

THE THING AND/OR THE WORK: HEIDEGGER AND “CONCRETE POETRY”

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Abstract. Towards the mid twentieth century, concrete poetry reconsiders the content-form relationship by experimenting with various physical instantiations of lyricism: visual, sonorous, kinetic, or functional in a way that recalls the “thingly” character of the work of art, the premise of Martin Heidegger’s aesthetic conception in *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1937).

Concrete Poetry Manifestos: Hints to Heidegger’s Conception

Experiments that explored the limits of art, pushing it towards the world of things, became more and more common, after the avant-gardist attacks on both matter and form. Giuseppe Morrocchi counted, between 1930 and 1975, dozens of lyrical attempts, which rebelled against official literary canons by decisive distortion/mutilation of formal aspects and inexhaustible expansion of poetical content. Concrete poetry is listed among them, but distinguished as a remarkable phenomenon with articulated aesthetic programs, which established new relationships between text and lyric schemes. Poetic text is neither a coherent continuous unit in a more or less rigorously organized prosody, nor a totally hazardous combination of cutouts.

Concrete Poetry of the 1950s started to question language by placing it in a new format:¹ repetition of the same word in order to form flat geometric figures, arrangement of words according to their visual suggestiveness, architectural anagrammatic games which build meaningful images. The former poetic matter, the poetic language, in its turn, is decisively changed: words do not stand for their meaning and connotation, metaphoric potential, or acoustic image, but for their visual impact. This graphic awareness transforms what was traditionally considered poetic form into a new matter. The matter of concrete poetry is not synonymous with content, meaning, theme, subject, or history, in the formalist sense of the term. It seems to be close to the Heidegger’s “thing-concept”, defined as a synthesis of matter and form:

In this analysis of the thing as matter (*hyle*), form (*morphe*) is already coposited. What is constant in a thing, its consistency, lies in the fact that the matter stands together with a form. The thing is a formed matter. (Heidegger 1993: 157)

The old distinction between the formal aspect and the content of literary work is replaced by the indivisible unity of the “formed matter”.

Poets like Eugen Gomringer (Switzerland), Haraldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatari (Brazil), Carlo Belloli (Italy), Ian Hamilton Finley, John Furnival (United Kingdom), Emmett Williams, Louis Zukovsky, Louise Bogan, Robert Creeley (USA), and many others formed a group who, in spite of their different cultural backgrounds, shared compositional principles. They engaged poetry in its social surroundings by making it part of daily commodities. Their common interest in the physicality of poetry as well as their collective publications expanded the literary movement to an international phenomenon that used a universal language that is “intelligible as an object” (Gomringer 1968: 68).

Their credo recalls, at least, one important aspect from Heidegger’s *Origin of the Work of Art*:

The name “concrete poetry” could be used because of this concern with use of the elements of language – with the word as a totality, for instance, reaching out to semantic, syntactic and pragmatic possibilities – an intelligible object treated with concrete intentions as a *useful thing*. The meaning of “concrete in relation to language” does not imply the limitation of reference only to *concrete things*, although in actual practice this connotation is apt. (Gomringer 1968: 68) [italics mine]

The occurrence of the Heideggerean key-word indicates that the world of art is no longer outside the world of things. As Heidegger conceives this relationship, works of art can physically change their natural environment as the Greek temples shaped their previously indistinctive landscape and brought into modern times their past, traces of history, or signs of decay. Concrete poetry interacts with the physical world by inserting a physical body among non-artistic things. It thus displays the “thingly” status of “formed matter”. In Gomringer’s programmatic text, “useful” echoes the essential feature of Heidegger’s equipment: the idea of equipment usefulness determines the choice of the matter. The constellations of concrete poetry work with visually suggestive patterns and forms according to which certain words

are selected to meet both the usefulness of the future poem/equipment and the most expressive shape, the final result of the creative process.² The concrete poem's usefulness lies in the unmediated display of its universal meaning. It facilitates the perception of what is not at hand for everybody, it restores the literal meaning to metaphors giving them concrete bodies, and it repeats essential truths of human existence in a more comprehensive way. Its usefulness is also compared with regulation by traffic signs. Gomringer's "concrete things" translate the "thingness of things" into everyday language.

Other references to the usefulness of concrete poetry appear in the Brazilian group's poetical platform. In their *Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry* they focus on the functionality of this type of poetry whose major aim is to communicate by the tension it creates between things and words, on the one hand, and structure and content, on the other. Poetry communicates itself, "guides its own making," (Campos, qtd. in Solt 1970: 72). and draws attention to things in a fresh way either by shaping various contents unexpectedly or by supplying content to shapes.

Concrete poem is an object in and by itself, not an interpreter of exterior objects and/or more or less subjective feelings. Its material: word (sound, visual form, semantical charge). Its problem: a problem of functions-relations of this material. Factors of proximity and similitude, gestalt psychology (Campos, qtd. in Solt, 1970: 72).

Brazilian poets clearly reject the idea of a mimetic art: concrete art does not reproduce real things; it creates things. Moreover, the concrete poem is a "poem-product," a "useful object." "Useful" is the most recurrent term in the concrete poets' *ars poetica*. Their insistence on "usefulness" underlines the shift from the art of entertainment, art for art's sake, life-evading art, or even didactic art.

Another aspect of "usefulness" refers to manipulability. A concrete poem offers itself to simultaneous response. Its "formed matter" is fully exhibited as a visual work of art, which does not need time, but space to be completely perceived. A glance is enough to see, read and understand a concrete poem because it can manifest meanings through its perceptible qualities. There is no distinction between form and matter, and the Heideggerean concept of "formed matter" fits the meaningful visual aspect perfectly. At the same time, the concrete poem *trompe-d'oeil* furnishes its "readiness-to-hand." Readers encounter the work with no effort

since the work with all its parts unconcealed is close to them, waiting for them to look at it. In this respect, the concrete poem meets the philosophic description of the equipment, as it was defined in *Being and Time*:

What is ready-to-hand in our everyday dealings has the character of *closeness*. To be exact, this closeness of equipment has already been intimated in the term ‘readiness-to-hand’, which expresses the Being of equipment. (...) When this closeness of the equipment has been given directionality, this signifies not merely that the equipment has its position [Stelle] in space as present-at-hand somewhere, but also that as equipment it has been essentially fitted up and installed, set up, and put to rights. (Heidegger 1993: 136)

Due to this placement, the poem as equipment also reveals its scope of becoming a reliable thing for anybody who uses/reads it. Its reliability consists in the complete unconcealment: nothing is supposed, ambiguous, or indeterminate. Readers enjoy concrete poetry as it is, that means that all its components are *in presentia*; and its interpretation, which is synonymous with perception, takes place instantly. Thus, concrete poems generate diverse and strong responses, which carry readers beyond aesthetic expectations towards reality for reality’s sake.

Form as an “Equipmental” Aspect

Louise Bogan’s *Train Tune* arouses readers’ visual and acoustic awareness. When looking at, and/or while reading the poem, they perceive the rhythm of repetitions both as “phonopoeia” and “graphopoeia”. Repetitions literally elicit the image of an object made of identical parts and recall the monotonous sound of a passing train. Five stanzas of four lines each, made of three-word noun phrases stand for the complete image of a train, while anaphora (the first monosyllabic word of each line is repeated twenty times, the second is repeated seventeen times) rolls over into an uninterrupted beat in which are four-syllable verses alternate with three-syllable ones. Words create the real experience of motion both by naming natural things, which may be encountered while moving and by embodying the physicality of the thing, which the poem “constructs” and sets into motion. This double functionality of concrete poetic language discloses the essence of the “equipment” by recording its “thingly” character. Louise Bogan duplicates the shape of the real equipment in the physicality of the poem, on another level of concreteness. She unveils the usefulness

of the equipment, which has become a poem and thus transfers the equipmental usefulness into her artwork: the evocative “train cars” of stanzas run across the page and textually configure the “Being of the equipment.” The concrete poem as equipment is as reliable as the self-contained equipment that makes the users feel completely secure in their world. Trains transport their passengers back and forth, the poem brings them “back through” natural scenes, public places like their “correlative correspondent” and also back to the safest intimate places implied by the last two lines: “Back along love / Back through midnight”. Human existence is turned into a visual and acoustic sequence that is captured by the concrete image and, at the same time, goes beyond it. Unlike the virtually multiple readings of literary texts, *Train Tune* displays no ambiguity. The absence of punctuation makes the words stand on their own, juxtaposition replaces the syntax, and, consequently, the self-sufficiency of the poem satisfies the readers’ everyday need of certainty. Readers as passengers become part of the artifact while “using” it and share the safe world of the artwork as equipment. Thus, paraphrasing Heidegger, one can define the concrete poem as the disclosure of what the train really *is*, “a happening of truth at work.” (Solt 1970: 64) *Train Tune* makes the defining attributes of the train work in the work as they work out the work. “What is at work in the work” (Heidegger 1993: 165) is the object itself.

A Mnemonic Wallpaper Pattern for Southern Two Seaters is Jonathan Williams’ concrete poem in which symmetrical parts create powerful visual effects, and clusters of graphemes completely replace lines and stanzas. A few words in a mechanically repetitive syntactic parallelism: “white only black only” mimics the design of a wallpaper. Perfectly justified on the left, the text is torn in the middle as if someone pulled the left strip from the top and attempted to tear it off. The wallpaper strip ripped partially because half of it sticks and refuses to come off. What is left on the right is an uneven portion, which is still readable. Although the letters and the words on the margin are incomplete, both letters and words alike can be presumed to be identical with the dominant pattern. The iconic suggestion of wallpaper is enforced by the nicely trimmed right side. It supposes that the white space around the wallpaper-poem will be covered with the endlessly repetitive pattern. Repetition plays an important part in the construction of the poem: characters, fonts, typesetting, spaces, colors, words, function as building materials capable of producing a new thing. This poetic device also suggests the rhythmicity

of the industrial mechanism, which repeats the same operation over and over again in order to produce serial objects. The wallpaper is such an object resulting from the mechanical repetitive process. Moreover, its structure reflects the repeatability inherent in the process of making the artifact. The aspect of the ready-made object impersonalizes the poem, shades its uniqueness, and makes it look inauthentic.

Nevertheless, the insertion of the title, *A Mnemonic Wallpaper for Southern Two Seaters*, in the torn body of the poem attaches an ideological significance, which also brings a sense of history. Thus, the whole artistic construct becomes an equipment, or part of the equipment: “two seaters.” The anti-segregationist message is dramatic: cars with two seats each, reserved for two individuals, one black and one white, facing the black and white text inscribed as wallpaper: “black only white only.” The two colors side by side (black letters on the white surface) become a sign on public means of transportation mirroring a certain era in the history of the Southern US. The poem seems to restore the collective memory by educating symbols from past decades. Like Greek temples, which change not only the landscape around, but also the present’s perspective on the current present, Williams’ poem emerges into the common urban environment and interrupts the normal course of the present. Its usefulness becomes relevant as long as readers perceive the “readiness of equipment” (Heidegger 1993: 181) and the “happening of truth” (Heidegger 1993: 165) in the poem. The poem is nothing else but a fragment of a potential still realistic equipment which “opens up a world” no longer actual. *A Mnemonic Wallpaper for Southern Two Seaters* reveals a historic truth through the physical body of the text and the isomorphism it generates. In Heideggerean terms of history, this poem brings into the openness its corporeality, which bears the load of a past history. The concrete poem “transports” its receivers³ into the realm where history can start again, making them experiment both the work of art and witness the history brought into the openness by the work. Thus, the poem’s usefulness becomes more complex. It is useful as a warning sign, whose urge to be interpreted cannot be avoided: “Don’t forget the lessons of history!”

Matter as a Thingly Aspect of Concrete Poem

Robert Creeley's connections with the concrete poetry movement are not long term ones. His poem *Le Fou* is often referred to as a concrete poem⁴ and anthologized in concrete poetry volumes. Mary Solt's note to this poem explains her choice as the editor of the concrete poetry anthology:

This *almost* concrete poem is of great interest because we find in it a conflict between the old grammatical-syntactical rhythm and the new kinetic rhythm of propulsive words which carry the essential thought structure (Solt 1970: 302).
[italics mine]

"Almost" is an intriguing term in the above commentary: on the one hand, it claims that Creeley's poem is not a concrete poem, on the other, it states that it is more than a concrete poem, or, as Altieri puts it, it is "objectivist poetic" (Altieri 1979: 172) which means that "a radiant presence" is pursued to "objective concrete events". For Creeley, concreteness has a very nuanced meaning: it mainly refers to the world as it is subjectively perceived and not as it is. What is concrete for Creeley is not necessarily concrete for the others. Thus, his sight penetrates beyond things and oblique images become as concrete as the things that wrapped them. In *The Rhyme*, the lover hides flowers behind her, the flowers hide the nothingness behind them; they are all signs for something else that takes on the consistency of the wrapping things. In *The Sign Board*, a face is not a face but the design of a face with no features; paradoxically, the "faceless" face is the concrete sign of an absence. Concrete objects and beings inscribe the void, make the nothingness corporeal in terms of the sensible world. Concreteness is certified by the poet's look and consciousness, which translate his psychological experiences into concrete images: pain is a flower, wound is a blossom, the loved woman is "in teeth and eyes," "speech is a mouth," a currently empty hole "will collect things" sometimes. Even the most deserted place is virtually concrete since the poet can see things, which may fill it: "nothingness is at the same time metaphysical abstraction and concrete fact" (Altieri 1979: 185).

The poem *Le Fou* takes the form of a dedication to a poet named Charles whose poetic voice takes over the poetic writing in the second "stanza," visually redefined as the lines placed in between larger blanks. The change of the poetic voice from the third person to the first person:

For Charles
who plots, then, the lines...

I mean, grace come slowly,
it is that way.

highlights the process of the literal making of the poem.⁵ From a physical point of view, the concrete act of making the poem is a three-dimensional object: first, it is an acoustic phenomenon (“the beat from the breath...”), second, it is kinetic (“they are waving” / we are moving away”), and third, it is visual: the poem’s lines are written with a keen interest in the pictorial aspect the poem. Actually, each of the three physical features can be fulfilled twice: in the poem and while the poem is being performed.

The poem is a latent acoustic event since it can be recited. At the same time, it is about an acoustic event: the breath, which at the beginning produces a slow movement, which then takes the form of an active, although metaphysical grace. Pitches and pauses are marked by the five different indentations that suggest different heights of sounds while unclosed parentheses let the sound fade away. This diaphanous material of the poem emphasizes the nature of the poem as a substantial thing, but always on the verge of vanishing. Although the apparently ephemeral body of the acoustic image does not seem to be a convincing argument for the concreteness of the poem, it bears, in fact, the poem’s functionality. Acoustic image makes this text a poem, in Heidegger’s words, “makes the thing what it is” (Heidegger 1993: 165). On the other hand, one of its usages is to be recited transforming the natural breathing into rhythmic musical measures, thus representing the referential status of the poem.

The kinetic aspect uncovers another essential “assignment” of the poem: the verbal density at the beginning rarefies to the end when words are separated from one another by large blanks, parentheses and blanks, and never ended lines. All these graphical marks render the motion of those who say “we” and refer to the static others as “they”. The parting is progressive, slow, but definitive:

So slowly (they are waving
we are moving
away from (the trees
the usual (go by
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which is slower than this, is
(we are moving!
goodbye

The syntactical coherence of the everyday enunciations is disturbed by the overlapping of different unfinished messages each of which start before the previous one is ended. In their motion, those who call themselves “we” record only fragments out of which it is impossible to make linguistic sense. Nevertheless, these incomplete sentences produce a meaning, which is related to the direct notation of the movement from the point of view of the subjects who are moving. Creeley is tempted to express motion the same way Louise Bogan tried to describe it in *Train Tune*, as perceived from the moving vehicle’s perspective. However, Creeley’s poem is more subtle than Bogan’s: he avoids the mechanic repetitions, the obviously suggestive shape, and the long enumeration of images encountered during the journey. Journey is deliberately pure motion for Creeley because he does not want to make journey a metaphor for human life, but a movement in itself.

The third aspect recalls what Heidegger would call “totality of equipment” (Heidegger 1993: 98). The visual body of the poem supports all the other usages and make them both possible and accessible. It becomes the absolute reference, the most energetic and vital element, out of which the other emerged. To conclude, the visual image is the catalyst of both the acoustic and the kinetic ones. All three are parts of the same concrete poetic texture, comparable with Heidegger’s “arrangement”: “Out of this ‘arrangement’ emerges, and it is in this that any ‘individual’ piece of equipment shows itself. *Before* it does so, a totality of equipment has already been discovered.”(Heidegger 1998: 177) The thingly feature of *Le Fou* is shown in the overlapping of multiple layers of the same image, simultaneously approached from different perspectives in order to enrich the poetic matter to the extent of the total experience.

Text as a Workly Aspect of Concrete Poem

The visual pattern in *Julia’s Wild* by Louis Zukofsky strikes the reader from the first sight: it looks like a regularly lettering design or a nonsensical decoupage from a bigger printed page out of which sharp scissors cut a piece or like a randomly typewritten text. The poem anticipates its difficult reading through its shape: lines

perfectly aligned to the left form a rectangle whose compactness seems impenetrable. It is as dilemmatic as the Sphinx’ riddle, in spite of its familiar appearance and common words. They are annoyingly repeated throughout the text according to a mathematical algorithm, both figuring the outline and providing substance of the poem. Like the Sphinx, the poem asks the question and answers it simultaneously. This deceitfully simple “formed matter” relies on a mathematical procedure, the combination of six semantically different items (come, shadow, take, up, this, and) in twenty different sequences. They maintain the morphological syntactical coherence of the two verbs (come, take), one noun or verb (shadow), one demonstrative, alternatively used as a pronoun or adjective (this), and one conjunction (and). All are combined in as many grammatically correct phrases as possible, suggesting that the series can be infinite.

Zukofsky’s interest in mathematics is well known. In his manuscripts and letters addressed to Lorine Niedecker there are several references to the relationships between music, mathematics and poetry. He conceived an algebraic pattern for his long poem *A*, section 9, where he used the equation for a circle to construct the poetic form and musicality of this section. Ahearn comments on Zukofsky’s creative method:

Mathematics, like music, has the advantage of relative freedom from doctrinal or didactic import. It therefore serves as “pure” form for combining sound so that the energy of the spoken word operates in a rigorously plotted field. (Ahearn 1982: 234)

His precise poetic structure denotes his concern for perfect shape, which, to a certain degree, determines the meaning of words, either individually considered, or as compound phrases. In *Julia’s Wild*, he rearranges the same enunciation in order to exhaust all conceivable meanings from corroborating visual aspect, acoustic image, and semantic load, not to mention the apparently hazardously created metaphors. Readers are continuously challenged to ask themselves whether they are confronted with a carefully designed work of art, or with an unpremeditated burst that seems to bear artistic characteristics. Zukofsky’s serious application of mathematical reasoning to this work leads one to conclude that a responsible creative process takes place:

What we do is to find rate of variation of one variable to rate of variation of the other. Then choosing any two poetic quantities the poem must be constructed in

such a way that the ratio of the variation of one of these quantities is to the rate of variation of the other as the ratio of the rates variation of the corresponding quantities of the equation which completely describes the geometrical figure.(Zukofsky, qtd. by Ahern 1992: 232)

Thus, the twenty variations of variables compose a monotonous incantation: “Come shadow, come, and take this shadow up” that goes on and on, basically changing the order of words, experimenting with different locations of words that alchemically change their meaning, and which consequently invites one to multiple readings. The comma here proves to be an ambivalent sign when one reads the work with both mathematics and writing in mind. In mathematics it marks off levels of (quantitative) information. As a punctuation mark, it sets off a word, phrase or clause creating and even expanding different meanings, delimits fully meaningful units, marks the entries of different poetic voices, and inserts pauses in the lyrical counterpoint. This beneficial unmediated encounter between mathematics and poetics assigns the analysis of the concreteness to the parallel examination of truth in the work of art.

According to Heidegger, there is an evident consubstantiality between the work of art and the truth: truth is openness and takes place (happens) in the strife of clearing and concealing that reside in the work, in “the createdness of the work” (Heidegger 1993: 180). This interesting point also implies the process of maintaining the “openness of beings” in the work in which the work and its “preservers”, not necessarily present, participate as long as they share the same truth. Zukofsky’s poem, interpreted in Heideggerean terms as “a becoming and happening of truth”, discloses both the inner mathematical nature of poetry, and the difference between the two *realia*.

Truth essentially occurs as such in the opposition of lighting and double concealing. Truth is the primal strife in which, always in some particular way, the open region is won within which everything stands and from which everything withholds itself that shows itself and withdraws itself as being (Heidegger 1993: 180).

The mathematical truth “happens” in Zukofsky’s poem by unveiling the rationality of the language itself, the primal matter of poetry, displayed in its overwhelming multiplicity. On the other hand, it forces the poetical expression to reformulate itself in order to get a new authenticity.

The tension in which truth is reached in Heidegger’s text is instanced by *Julia’s Wild*. The strife of the earth versus the world is staged in the poem: the invocation that starts and ends the poem points to the problematic concealed nature of the earth that finds its way out into the world by the mathematic rationale. “Shadow” represents the unclear zone in which truth and untruth meet and from which truth is distilled. The truth is “at work” in the mathematically designed poem. The title indicates the irrationality of the matter, which the poem tries to “tame” by the regularity in its mathematical appearance.

The poem is not an equation, it does not reveal a mathematical truth, but still illuminates the mechanism of language, its infinite metaphoric resources, and ultimately makes the “Being of beings” communicable and opens the understanding of the “essence of things”. One can notice that the structure of each line is in accordance with the mathematical truth/thing, but one can also admit that the opposite approach is valid as well: the mathematical truth is framed by the lines of the poem. These mutually spectral structures have the same source, the event of the unconcealment, which takes place in the work. This supports Heidegger’s theory that it is the poetical language in which truth originates since poetry is the essence of all other arts. Language, in its turn, “naming beings for the 1st time”, opens the realm of beings to the unconcealment. Zukofsky succeeds in reaching the most abstract aspect, the *thingness* of the poem itself. Beyond the poem, the mathematical definition is only a useful math tool/equipment that does not actualize in any way poetic subsequent implications.

Conclusion:

Reading concrete poetry through Heideggerean lenses illuminates the serious engagement of concrete poets to make poetry competitive with non-artistic objects while emulating their qualities, which are always supposed and expected, but never brought to consciousness. Concrete poetry brings the truth of the mass of useful objects out of anonymity. As long as these poems make readers reach the truth otherwise concealed or less visible by experimenting their physicality, these works fulfill their mission. They do not intend to get either an aesthetic response or an intellectual stimulus; they attempt to develop a constant awareness of the surroundings irrespective of how common or extraordinary they are. At least for its

imaginative rethinking of reality it is worth experiencing concrete poetry. Which of the concrete poems are better than others? It is difficult to answer this question from a single perspective since their expressive core enacts different roles in order to perform the twentieth century *Theatrum Mundi*. For each role, critics may have a different approach, but the three aspects (equipmental, thingly, and workly) by which Heidegger defined the equipment and the work of art represent a philosophical matrix for concrete poetry and a solid basis for further aesthetic discussions.

(...) suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature; for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature (...) (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act III, scene 2)

Notes

¹ The Dutch artist Theo Van Doesburg coined the term in 1930 in his manifesto. Artists like the Swiss painter Max Bill, the Swedish poet Oyvind Fahlstrom, and the musician Pierre Schaffer, used the term referring to their own works. It was Eugen Gomringer who made it famous by publishing the Concrete Poetry manifesto in 1953.

² Constellations are new poetical structural units, which substitute traditional lines and stanzas.

³ "receivers" could be an equivalent for Heidegger's "preservers".

⁴ Mary Solt in *Concrete Poetry*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1970; Karla Lydia Schultz in her study "The Pull of Gravity: Love Poems since the Sixties" in Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (eds). *From Ode to Anthem Problems of Lyric Poetry*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986; or Charles Altieri in the chapter "The Struggle with Absence" in *Enlarging the Temple*. 1979. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP.

⁵ I use the term "making" both for its Heideggerean resonance and for its concrete suggestion.

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