objects to both the aesthetic of non-formalism on an issue of taste and to its radical politics, and I would suggest that Finlay is reacting to what is around the mid-nineteen sixties the beginning of the Concrete poetry movement's political phase.

I will now discuss how it was the formal aesthetic of the Concrete poem which was also on the side of revolutionary left wing politics in the context of Houédard's account of it as a destruction of representation. Houédard writes in his 1962 essay, 'Beat and Afterbeat: A Parallel Condition of Poetry and Theology', how in the new post-war structure of society in Germany, England, France, and America both religion and poetry had become reified. He writes: 'The unexpected the syncopated the mad crazy ragtime jazz of the divine is all provided for & understandingly expected by

planned integrated managerial societies: revolution is contained.'[375] For Houédard, moments of radical liberation in the post-war arts were prone to being absorbed and cancelled out by the dominant society, reflecting an increasing level of control over an individual's spontaneous desires. I would suggest that this type of control through cultural appropriation can be described as what Marcuse calls 'institutionalised desublimation' and which Houédard implicitly found Concrete poetry and Kinetic art to be responses to. Sublimation and desublimation are psychoanalytical terms which Marcuse uses in his revision of Marxism through Freudian theory. I have already said how sublimation means to convert libidinal energy into more socially acceptable forms and desublimation means to free this libidinal energy trapped in socially acceptable forms and return it back to a libidinal state. I would suggest that desublimation in art, associated with the aesthetic experience of the sublime, appertains to the release of libidinal energy from the control of artistic traditions, and that sublimation in art, associated with the aesthetic experience of the beautiful, appertains to the control of libidinal energy by artistic traditions. It is desublimation in the arts which potentially provides a radical challenge to the status quo and the reason why that a break with the convention of representation might be considered to be politically radical.

The U.S. artist Jean Toche who participated at DIAS, implies in a letter to Cobbing how desublimation as violence was necessary for social revolt. He writes:

> As we live in a cultural society which is powerfully organised, both in its
>
> oppressive manner to exploit people, and its repressive manner to protect and
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> expand that exploitation, violence is often the only possible way for the

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[374] Ian Hamilton Finlay, Letter to Dom Sylvester Houédard (Unpublished, 5th November, 1965), unpaginated, p. 2 of 2. dsh Archive, Collection of Modern Literary Archives, The John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester.

oppressed people to make their voice heard. In that perspective, I believe that

violence is not only justified, but necessary for survival.'[376]

As Houédard's quote above suggests, however, not only is desublimation necessary

for social revolt but an art of authentically liberated energy was not easy to achieve in

a post-war environment of cultural control. Desublimation was most associated with

not just anti-representation in the arts with but anti-formalism with the emergence of

destructive art. The U.S. poet D. A. Levy's June 1966 manifesto called 'The Para-

Concrete Manifesto' published in issue thirteen of *Thaloc* helps to situate a non-

formalist Concrete poetry within a context of resistance to political and social

conservatism. He writes: 'Our Concrete poems are written to purify our minds &

intestines of all western sophisticated hypocrisy apathetic – impotent – outrages [. . .]

each poem transcends words in a successful attempt to communicate ground zero –

the joy of nuclear destruction promised by the present political and religious regimes

[. . .] each poem – a new death of WORDS AS ART (sic)'.[377] Levy's 1965 'Polluted

Lake Series', which included work by Morgan and Houédard, foregrounded the

materiality of its sparse booklets, with pages cut unevenly, the use of rough paper, and

a rubber stamp printing of their word and letter assemblages, as a symbolic means of

reflecting and countering the destructive forces in society.

In Houédard's essay, *An Aesthetics of the Death Wish?*, he described formal

Concrete poetry as destructive and by implication a poetry of desublimation.

Houédard's quote above suggests a political reason as to why he saw the formal art of

Concrete and Kinetic as desublimated forms in that as liberated libidinal energy they

had not been contrived by cultural habit. Institutionalized desublimation is a concept

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[375] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Beat and Afterbeat: A Parallel Condition of Poetry and Theology?' *The Aylesford Review*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Summer, 1962), pp. 140-156 (p. 143).

[376] Jean Toche, Letter to Bob Cobbing (9th February, 1969), unpaginated, page 1 of 1. Bob Cobbing Papers, British Library. Correspondence 2: Box 3; Envelope 4-6, 1960s.

explaining how modern society engineers the release of instinctual energy in order to control and exploit its power. Marcuse explains institutionalized desublimation when he writes the following in *One-Dimensional Man*:

> This mobilization and administration of libido may account for much of the voluntary compliance, the absence of terror, the pre-established harmony between individual needs and socially-required desires, goals, and aspirations. The technological and political conquest of the transcending factors in human existence, so characteristic of advanced industrial civilization, here asserts itself in the instinctual sphere: satisfaction in a way which generates submission and weakens the rationality of protest. The range of socially permissible and desirable satisfaction is greatly enlarged, but through this satisfaction, the Pleasure Principle is reduced – deprived of the claims which are irreconcilable with the established society. Pleasure, thus adjusted, generates submission. [. . .] Institutionalized desublimation thus appears to be an aspect of the "conquest of transcendence" achieved by the one-dimensional society. Just as this society tends to reduce, and even absorb opposition (the qualitative difference!) in the realm of politics and higher culture, so it does in the instinctual sphere.'[378]

This concept of institutionalized desublimation reflected a sense amongst revolutionary thinkers that society was being insidiously repressed at the time and which called for authentic forms of opposition to the status quo to be recognised and distinguished from the inauthentic. This opposition was made in the belief in an authentic human nature that was being alienated within the self by social and cultural ideology and the use of an environment serving a capitalist socio-economic system.

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[377] D. A. Levy, 'The Para-Concrete Manifesto', *Thaloc*, No. 13 (1966), unpaginated, page 1 of 1.
[378] Marcuse, Herbert, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1986), pp. 75-79.

Desublimation in the arts as anti-representation has been said to be on the side of radical politics, but the post-war period meant the growth of an inauthentic institutionalised desublimation as a form of insidious control of desire. Institutionalised desublimation as described by Houédard and Marcuse existed alongside another kind which characterised the post-war period which the critic A. Alvarez identified in his 1962 essay, 'The New Poetry or Beyond the Gentility Principle' when he writes: 'What, I suggest, has happened in the last half century is that we are gradually being made to realize that all our lives, even those of the most genteel and enislanded, are influenced profoundly by forces which have nothing to do with gentility, decency or politeness. Theologians would call these forces evil, psychologists, perhaps, libido. Either way, they are the forces of disintegration which destroy the old standards of civilization. Their public faces are those of two world wars, of the concentration camps, of genocide, and the threat of nuclear war.'[379] For British poetry to remain relevant for Alvarez it had to speak about the destructive history of the world at that time.

Inauthentic desublimation existed, then, as a form of oppressive destruction waged by the dominant culture, which DIAS and auto-destructive art had been a symbolic protest against, as well as a form of insidious control through appropriated desire waged by the dominant culture called institutional desublimation. These two forms of desublimation are implicitly acknowledged by Houédard in the introduction to the catalogue of the 'Freewheel' exhibition when he speaks of 'our shame at being human – at our squalid degradations of mind by mind that operate on every level - & not just obvious levels like segregation genocide censorship vietnam curialism & torture – but the more sophisticated corruptions of social structure – the pseudo-facts & non-

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[379] A. Alvarez, 'The New Poetry or Beyond the Gentility Principle', *The New Poetry* (1962), pp. 21-32 (p. 26).

events'[380] Houédard implies in the quote given above from his essay 'Beat and Afterbeat: A Parallel Condition of Poetry and Theology?' that the non-formal aesthetic of Beat poetry was in danger by the nineteen sixties of being absorbed by the status quo and becoming reified. The formal poetry of Concrete on the other hand was seen by him to arrive as an authentic anti-representational poetry and desublimation of aesthetic form. I would suggest that Houédard's questioning of what was politically radical in poetry takes into account Finlay's complaint in his letter quoted above that anti-formalism might not be as successful in its opposition to the status quo as was generally thought and was a response to a new form of dominant power in the post-war period. The formal aesthetic of Concrete poetry is seen by Houédard to be potentially a literary strategy of authentic desublimation in response to institutionalised desublimation.

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[380] Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Introduction', *Freewheel*, (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1967), unpaginated, p. 1 of 2.

4.2 Concrete Poetry's Politics of Participation

I have so far discussed the radical politics of Concrete poetry's abstraction and its breaking with representation and more specifically with its relationship with a non-formal and formal aesthetic. In these previous sections I have considered the politics of the text and in this section I will consider the politics of the relationship between the reader and the text by discussing the political dimension of participation.

I want to begin by discussing the politics of participation through the Marxist critic Peter Bürger in his 1974 book, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, and in relation to the Concrete poetry movement. Bürger argues that the breakdown of the divide between author and reader occurs during the original avant-garde period. He offers a Marxist reading of modern art which is counter to a formalist analysis which takes the art object as it is and does not question the assumptions which have helped to construct that art object. Bürger tries to understand the function that art has in the context of its time, and more specifically examines the effect art has upon the institution of art. Bürger's reading of the original avant-garde is influenced by Herbert Marcuse's 1937 essay, 'The Affirmative Character of Culture'. Marcuse argues that art in capitalist society is a reaction against such a society because art contains a realm of truth which has been repressed and yet by being an aesthetic realm outside of society means that change to society is mitigated. The affirmative character of art describes this contradiction about art in a capitalist society whereby art affirms the existence of a better world free from the struggle of survival, and also affirms the reality of capitalism by helping to prevent this better world from becoming a reality because the desire for it is satisfied in the aesthetic realm of art. From Marcuse's analysis of art, Bürger takes the perception that the art object is not given as a thing in itself and that

instead it has a function which is determined by the 'framing conditions'[381] of art, that is, the institution of art, or the cultural assumptions which underpin a work of art at a given moment in time. The function of art in capitalist society is to legitimise the representations of the bourgeois as the dominant class. What distinguishes the institution of art in the bourgeois society that came to dominance in the eighteenth century from its existence in courtly and sacred societies is that it became divorced from praxis, or everyday life experience. This autonomy characterises the bourgeois institution of art, where the production and reception of works are transformed into individual acts and where the purpose or function of art is to maintain art's separation from praxis. In pre-capitalist stages of history art had been produced and received in a mostly collective capacity and with a function that was practical in that art was used for religion during the middle ages and then for a ruling sovereign during feudalism. With the arrival of capitalism art no longer serves a practical purpose and exists within an institution autonomous from society of which the conditions ascribed to art justify the rule of the bourgeois class. In the nineteenth century with the emergence of 'art for art's sake' where form was foregrounded over content, the institution of art's separation from life praxis became the implicit content of art-works as art became conscious of its own socially ineffectuality. This in turn according to Bürger provoked the emergence of the original avant-garde to try and overcome art's autonomy. The aestheticism of the nineteenth century was a reaction against the practical world of capitalism's means-end rationality and had made visible art's autonomy, that is, the social disinterestedness that underlined the institution of art. Both the art object and the creator assume an appearance of being self-sufficient and autonomous of society. The institution of art responded to its becoming visibly autonomous by becoming

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[381] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 12.

categorised as art, Duchamp, as Bürger says, 'not only unmasks the art market where the signature means more than the quality of the work', he also 'radically questions the very principle of art in bourgeois society according to which the individual is considered the creator of the work of art.'[385] Duchamp's works negated the notion of the individual creator. We have already seen in the previous chapter how the condition of the creator as a distinct autonomous consciousness was challenged by Concrete poetry. Under capitalism the individual is also taken to be the receiver of art. Bürger draws on the examples of poetry to show how the reception of an art object as an individual act distinguishable from that of production is attacked by the avant-garde so that the categories of reception and production are brought together. The reader or spectator becomes a participator which negates the bourgeois category of the individual. He writes:

> Given the avant-gardist intention to do away with art as a sphere that is separate
>
> from the praxis of life, it is logical to eliminate the antithesis between producer
>
> and recipient. It is no accident that both Tzara's instructions for the making of a
>
> Dadaist poem and Breton's for the writing of automatic texts have the character
>
> of recipes. This represents not only a polemical attack on the individual
>
> creativity of the artist; the recipe is to be taken quite literally as suggesting a
>
> possible activity on the part of the recipient. The automatic texts also should be
>
> read as guides to individual production. But such production is not to be
>
> understood as artistic production, but as part of a liberating life praxis. This is
>
> what is meant by Breton's demand that poetry be practised (*pratiquer la*
>
> *poesie*). Beyond the coincidence of producer and recipient that this demand
>
> implies, there is the fact that these concepts lose their meaning: producers and

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[384] Ibid.
[385] Ibid., p. 52.

recipients no longer exist. All that remains is the individual who uses poetry as an instrument for living one's life as best one can.'[386]

The recipe for making texts as a means of making the reader a participator returns in the Concrete poetry movement. Rot's method for his students which he called 'Little Tentative Recipe' whilst teaching print making at Watford School of Art instructs a physically exhausting exercise of recycling material:

> Print until you can't stand it any more or you don't want to any more; take away for binding, for instance, the sheets which the machine cannot take any more (torn wrinkled, or beautiful according to someone's taste); don't' throw anything away. As soon as you can't stand this any more, have another recipe; if you can't stand anything any more, give it up; if you don't want to give it up, go on until you can't stand it any more.[387]

The cut-up method was also another recipe for making texts. Gysin's poem 'Minutes to Go' reads, however, not only as a poem prescribing the cut-up method but also as its manifesto where Gysin and Burroughs are by implication mythically portrayed as the authors of cataclysmic changes in the fabric of reality. They are announced as 'the hallucinated' who 'have come to tell you that yr utilities/ are being shut off dreams monitored thought directed'[388] and that although, as they say, 'the writing machine is for everybody' it is these two authors who alone bring 'the system'[389] of the cut-up. The 'you' that is addressed in the poem are the masses whose minds are being declared as taken over by the cut-up writers. They are the authors who are leading the

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[386] Ibid., p. 53.
[387] Dieter Rot, 'Little Tentative Recipe' (1968) *Art Without Boundaries 1950-70*, ed. by Philip Thompson, Philip Williams, and Gerald Woods (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), p. 174.
[388] Brion Gysin, 'Minutes to Go', *Minutes to Go* (1960) (San Francisco: Beach Books, 1968), pp. 3-5 (p. 3).
[389] Ibid., p. 5.

readers and listeners via the praxis of the cut-up and which thus re-asserts the individual artist as central to the work of art.

I would suggest that this reading of the poem-manifesto of the cut-up, which finds that the category of the individual is asserted, supports Bürger's insight into the duplicity of the avant-garde in the post-war period. As well as providing a theory explaining the purpose of avant-garde art, Bürger also identifies a separation between an original and authentic avant-garde on one hand and an inauthentic neo-avant-garde on the other. He argues that the modern art movements at the beginning of the twentieth century came as a genuine attack against the bourgeois institution of art, whereas those in the nineteen sixties, which he derogatorily calls a neo-avant-garde, did not because their stylistic radicalism did not attack the autonomous institution of art and instead merely supported it. He writes that 'the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art* and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions', and that this 'is true independently of the consciousness artists have of their activity, a consciousness that may perfectly well be avant-gardiste', for '[i]t is the status of their products, not the consciousness artists have of their activity, that defines the social effect of works'.[390] The crisis in the concept of avant-gardism in the post-war period would mean that for Bürger art in the post-war period was not just an inauthentic repetition of the past but that it lacked a political function. Bürger's argument, though, that the neo-avant-garde was politically inauthentic is based on a generalised analysis of art to suit his argument. The situation during the nineteen sixties with respect to this argument was more complicated than Bürger makes out. Bürger argues that the art which resembles that of the original avant-garde in the nineteen sixties exists as autonomous works of art and not as anti-art as it had once

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[390] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 58.

done. He writes that 'the happening, for example, which could be called neo-avant-gardiste, can no longer attain the protest value of Dadaist manifestations, even though they may be prepared and executed more perfectly than the former.'[391]

Although I have given some examples of recipes for making texts during the nineteen sixties, I want to suggest that Bürger's argument that avant-garde art challenges the category of the individual in production and reception was actively continued by the Concrete poetry movement even though this challenge was re-discovered as not specifically against the institution of art but on the side of libertarian politics.

The Concrete poetry movement was involved in undermining the elitist position of the artist through collaboration. Gomringer in his essay, 'Poetry as a Means for the Structuring of a Social Environment', suggests that the Romantic concept of the poet as a special individual was undermined through the Concrete poem's technocratic involvement with other creative sectors of the culture. He writes:

> Concrete poetry distinguishes itself decisively from many other attempts to group poets and poetry in that it saw poetry as a great intellectual playing field and the poet as rule maker and umpire. From its very beginnings, Concrete poetry saw the poet as a conscious participant in the team of creative builders ("Gestalter" tr.), who, drawn from the most diverse fields and working within and across their own disciplines, work together on the structuring of society. Although schooled in literary history, I myself had to shed that sort of preparation and go to school again, this time in the fields of architecture and business, graphics and typography, advertising and argonometrics. Even while I would try to apply traditional literary concepts – hesitatingly, for I could sense

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[391] Ibid., p. 57.

that they were no longer really valid – it became clear from my own work that these forces could not be considered merely the latest developments of an exclusively literary tradition. Neither could the poet, I realised, continue in his traditional role as Poet, for as such he remains – despite all the favourable reviews in the world – a lonely, perhaps courageous, asocial figure. The question arises as to whether such a figure can even relate to the language of the other creative builders.[392]

I would suggest that the elitist position of the poet was undermined in a different way by the movement in Britain in that the audience was brought closer to the poetry as an activity to be involved with. The Concrete poetry movement in Britain was involved in becoming more of a democratic art by undermining the elitist position of the artist which depended upon the viewer being passive and kept distant from the work. Towards the end of the nineteen sixties the Concrete poetry movement in Britain showed signs of distancing itself from the institution of the art gallery. The event 'Pavilions in the Parks' between the 1st August to 29th October 1968 was a three month pilot scheme at Cheyne Walk, London for a proposal to show a full range of the arts on permanent sites in parks and open spaces. For the twelve weeks of the scheme there were different kinds of activity at all times on the three areas of the site. This scheme was covered in *Agentzia*. The scheme used a method of selection by chance which the artist Joe Tilson saw as an attempt by the scheme to break down as he says 'the monolithic structure of the international art world'.[393] For Cobbing there was a distance between the public and an elite of the commercial art world and he saw the scheme as opposing this alienation. As he says in *Agentzia*, 'the gap which exists at the moment between artists and those associated with them and the general public,

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[392] Eugen Gomringer, 'Poetry as a Means for the Structuring of a Social Environment', *Visible Language* (Summer, 1976), pp. 227-241 (p. 228).

could be closed.'[394] This scheme was favorable to sound poetry which otherwise was restricted in its contact with an audience by the art gallery. The scheme was continued the following year in Forestdale in Surrey between 16th to 30th July which included an exhibition of posters, graphics, and sound with tape-recordings of Chopin and of music by the composers Christian Wolf, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Cage, a presentation of Concrete poetry by Verey, Sharkey, and Clark, readings of Albert-Birot and Antonin Artaud, a lecture on 'meta-art' by Jean-Claude Moineau, and performances by Cobbing and Chopin. 'A Festival of Sound' between 22nd to 29th August 1968 was also part of 'Pavilions in the Park'. Performances were given which included over a hundred items of sound poetry, and electronic and concrete music. Chopin performed and the poet Lilly Greenham from Spain gave a reading of sound poems by different poets at the Arts Laboratory. Cobbing's *An ABC in Sound* was read on the B.B.C. Third Programme, as was a survey of sound poetry on B.B.C. radio called 'The Exploding Sound'. There were also sound poems on tape by Dufrêne, the German poet Ernst Jandl, the French poet Paul de Vree, the Swedish poet Oke Hodell, and the U.S poets, Gysin, Ginsberg, and Michael McClure. A sound environment was set up in which the public could make their own sounds with objects provided which were then amplified and mixed to create an instant music, or read into a microphone that would contribute to a tape project for the festival. An electronic improvisational group from the Architectural Association in London were also present. Lockwood and Cobbing also gave a performance of a work consisting of sounds spontaneously made by a group they had convened at the Anti-University of London. The aim of the festival was to show the public the developments which had taken place internationally in sound poetry and electronic and concrete music and to

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[393] Joe Tilson, *Agentzia*, No. 2 (1968), unpaginated, page 1 of 1.
[394] Bob Cobbing, Ibid.

experience isolated sounds without regard for any potential for structured composition.

Sound poetry in Britain tried to end an alienation between artist and audience through a praxis of making. The sound poet Andrew Lloyd was involved in socialist, anarchist, and anti-war groups throughout the nineteen sixties and held sound poetry performances that were designed to make the audience active through collective rites, chants, and improvisation. In the fourth issue of *Stereo Headphones*, Lloyd perceives both an authentic and inauthentic avant-gardism like Bürger, but unlike him he does not dismiss the possibility for an authentic avant-garde to exist in the post-war period. He writes:

> Avant-garde I think is a term that has lost its meaning. Within the framework of
> 'pure art'. where anything is permissible including the traditional, & where
> little is effective i.e. revolutionary, because it is encapsulated, either within a
> small social grouping (the underground), or reduced to a passively perceived
> spectacle for one half hour of the day, a spectacle that hardly interacts at all
> with life experience . . . The only avant-garde is the movement which
> completely changes the social relationships in which art is embedded –
> passivity, encapsulation, elitism, commercialism, faddism & many other hack
> words.[395]

For Lloyd, an inauthentic avant-garde existed as a formally radical art which served aesthetic taste, whilst an authentic avant-garde was still possible in the post-war period as an art which attacked the alienated position of its audience.

I would suggest, though, that a challenge to bourgeois society was made by the Concrete poetry movement through an attack against the productive and receptive

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[395] Andrew Lloyd, Untitled Statement, *Stereo Headphones*, No. 4 (Spring, 1971), unpaginated, page 1 of 1.

conditions of art where the intention was not so much to undermine a so-called institution of art for its own sake, but to realise a politics of desublimation through which society might be transformed. For the French artist Jean-Jacques Lebel the theatrical performance of the happening directly challenged the bourgeois condition of art's reception because it was a new type of aesthetic language through which the masses could engage with and express themselves outside of the demands placed upon expression by dominant society. The 'Poets' Conference' in August 1965 at the Cardiff Arts Festival where Lebel, the English poet Jeff Nuttall, and the artists Tom Hudson and Philip Corner, organised a happening which invited the audience to bring an object to be processed and exchanged. This performance was stopped by the authorities when a pig was brought to be sacrificed. Lebel in his essay, 'A Point of View on Happenings from Paris', criticises the censorship of such radical art as a reflection of the authorities trying to prevent the capability of the happening transforming the spectator into a participator. He writes:

> What we have been doing with happenings is not just giving people something
>
> to look at, we have been giving them something to do, giving them a language
>
> for their hallucinations, desires and myths. No wonder that happenings, as soon
>
> as they start-working, get authoritarian reactions from the philistines and the
>
> culture police who want the public to remain passive and submissive.[396]

Finlay's letter to Houédard from the 5th November 1965 which has already been quoted was in response to the happenings taking place in Britain and which he saw as contributing towards the end of the Concrete poetry movement.

The intention of Concrete poetry under Gomringer was for it to become a poetry of praxis, except one which was consonant with capitalist society. As he wrote in his

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[396] Jean-Jacques Lebel, 'A Point of View on Happenings from Paris', *ICA Bulletin* (November, 1965), 14-15 (p. 15).

1954 manifesto, 'From Line to Constellation': 'Headlines, slogans, groups of sounds and letters give rise to forms which could be models for a new poetry just waiting to be taken up for meaningful use. The aim of the new poetry is to give poetry an organic function in society again, and in doing so to restate the position of poet in society.'[397] This type of sublation intended by Concrete poetry can be described in Bürger's words as a 'false sublation of autonomous art'[398] because unlike earlier twentieth century radical movements such as Dada and Surrealism it was not concerned with superseding art's autonomous existence as an institution separate from social life and for art to become transformed into praxis.

I would suggest that the Concrete poetry movement in the nineteen sixties undermined the category of the individual behind the production and reception of art for the sake of a politics of desublimation. For Lebel, participation meant individuals becoming autonomous from social conditioning through spontaneity. Making the spectator participate meant challenging the alienation of society because it involved an awakening of the unconscious. A 1970 essay by David Gardener called 'Tyranny' from the British counter-culture magazine, *Cosmos*, speaks of an invisible and insidious domination which it calls the 'ENSLAVEMENT AND SEPARATION OF BODY AND MIND'.[399] He goes on to say that any potential revolution does 'not mean any storming of Bastilles or Whitehalls – they work to their own destruction – but the reoccupation of our own bodies that have been made into Bastilles and the reoccupation of our own centres of feeling – those draughty palaces – our inalienable heritage – till mind meshes once more with body and thought with action.'[400] It was

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[397] Eugen Gomringer, 'From Line to Constellation' (1954), trans. by Mike Weaver, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, ed. by Mary Ellen Solt (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 67.
[398] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 54.
[399] Donald Gardner, 'Tyranny', *Cosmos* (1970), unpaginated, p. 1 of 3.
[400] Ibid.

the submersion in immediacy which could rediscover a human nature that had otherwise been alienated by post-war society.

I would suggest that challenging the institutionalized condition of art's production and reception had particular relevance during the nineteen sixties given the emergence of consumer culture at the time which reinforced an ideology of non-participation. According to the Marxist critic Raymond Williams the term 'consumer' in post-war society begins to replace that of 'customer' which Williams explains as being reflective of a major change in post-war large-scale industry where instead of the production of a product following a demand for it, the reverse has become just as true. He writes: 'since production is not generally planned, but the result of the decisions of many competing firms, market research has inevitably become involved with advertising, which has itself changed from the process of notifying a given supply to a system of stimulating and directing demand. [. . .] It is then clear why 'consumer', as a description, is so popular, for while a large part of our economic activity is obviously devoted to supplying known needs, a considerable and increasing part of it goes to ensuring that we consume what industry finds it convenient to produce.'[401] Whereas market research was meant as a way of catering for changes in desire by seeking out what was demanded so that production could be arranged accordingly, in the post-war society market research has changed so that it now provoked demand itself. The dominant culture in Britain during the nineteen sixties is one which has given rise to the consumer and which helps to ensure that the desires of the individual are manipulated so that the products of industry are bought. This situation was

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[401] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (1961) (Hamondsworth: Penguin Books, repr; 1973), p. 323.

satirised by a non-sensical questionnaire by McCarthy and Lloyd in aid of a fictitious 'Institute for Advanced Research in the Methodology of Interrogatory Studies'.[402]

The political implications of this dominant culture according to Williams is that society loses much of its control to make its own decisions for the sake of an autonomous economic activity. The consequence of a consumer society as Williams says is 'a weakening of purposive social thinking [. . .] which seeks to reduce human activity to predictable patterns of demand.'[403] As opposed to being a consumer, Williams proposes that being a user is one alternative. He writes: 'the concept of use involves general human judgements – we need to know how to use things and what we are using them for, and also the effects of particular uses on our general life'.[404] Use resists the act of consumption which according to Williams tries to prohibit the social in favour of the individual. Economic activity serving social use is obscured in modern society with the emergence of the consumer and the new system of production and distribution.

Barthes writes in *S/Z* that 'the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text.'[405] The terms 'consumer' and 'producer' are Marxist literary terms for reader and author respectively. The participation encouraged by the 'open' text for the reader means they are no longer simply consumers of meaning. The text which elicits conceptual participation in the codes of meaning is use as a social activity which undermines the category of the individual as supported by a culture of consumption in that the originality of an author is displaced. The abstraction, however, of Concrete poetry

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[402] Andrew Lloyd and Cavan McCarthy, 'Institute for Advanced Research in the Methodology of Interrogatory Studies'. (Unpublished, 1960s), 2 pages. Bob Cobbing Papers, British Library. Box. 1; Envelope 4-5 'Fliers, Posters, Events and Programs'.
[403] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (1961) (Hamondsworth: Penguin Books, repr; 1973), p. 323.
[404] Ibid.

Figure 12

O	mobile
T	event
U	genic
A	maton

Figure 12

written poetry is a sad case of substitution
for love - AN EGO GESTURE - almost in
spite of itself

cut along the lines and rearrange
in any order or disorder or with
comment or defacement and return
to me (john sharkey) c/o ICA
for inclusion in a popular anthology
or participation

how so ? says the cynic
participation is a popular term

VISUAL POETRY IS A MORE EXTREME
CASE AN EXTENDED FORMAL
METAPHOR INTO THE THINGNESS
OF THINGS

conception of the form and external
structure - visible as in LOGIC NETS -
should meet expectations
on the frontal plane

permission granted is a
gifthorse strategy
dangerous when needed

non poetry or words that are
conceptualised within the r
ealms of what could be dep
ends upon love or transfere
nce

IGNORE THE GESTALT
remove the cypher
OPEN THE FORM
deny the concept
ERADICATE THE STRUCTURE
imagine a revolution

tended to be more at the level of material production rather than of conceptual production. In a 1981 interview, Gysin describes how women in textile factories were not shocked by his permutation sound poems because, as he says, 'they realised semi-unconsciously that this was sound being used as material, so they compared it to their work with material.'[406]

I would suggest that in the use of the Concrete poem the category of the individual is negated for the purpose of negating cultural sublimation. A 1967 poem by Sharkey called 'Popular Cut-Out Piece', 'Figure [12]', published in the *ICA Bulletin*, however, invites the reader's participation to be read as a politicised act of desublimation of the poem as sublimated object. It consists of eight panels on each side of a page where on the first side the panels contain the letters 'A' 'U' 'T' and 'O' and the words 'mobile', 'event', 'genic' and 'maton', and on the other side the panels contain eight phrases. The word 'Auto' on the first side of the poem can refer to either the agency of a self or the predictable behaviour of a machine, and it is the former which the reader is encouraged to use in their re-arrangement of the poem which would be a spontaneous act of desublimation upon the otherwise rational and closed device of the poem's grid. The consequence of this is that as readers assert their subjectivity in re-arranging the order of the panels the connotations of the words and of the phrases change. The eighth panel on the reverse side of the poem reads: 'IGNORE THE GESTALT/ remove the cypher/ OPEN THE FORM/ deny the concept/ ERADICATE THE STRUCTURE/ imagine a revolution'.[407] This instruction implies that a realisation of the anti-formal that was against the rational aesthetic of the Concrete poem as it emerged in the nineteen fifties is necessary for the realisation of radical left-wing

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[405] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 4.

[406] Brion Gysin, 'The Deceptual Art of Brion Gysin', *Performance Magazine*, No. 11 (1981), 13-16 (p. 16).

[407] John Sharkey, 'Popular Cut-Out Piece', *ICA Bulletin* (November/ December, 1967), 35-36 (p. 36).

politics. With the reader's participation, though, being able to intervene in the sequence of the poem it becomes more apparent that the implication of this instruction is more a statement to be questioned. The poem as Sharkey has arranged it will be re-contextualised by the reader in unpredictable ways and it is this act itself which means the realisation of a new revolutionary language.

Sharkey in a letter to Cobbing implies that Concrete poetry was dated after the nineteen sixties because its experiment no longer reflected the world around it when he speaks of his own poems after the movement as having become 'large and noncrete (sic)' due to what he describes as 'a feeling that the complexities of life and mood are just a bit too vulgar for the pure statement'.[408] For Sharkey the change to the historical context after the nineteen sixties is implied to displace Concrete poetry's appearance of self-sufficiency and which is anticipated in the use of the reader in the poem above who can realise either a formal or anti-formal re-arrangement of the poem.

The theorist Louis Althusser writes in 1970 that the 'age threatens to appear in the history of human culture as marked by the most dramatic and difficult trial of all, the discovery of and training in the meaning of the 'simplest' acts of existence: seeing, listening, speaking, reading'.[409] This call for a reappraisal in the fundamental acts of cognition is intended to question the belief in representation by empiricist methodology within the human and natural sciences which commonly supposed that the individual could have direct knowledge of the world. In contrast to Sharkey's own description of the world justifying a certain kind of text in the quote above, I would suggest that the invite for the reader's participation at the level of actual physical destruction in Sharkey's poem implies a relinquishing of belief in a knowledge of a true text which contributed to such poetry's resistance of social tradition.

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[408] John Sharkey, Letter to Bob Cobbing, (Unpublished, undated), unpaginated, p. 1 of 1. Bob Cobbing Papers. British Library: Correspondence 2; Box 3; Envelope 1-3 1970s.

Conclusion

This thesis has given an account of the Concrete poetry movement in Britain with respect to what it achieved as a post-modern avant-garde and in relation to how it understood itself as such. I have argued that the Concrete poetry movement in Britain was a post-modern avant-garde. To make this argument each of the last three chapters have addressed the avant-garde aspects of the poetry located within the Concrete poetry movement's own poetics in Britain. As far as this argument is concerned the term post-modern has been understood as the post-war period which the Concrete poetry movement occupied as well as a concept to denote a revising of avant-garde aspects in the post-war period which the Concrete poetry movement has been found to be reflective of. The first chapter described the Concrete poetry movement in Britain as reflective of a new type of avant-garde movement that was decentred. It was not just fragmented as a group but it was also not self-conscious as an avant-garde in that its poetics and poetry do not reflect a univocal ideology and because of this the movement as a group was reflective of a post-modern politics of the particular and the contingent.

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[409] Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1970), p. 15.

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