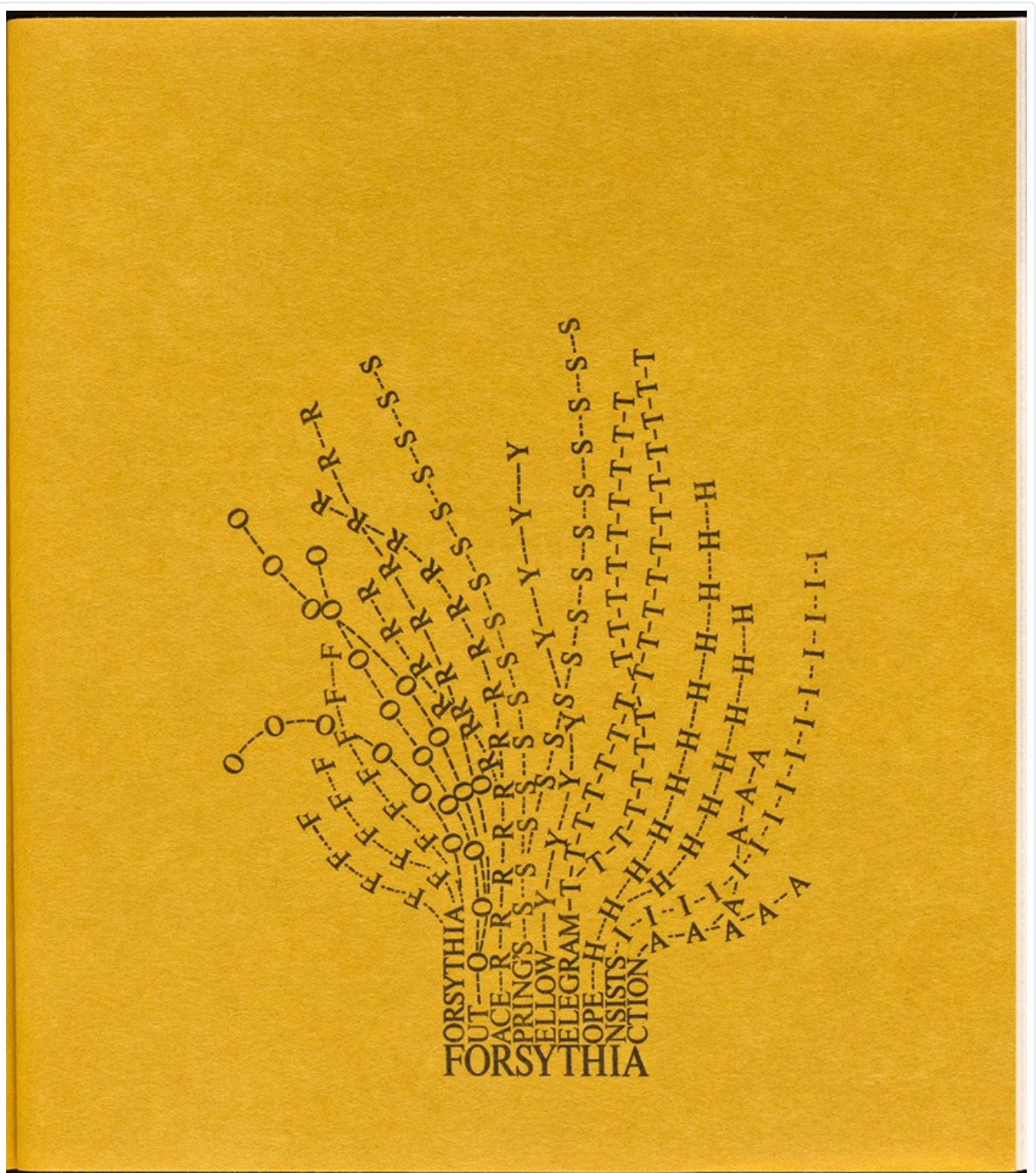


## 1. HOPE INSISTS ACTION

The first comprehensive study of concrete poetry to appear in the US, in 1968, was the influential volume *Concrete Poetry: A World View*. On its cover appears a concrete poem by the one of four women included in the volume, Mary Ellen Solt, the editor and translator of the anthology. (The others are the Portuguese poet Salette Tavares and the French poet Ilse Garnier.) The image gracing the volume's cover, in comparison with the poems featured within it, might seem rather anomalous in terms of the subject matter it introduces, for it reads as a call to action as much as a meticulously designed image/text composition. Its presentation of course defies reading conventions: its most legible part, its title, appears at the bottom and not at the top of the piece. Everything else stems from this word and takes the form of a horizontal acrostic, as opposed to most acrostics which read from top to bottom. Above the word *forsythia* we read an almost Dickinsonian line of verse: "Forsythia Out Race Spring's Yellow Telegram Hope Insists Action." From these words radiate the letters in "forsythia" and the translation of each into Morse code.



"FORSYTHIA," Mary Ellen Solt, permission authorized by the Estate of Mary Ellen Solt

In 1966 Solt had been invited to guest-edit an issue of the review *Artes Hispánicas/Hispanic Arts*

devoted to concrete poetry by poet and translator Willis Barnstone, her colleague at Indiana University. She had first become aware of the movement through meeting, in Edinburgh in 1962, Ian Hamilton Finlay, editor of the magazine *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.* (1962–68), in whose pages she encountered works by international contributors including the Brazilian Noigandres group (formed by Haroldo and Augusto de Campos as well as Décio Pignatari) and Eugen Gomringer, the movement's founders, amid that of many others. She became a frequent contributor herself. Solt began corresponding and translating the Brazilian poets. Her research continued to expand, and by 1968, a year after Something Else Press had published Emmett Williams's landmark *Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, the brimming issue of *Artes Hispánicas* appeared. While Williams's volume features a larger number of international contributors, Solt's comprehensive study includes—along with a thorough introductory text divided into sections for each of the countries where concrete or visual poetry developed—its foundational manifestos; color reproductions and foldouts honoring the works' original designs; and glosses of the works and their translations into English and/or Spanish depending on what each demanded. Also included are proto-concrete poems by authors not associated with concrete poetry, such as Louise Bogan, Louis Zukofsky, Robert Creeley. After the review's publication, the members of the Noigandres group visited Indiana University, holding symposia and readings that Solt found exhilarating in their international scope. In 1970, Barnstone convinced the university's press of the importance of publishing the issue in book form.

The book version of *Concrete Poetry: A World View* differs slightly from the magazine. Most noticeably, on the cover of the magazine appears a poem by Augusto de Campos instead of "Forsythia." In the book, this poem appears in the inside front cover instead. To imagine the reason for the swapping of images doesn't require much effort: Solt's 1966 poem is a fetching, vibrant composition hiding its complexity in the mimetic representation of a forsythia shrub. On the other hand, De Campos's poem, from the collection *Poetamenos* (1953), is similarly beautiful to look at, with the symmetrical disposition of orange and white type floating in a calm sea of blue, but unless readers understand Portuguese, and even if they do, its meaning doesn't come instantly across, in part, because of its color-coded portmanteaus informed by Webern's atonal music. A translation of the poem by the author, Marco Guimarães, and Mary Ellen Solt is provided on the next page. Perhaps it's not surprising that the poem, despite its innovative form, addresses the common trope of copulation as the origin of human life and presents, in a visual/semantic composition, the movement from conception to inception: "here / are / the / bare / bodies" is presented in a vertical column at the center of the composition, and on either side of it appear the following lines: "lovers kinless / brotherone womoanother / meover sheneath..."<sup>1</sup> The piece itself could be read as a meta-

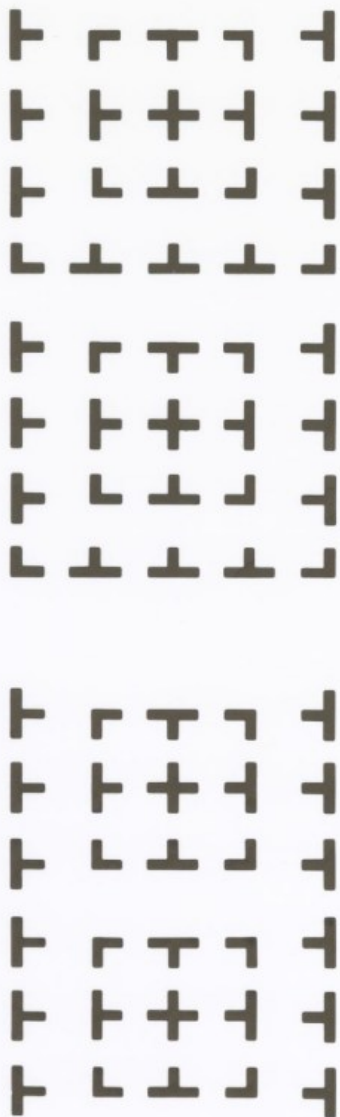


commentary announcing the birth of the new sensibility, a sensibility that Solt's iconic "Forsythia" embodies perhaps more fully than Augusto de Campos's poem itself.

"Forsythia" appears also in the Something Else Press (1967) anthology, along with a few other flower poems from Solt's 1966 collection *Flowers in Concrete*, and an iconic poem entirely devoid of language titled "Moonshot Sonnet." In this anthology, among 77 authors, Solt is one of three women, the other two being, again, Ilse Garnier, and the Czech poet Bohumila Grögerová—both of whom share the bill with their more recognizable partners, Pierre Garnier<sup>2</sup> and Josef Hiršal, respectively. According to the gloss accompanying "Forsythia," the poem, just like all the other flower poems in her collection, was "typographically concretized" not by Solt but by designer John Dearstyne. A quote taken from George Sadek's introduction to *Flowers in Concrete* proposes that, in the case of concrete poetry, it often becomes difficult to draw the line between the contributions of the different parties involved in the work's making, mainly the author of the text and the typographer interpreting it: "The literary and visual meaning of concrete poetry as conceived by the poet and interpreted by the typographer is somewhat analogous to a stage performance of a play."<sup>3</sup> The production relies on collaboration, and even if an author is not directly involved in typesetting a work, their visualization of the final composition is integral to its realization as a concrete poem.

Regardless of the role that each contributor performs, can the players in this play speak for themselves or is a different type of interpretation required for the reader to understand the interrelation between the work's graphic, lexical, and visual components? The inconclusive answer might be that some do and some don't. If we take a look at Solt's "Geraniums," for instance, and compare it to her "Moonshot Sonnet" from 1964, the poems' different degrees of legibility become instantly apparent. Readers of "Forsythia" can instantly tell that "the design is part of the text," but they might not notice that "the design is made of the letters in the name of the flowering shrub and their equivalents in the Morse Code"<sup>4</sup> unless they're told. On the other hand, Solt's commentary framing the hermetic, coded "Moonshot Sonnet" is essential to access the poem's many layers of signification. It reads as follows: "It has not been possible since the Renaissance to write a convincing sonnet on the moon. Looking at the moon photographs in *The New York Times*, it occurred to me that since the scientist's symbols for marking off areas on the moon's surface were presented five to a line and the lines could be added up to fourteen, a visual sonnet could be made of them. The poem is intended as a spoof of an outmoded form of poetry and as a statement of the problem of the concrete poet's search for valid new forms."<sup>5</sup> In her own *A World View*, along with a version of the same text, she compares the sonnet to concrete poems arguing that "the sonnet was a supranational,

supralingual form as the concrete poem is.”<sup>6</sup>



“MOONSHOT SONNET,” Mary Ellen Solt, permission authorized by the Estate of Mary Ellen Solt

The ubiquity of glosses such as these in both Emmett Williams’s anthology and Solt’s *A World View* raise the question of where the work begins and where it ends. The paratext might be indispensable for the motivations behind the decisions factoring into the concrete poem to be legible, but as much as contextualization seeks to effect the readers’ understanding, it doesn’t preclude the possibility of mistranslations and misreadings. The translations into Spanish of Solt’s poems in her own *A World View* are a case in point. If in the original, “forsythia out race [meaning, are faster than] spring’s yellow telegram,” in Spanish forsythia are emitted by spring’s “race or caste.”<sup>7</sup> The translation of “Moonshot Sonnet” fares no better: an unfortunate literal reading of the title misunderstands the idiom for launching a spacecraft to the moon, “moonshot,” a codeword for the 1960s zeitgeist, and instead renders this moon as riddled by bullets. The title in Spanish is: “Soneto a la luna acribillada”<sup>8</sup> (Sonnet to the Bullet-Ridden Moon.)

## 2. POETRY FOR EXPORT

The members of the Noigandres Group referred to Ezra Pound as their *paideuma*, borrowing the term he coined after Frobenius to refer to “the gristly roots of ideas that are in action.” In their manifesto “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry” from 1958, they describe the concrete poem as the “tension of words—things in space-time” and speak of its “dynamic structure: multiplicity of concomitant movements,” highlighting the importance of the ideogram “either in its general sense of spatial or visual syntax, or in its special sense (Fenollosa/Pound) of method of composition based on direct—analogical, not logical-discursive—juxtaposition of elements.” The ideogram “appeals to nonverbal communication” and allows for speedier transmission. The concrete poem is against expression—it communicates its own structure and 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).”<sup>9</sup>

Among those figures they acknowledge as their forerunners are Mallarmé, for his groundbreaking typographical experiments in *Un Coup de des*; Joyce, for his word-ideograms; Apollinaire, for his *calligrammes*; the Futurists and Dadaists; and, in Brazil, the modernist Oswald de Andrade. Like him, they were also conceiving of strategies to launch Brazilian literature onto the world’s stage, just as he had done in the 1920s. They adopt the economic metaphors in his 1924 “Brazil-Wood” manifesto but offer a corrective to his failed vision of developing a vernacular poetry *for export*, for De Andrade

consisting of a “language without archaisms, without erudition. Natural and neologic. The millionaire contributions of all the mistakes. The way we speak. The way we are.”<sup>10</sup> According to the Noigandres group’s program, to succeed in putting cutting-edge Brazilian poetry on the world map, the key was *not* to attempt to export specific Brazilian content—which Andrade compares to the much sought-after “Brazil-wood”—but rather a technique, their structural procedures and constructivist approach. In Haroldo De Campos’s own words: “Evidently, when one speaks of a ‘poetry for export’ one seeks to refer to a poetry capable of creating new techniques valid internationally, and not the habitual export of exotic raw materials typical of certain Brazilian literature divulged outside our borders.”<sup>11</sup>

In this respect, their program is entirely dependent on translation, and in keeping with Pound’s dictum in “A Retrospect”: “That part of your poetry which strikes upon the imaginative eye of the reader will lose nothing by translation into a foreign tongue; that which appeals to the ear can reach only those who take it in the original.”<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, in the early phases of Concrete poetry during the late ’50s and the early ’60s, text was reduced to a minimum in order to foreground the composition’s iconicity, facilitate translation and the poem’s international flow. Some of the poems were even written in English, by then the lingua franca for anything related to the entwined worlds of commerce and communications: examples included in the *Something Else* anthology include the poem “Man Woman” (1968) by Décio Pignatari, and “Epithalamium II” by Pedro Xisto (1966), which graphically displays the masculine third person pronoun “he” being embedded in the feminine third person pronoun “she.”

The Noigandres group was keenly aware that had the ratio of text to image privileged the text, the circulation of their proposed model would have encountered many challenges. To them, concrete poetry equated “a projected industrial art, a *know-how* of language—and a creation of ‘models of sensibility’.”<sup>13</sup> Its foundation was a techno-utopian vision of modernity promoted by the frenzied developmentalism of Juscelino Kubitschek’s presidency from 1956 to 1961, which later in the 1960s proved to be nothing but a mirage. Critics lumina Maria Simon and Vinicius Dantas synthesize a common local critique of the Concretista program in their critical volume *Literatura comentada* devoted to Concrete Poetry: “The longing for modernity often led the poets to abstractly affirm a vocation for the future, as if the possibility of overcoming underdevelopment was imminent.”<sup>14</sup>

The Concretista’s fetishizing of technology and investment in a poetics of impersonality in which the poet, in the words of Décio Pignatari, was but an “industrial designer”<sup>15</sup> was seen as divorced from Brazil’s actual reality and tone deaf to its society’s needs.



### 3. SLIPPERY WHEN WET

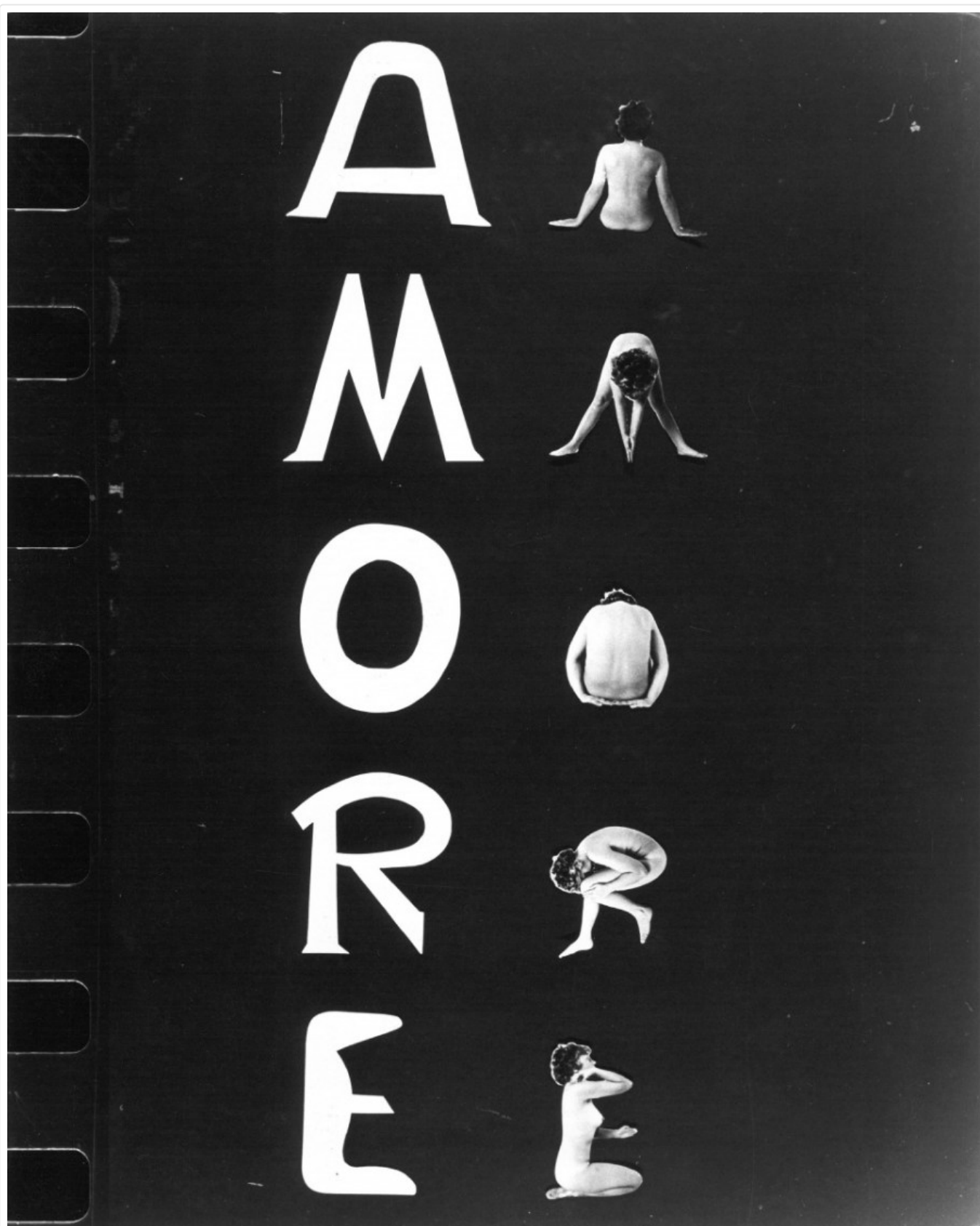
A seemingly innocuous yet slippery semantic coincidence might have magnified the similarities between concrete poetry and itself with Kubitschek's developmentalist program. But isn't linguistic slipperiness precisely the domain of poetry? It is particularly pronounced when it comes to concrete poetry, which Rosmarie Waldrop reminds us is "first of all a revolt against the transparency of the word."<sup>16</sup> The word in question here is precisely concrete. How exactly did poetry get to be *concrete*?

An origin story: De Stijl artist Theo van Doesburg came up with the term "art concret" to refer to the geometric abstraction he put forth, a mathematical art of absolute clarity that was different from other nonrepresentational art. When choosing the moniker, van Doesburg was not thinking of engineering or architecture—concrete is not equally slippery in all languages. The mixture of gravel, sand, cement, and water in French is not *concret* but *béton*. Manifestos and writings by van Doesburg and a handful of other painters appeared in the single issue of *Revue Art Concret*, published in Paris in 1930. "Typing is clearer, more legible and more beautiful than handwriting..."<sup>17</sup> reads a rather odd passage in the pamphlet that has little to do with painting itself and which is followed by the artists' rejection of romantic notions brought back into circulation by Surrealism, such as symbols, inspiration, the unconscious, and dreams. "We don't want artistic writing," they claim, by which they mean "ersatz creative thought"<sup>18</sup> that is an obstacle to the attainment of a universal art.

In the 1950s Art Concret's legacy was particularly strong in South America, and especially in Brazil, where concretism bifurcated and prompted concrete the adjective and concrete the noun to cross paths. Following the lead of Bauhaus artist, architect, and industrial designer Max Bill, a group of artists from São Paulo including Geraldo de Barros, and from Rio de Janeiro, including Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Pape, and Lygia Clark, united briefly in pursuit of a rigorous concrete art in which the work assumes "the form of its own technical content."<sup>19</sup> Advocating for the new, in their "Ruptura manifesto" of 1952, the artists equal it to "experiences that tend to renewal of fundamental values of visual art (space-time, movement, and matter)." Concrete art and poetry were brought together for the first time in the *Exposição Nacional de Arte Concreta*, which opened in São Paulo in 1956, and recognized the movements as emblematic of the spirit of modernity sweeping through Brazil. From the get-go, in the poets' manifesto, concrete the adjective welcomes the associations that its proximity with concrete the noun brings, as its very title is a calque of Lúcio Costa's "Pilot Plan for Brasília" (1957), itself a nod to Le Corbusier, with whom Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, architect of Brasília's buildings, had collaborated on Brazil's first modernist project, the Ministry of Education and Health building in Rio completed in 1943. Brasília, conceived as Brazil's new administrative capital in

an effort to modernize the country and expand it westward, away from the coasts and into the continent, epitomized President Kubitschek's desire to push the country forward "fifty years in five."

The "Pilot Plan for Brasília" reads like a pattern poem whose shape can be read as a cross, a bird, an airplane, or a bow and arrow, all pointing to Brazil's coexisting temporalities. Costa described the plan as "deliberate act of possession, a gesture with a pioneering sense, in the mold of the colonial tradition,"<sup>20</sup> betraying the colonizing impulse behind it. Brasília was built by 1960 and became the world's most realized example of Le Corbusier's ideal city, sprung from out of nowhere like a radiant mirage, with buoyant curvilinear shapes defying the buildings' concrete monumentality and asserting Brazil's preeminence in the international architectural scene. Development spoke the language of concrete, and so did Brasília. Mirages by definition are ephemeral. Later in the 1960s, the labor party's candidate, João Goulart, assumed power and the US-backed military staged a coup d'état leading to a dictatorship that lasted 21 years and was the model for the other US-backed military dictatorships in South America. Leaving politics aside, let us return to concrete the adjective. Institutions and monuments—inevitably, the patriarchy's monuments—go hand in hand, but that does not mean they cannot be toppled.



"AMORE," Tomaso Binga, 1976, permission authorized by Collezione Donata Pizzi.

#### 4. MONUMENTO / MENTO

If it would be a mistake to judge women's participation and engagement in the practice of syncretizing word and image by their representation in the anthologies and main surveys of the era, the exhibitions curated by Mirella Bentivoglio are much better indicator of women's activity in the field. Between 1971 and 1981, this multifaceted Italian poet, artist, and scholar took it upon herself to make this activity visible in the fourteen exhibitions she curated between 1971 and 1981. Starting with the *Esposizione internazionale di operatrici visuali* (*International Exhibition of Visual Operators*) at Milan's Centro Tool, which opened in 1972, the culmination of her efforts was *Materializzazione del linguaggio* (*Materialization of Language*), shown as a section of the Venice Biennale of 1978. *Materializzazione* included work by eighty-one contemporary women artists and their predecessors, including Tomaso Binga, Sonia Delaunay, Ana Hatherly, Giulia Niccolai, Mira Schendel, and Mary Ellen Solt, and whose contributions, Bentivoglio writes in her essay framing the exhibition, fall "between language and image" and "between language and object" and share the "working theme of 'poetic operations'"<sup>21</sup> but are not necessarily affiliated with the concrete poetry movement. Apropos of the rubric, she differentiates language-based art from typographical and sonic experiments and *poesia visiva* combining photography and text, often collaged. She goes on to propose that the "critical labels of each group or movement (lettrism, concrete poetry, spatialism, visual poetry, and so on) attest to the fertile exchange of collective recognition; but if every avant-garde, every liberating break, is destined, sooner or later, to slowly solidify into institution, the examples [she] collected ... also document a spontaneous escape from those avant-gardes' gradually institutionalized frameworks..."<sup>22</sup>

In 1968, Bentivoglio and her collaborator Annalisa Alloatti had designed a portfolio titled "Monumento"<sup>23</sup> visualizing those frameworks' fragility. The work begins with a totemic figure made up of two syllables contained in *monumento* forming the word *nume*—which, fittingly, means godlike. The second piece in the sequence marks a division or difference between a me and a you that leads to the gradual disintegration of the vertical structure in the following pieces, allowing for letters to free themselves of the grid and to form words with parts of *monumento*, among them "muto" (I am mutating), "temo" (I fear), and "mento" (I lie)... In the sequence's last piece, only traces and fragments of letters remain, forming beautiful rubble. About "Monumento" Bentivoglio writes, "It is a structure of transformation: the monument recognizes its non-communicative nature; it doubts; it falls; it mutates [...] it becomes pure rhythm."<sup>24</sup>

What makes women's focus on the materialization of language different from that by their male

counterparts? In addition to the anti-institutional drive, she offers a few other answers: among them women's deep relationship to the alphabet, since they are often the first to pass it on to the children, as mothers and teachers—an alphabet that is the “residue of pictograms distantly linked to the initial sounds of ancient, iconic words.” So for Bentivoglio, to adopt word and image “means reactivating our atrophied tools of communication.” She clarifies that, “Obviously women aren't the only ones engaged in this work, but they do have double the motivation for engaging in the discourse: in the past they've been rendered immaterial (dare I say dematerialized) by the ‘abstract sublimity’ of their public image, paralleled by their public absence; privately confined to daily, exclusive contact with the material world, women are now using every fiber of their beings to oppose a world rendered unreal (dare I say ‘derealized’) by repetitive mechanisms.” She argues too that “As women sought to identify and understand these bodies of language, they also rediscovered their own bodies, and they did so precisely through gesture.”

The work of Italian artist and poet Tomaso Binga (Bianca Menna) is emblematic in this regard. In the early 1970s she adopted a male pseudonym as a spoof on masculinity and in homage to the Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti—though she characterizes her removal of an m from his middle name as a gesture in opposition to his misogyny. Once a schoolteacher, the production of alternate alphabets has been constant in her work. For her *Dattilocodice* (Typecode) series of 1978, she superimposed typewritten letters to generate ideograms reminiscent of the pictographic roots of written characters. Her *Scritture viventi* (Living Writing), for which she assumed a different bodily position for each letter of the alphabet, is the basis of several collage series, among them the *Alfabetiere murale* (Mural ABC, 1976) and the *Alfabetiere pop* (Pop ABC, 1976), containing imagery from children's books.

Embodying the alphabet suggests that fullness of expression requires the engagement of the disciplined and undisciplined parts of the body alike. Similarly, Liliana Landi, another Italian artist who was part of Bentivoglio's expanding network of women artists, combined typescripts with handwriting, collage, and other kinds of mark-making in loose gestural writing that privileges no technology over another, as is evident in her book *In rapporto a* (*In relation to*) from 1976. She writes, “sound and gesture coincide / it is the gesture that generates the sound - / the visual image, / before the reading, transmits the gesture.”<sup>25</sup>

Another element that Bentivoglio identifies as salient in the work of women artists is a focus on the prelinguistic. She writes, “mark-making and handwriting follow the circuits of memory, opening the floodgates to create intriguing maps of the energetic tensions presiding over the formation of thought



before it's crystallized into verbal articulation."<sup>26</sup> Indicative of this strain are Mira Schendel's *Graphic Objects* or by Irma Blank's radically open texts, asemic writing for all to read, the literate and illiterate.

Subversion is patent in the works featured in *Materializzazione* as well. She writes: "One can detect a quest for some self-expressive breakthrough, a way to smuggle 'mater' (the original, creative world, the matrix, the silent reference, the vehicle of meaning) out through obedience to 'pater' (the codified meanings, the prevailing dogmas of patriarchal society)."<sup>27</sup> Two artists that come to mind in this respect who were not part of Bentivoglio's carefully cultivated network are Mirtha Dermisache and Cecilia Vicuña.

On the other end of the world, also from the late 1960s to the 1980s, Argentine artist Mirtha Dermisache was making asemic works that appeared in print formats such as books, newspapers, and bulletins, although nothing in them is conventionally legible. Her publications are filled with an astonishing range of highly expressive systems of clearly differentiated graphic inscriptions that speak a loquacious silence. Produced in catastrophic conditions while the military junta dictated the terms of public discourse in her native Argentina, works such as her iconic newspaper *Diario 1, Año 1*, from 1972,<sup>28</sup> doubly contested censorship. For her, no work was complete until it circulated in print. "I 'write' (inscribe) my books, which are perfectly illegible, and that tenuous structure of 'gaps' is filled as soon as it reaches the 'reader',"<sup>29</sup> she's reported to have said, suggesting that her writing's motivation was not to cancel signification, but to multiply it *ad infinitum*. It garnered the support of Roland Barthes, who in a 1971 letter praised her for you have managing "to produce a certain number of forms that are neither figurative nor abstract, forms that could be called illegible writing, which leads readers to formulate something that is neither a specific message nor a contingent form of expression, but, rather, the idea, the essence, of writing."<sup>30</sup>

Cecilia Vicuña's word/image compositions *Palabramas (Word Weapons)*<sup>31</sup> also emerged in conditions in which warring factions were competing for the control of a national narrative deeply embroiled in Cold War geopolitics. The series turns an increasingly repressive regime's attempt to weaponize words on its head. Its wager is a non-nihilistic form of Dada: when power debases language, if you jam words together and cut them up in order to form new ones, you'll uncover the truths that conformists try to hide. Exemplary instances of the many possible ways to make meaning out of binding words and images, the *Palabramas* take the form of emblems, rebuses, riddles, pop visual poems, performance props, and countercultural publicity. (They even have a page-bound counterpart

in the book *PALABRARmas*, first published in Buenos Aires in 1984.) They upset the hierarchies inherent in alphabetic writing and offer the reader everything but easy catchphrases. Minimal yet irreducible to a single paraphrase, in the economy and immediacy of their visual and verbal syntax they bring to mind poet David Antin's proposition that a poem is a commercial that isn't selling anything.

Are the *Palabrarmas* concrete poems? They certainly accomplish the mission articulated in one of Eugen Gomringer's early writings on concrete poetry. In the 1954 manifesto "From Line to Constellation," the Bolivian-born German poet envisioned a new type of poem that "is simple and can be perceived visually as a whole as well as in its parts. It becomes an object to be both seen and used: an object containing thought but made concrete through play-activity, its concern is with brevity and conciseness. It is memorable and imprints itself upon the mind as a picture."<sup>32</sup> The playful *Palabrarmas* works indeed offer viewers words to be seen and pictures to be read, but their original motivation was not aesthetic but instead the promotion of revolutionary ideals and the production of a novel, collective-oriented sensibility. Radically open, they are designed to acquire new meanings off the page and in relation to the ways in which they are presented in the public sphere on a range of different supports, including the body itself. Take, for instance, the word *mentira* (lie) torn in two and appearing alongside pensive human figures and dismembered body parts printed on clear banners with which Vicuña and other performers announced their dissent by parading in the streets of Bogotá in 1977. The work's composition invites the viewers' instant participation, as the links between its components cannot easily be figured out: the verb *tirar* has many possible meanings, among them "to throw away," "to pull," and "to shoot." The syllable *men* in Spanish evokes *mente* (mind), but it is also an English word—lies tear the mind apart by producing cognitive dissonance, indeed, but they are also what imperialism and the patriarchy traffics in.



"MEN TIRA," Cecilia Vicuña, 1977, permission authorized by the artist.

*Ver dad* (*Truth: To Give Sight*), a *Palabrarma* from 1974, was activated in the same 1977 performance in Bogotá. Performers walked around with masks/eyeglasses with the word *verdad* (truth) divided into its two syllables: *ver* (to see), *dad* (the imperative of to give). Help people see clearly is one reading of the work. Other interpretations: to see clearly or to perceive the need to give is a form of generosity. Repurposed and printed on a flag in Marfa, Texas, in 2020–2021, the Spanish in the piece gives it a different set of connotations. It speaks to the marginal status of the ever-gentrifying region's Spanish-speaking Tejano community and the migration crisis perpetually unfolding on the US/Mexico border.



"SOL Y DAR Y DAD," Cecilia Vicuña, 1974, permission authorized by the artist.

Another particularly felicitous activation of a *Palabrarma* involved the piece *Sol y dar y dad* (*Solidarity: To Give and Give Sun*) and is documented in the video *Sol y Dar y Dad, Una Palabra Bailada*, from 1980. The words *sol y dar y dad* (sun and give and give) provide an alternate spelling for the word *solidaridad* (solidarity) and were printed on a ball with which Vicuña, her collaborators, and children from a school in Bogotá played. Solidarity unfolds as a process involving the verb *dar*, which can also mean "to yield or give oneself over to something." The performance's participants appear united and absorbed in the task of passing each other the ball and keeping it up in the air, and we are reminded that the purpose of play is not to compete but to extend the duration of sheer communal pleasure. In this body of work Vicuña proposes a clear lesson: "Words are weapons, perhaps the only acceptable weapons."<sup>33</sup> Dissolve the spaces dividing one word from another and you'll witness how the edges of words usher in the beginnings of other words. Or break down single words and discover that within



them nest other words, particles of words containing seeds of meaning. The words' pasts and their latent futures. Portmanteaus, *palabras maleta*, words that are trunks transporting other words to newly discovered realms.



"THE PEOPLEMOVER," Mary Ellen Solt, 1968, permission authorized by the Estate of Mary Ellen Solt.

Like Vicuña's *Palabramas*, Mary Ellen Solt's protest signs against the Vietnam War and the US's gun-obsessed culture for the 1968 *The Peoplemover*, which she labeled a "demonstration poem," are extensions of the message that "hope insists action" in her poem "Forsythia" from 1966. She too knew that every statement, broken down, opens portals into language's inexhaustible plenitude. That if you do this systematically, and better yet, communally, authoritative meaning evaporates



completely, giving way to multiplicity and process. In other words, to action.

This paper was delivered as a keynote speech at “Alfabeti del Corpo: Gender, Translation, and Activism” at Villa La Pietra, NYU Florence, on April 18, 2024.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press, 1971), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Collaborations by the Garniers rarely failed to appear in the era’s publications, as they were essential members of the international network of artists experimenting with poetry’s sonic and visual properties on and off the page. They coedited the French journal *Les Lettres*, devoted to concrete and visual poetry and its close kin, Spatialism, whose founding manifesto they launched in 1962, aiming to liberate words from sentences and to create “cosmic space-word constellations.”

<sup>3</sup> Emmett Williams, *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967), unpaginated.

<sup>4</sup> Williams.

<sup>5</sup> Williams.

<sup>6</sup> Solt, 307.

<sup>7</sup> Solt, 307-308.

<sup>8</sup> Solt, 307-308.

<sup>9</sup> Solt, 71-72.

<sup>10</sup> Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea, *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* (New Haven and London/Houston: Yale University Press / The Museum of Fine Arts Houston, 2004), 465.

<sup>11</sup> Leodegario de Azevedo Filho, ed. *Poetas do Modernismo*. Vol. 6. (Brasília: Ministério de Educação e Cultura/ Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1972), 135-6.

<sup>12</sup> Ezra Pound, *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Azevedo Filho, 103.

<sup>14</sup> Iumna Maria Simon and Vinicius Dantas, eds. “Why Poetry in Times of Poverty?” In *Poesia concreta*. Literatura Comentada series. (São Paulo: Abril Educação, 1982), 103.

<sup>15</sup> Simon, 103.

<sup>16</sup> Rosmarie Waldrop, “A Basis for Concrete Poetry,” in *Dissonance (if you are interested)* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 47.

<sup>17</sup> Otto Gustaf Carlsund, Theo van Doesburg, Jean Hélion, Léon Arthur Tutundjian, Marcel Wantz, *Revue Art Concret*, January 1930, 4.

<sup>18</sup> *Revue Art Concret*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Waldemar Cordeiro, Luis Sacilotto, Geraldo de Barros, and others, "The Ruptura Manifesto," in *Inverted Utopias*, 494.

<sup>20</sup> Lúcio Costa, "Report on the Plano Piloto de Brasília" (1956), accessed March 3, 2024, <https://concursosdeprojeto.org>.

<sup>21</sup> Reproduced in Alex Bennett and Oscar Gaynor, eds., *Tinted Window* no. 2: "Verbivocovisual," 2019, 38-40. Issue dedicated to *Materializzazione del linguaggio*. Trans. Alta Price.

<sup>22</sup> *Tinted Window*, 40.

<sup>23</sup> Reproduced in Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la Torre, eds., *Women in Concrete Poetry* (New York: Primary Information, 2020), 27-33.

<sup>24</sup> *Women in Concrete Poetry*, 430.

<sup>25</sup> *Women in Concrete Poetry*, 256.

<sup>26</sup> *Tinted Window*, 40.

<sup>27</sup> *Tinted Window*, 38.

<sup>28</sup> Reproduced in *Women in Concrete Poetry*, 145-153.

<sup>29</sup> Siglio Press, May 8, 2024, [https://sigliopress.com/titles/mirtha-dermisache/#:~:text=Every%20piece%20of%20writing%20is,reader's%20unique%20sense%20of%20signification.&text=I%20%E2%80%9Cwrite%E2%80%9D%20\(inscribe\),it%20reaches%20the%20%E2%80%9Creader.%E2%80%9D&text=MIRTHA%20DERMISACHE%20\(b](https://sigliopress.com/titles/mirtha-dermisache/#:~:text=Every%20piece%20of%20writing%20is,reader's%20unique%20sense%20of%20signification.&text=I%20%E2%80%9Cwrite%E2%80%9D%20(inscribe),it%20reaches%20the%20%E2%80%9Creader.%E2%80%9D&text=MIRTHA%20DERMISACHE%20(b).

<sup>30</sup> *Women in Concrete Poetry*, 468.

<sup>31</sup> Cecilia Vicuña, *Word Weapons* (San Francisco: CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 2023).

<sup>32</sup> Solt, 67.

<sup>33</sup> Cecilia Vicuña, *New and Selected Poems* (Berkeley, CA: Kelsey Street Press, 2018), 69.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Mónica de la Torre's most recent book of poems is *Pause the Document* (Nightboat, 2025). Her other collections include *Repetition Nineteen* (Nightboat, 2020), *The Happy End/All Welcome* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2017)—a riff on Kafka's *Amerika*—and *Public Domain* (Roof Books, 2008). She has translated an array of poets including Amanda Berenguer, Omar Cáceres, Ana Hatherly, Lila Zemborain, and Gerardo Deniz. With Alex Balgiu, she co-edited the anthology *Women in Concrete Poetry 1959–79* (Primary Information, 2020). She is the recipient of the 2022 Foundation for Contemporary Arts C.D. Wright Award for Poetry and a 2022 Creative Capital grant. She teaches at Brooklyn College.