

OUT OF WORDS: THE SPACETIME OF CONCRETE POETRY

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Lygia Pape's *Livro da criação* (Book of creation, 1959–60) is a set of fifteen three-dimensional geometric compositions, made in gouache on cardboard, intended to be handled and interacted with by viewers, and entirely without words. It can at first be hard to think of each of the individual compositions as pages of a book. If anything it may be the work's title—and perhaps some knowledge of Pape's creative trajectory and aesthetic affiliations—that first suggest to the viewer its identity as a (very special) kind of artist's book and its place within the context of the experimental poetry practiced by members of the Rio de Janeiro-based Neoconcrete group.

In its absence of words and letters, *Livro da criação* is not alone among book works of Pape's such as *Livro da arquitetura* (Book of

commentary on the suspicion and paranoia that dominated the early days of Brazil's military dictatorship. In Japan during the same period, the avant-gardist Kitasono Katue published "plastic poems" composed of photographed newspaper cutouts, some of them including foreign (mostly French) writing and others containing no writing at all (fig. 2). But can such works still be called poetry? If they are entirely without words, what would make them belong to the realm of poetic experimentation rather than to that of the plastic arts?

Suspending for a moment any verdict on the poetic identity of such works, it is worth examining how they came to be designated as poems: that is, through their continuity and dialogue with a certain trajectory in the materialization of poetic language, a trajectory seen in a significant share of avant-garde poetry in the postwar era. If, following the critics



Fig. 1. Lygia Pape. *Livro do tempo* (Book of Time). 1961–63.
Tempera and acrylic on wood, 365 parts, 16 × 16 × 3 cm (each). Courtesy Projeto Lygia Pape

Architecture, 1959–60; plate 240) and the monumental *Livro do tempo* (Book of Time, 1961–65; fig. 1), in which she stretched the concept of the book even further by attaching its 365 compositions to the wall, eliminating the interactive aspect of the previous pieces. Indeed, some of the most radical poetic experiments of the postwar years in Brazil and beyond lack verbal language. In 1964, working with photographs cut from printed media, the São Paulo-based concrete poet Augusto de Campos produced *Olho por olho* (Eye for eye), a poignant

Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, the Conceptual art of the late 1960s and 1970s has been repeatedly described in terms of the "dematerialization" of the art object, postwar avant-garde poets performed the opposite operation.¹ Emphasizing the visual and vocal aspects of verbal language, they pursued a radical materialization of the poetic word, a process that culminated, in some cases, in the disappearance of verbal language from poetic composition.

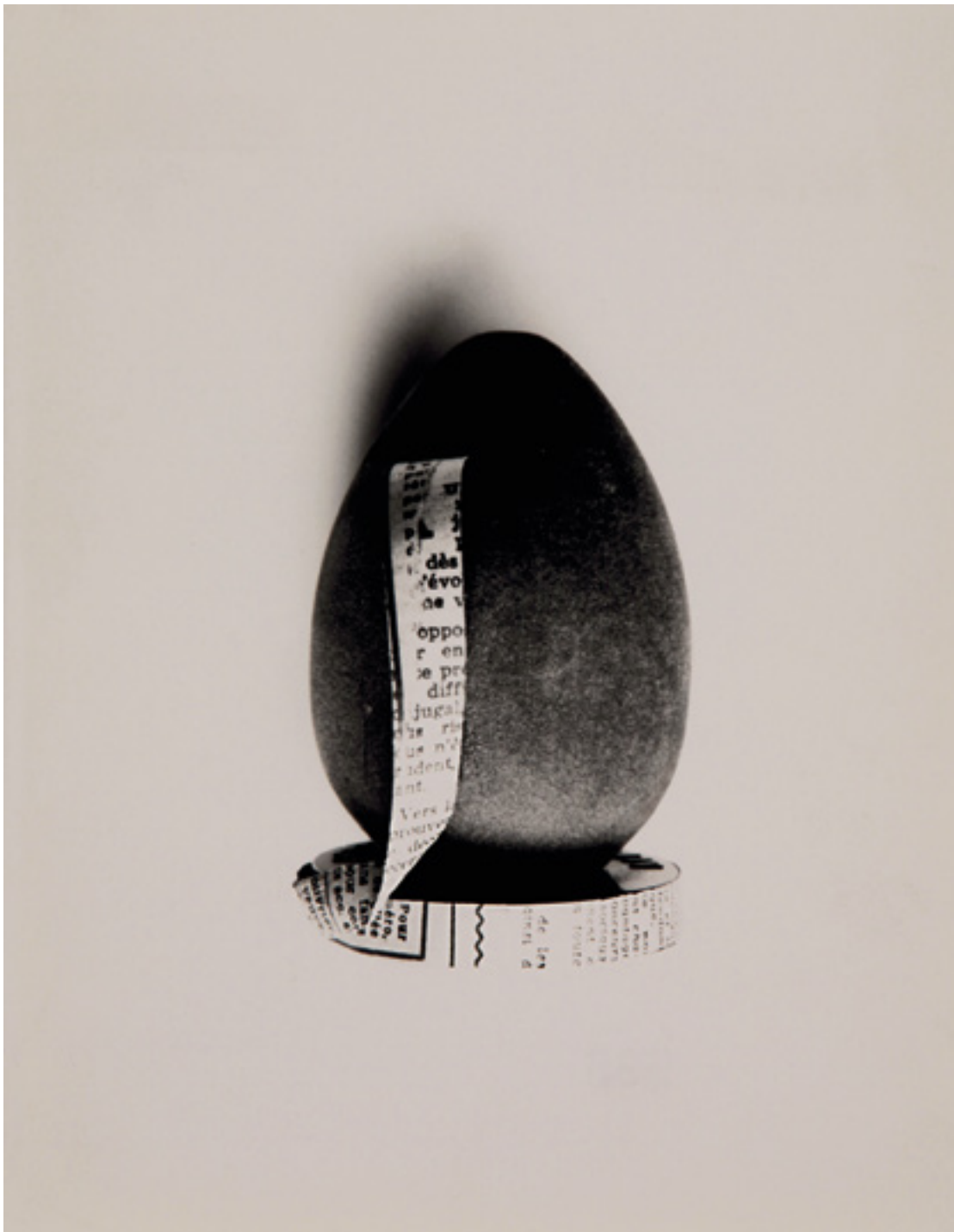


Fig. 2. Kitasano Katsue. *Prosperité solitaire*. 1974.
Gelatin silver print, 15.5 x 13 cm.

The search for a concrete form of poetic expression—for poems that could not just create but *be* their own objects, rather than representing external reality through what was often described as the partial or abstract means of communication characteristic of verbal discourse—was one of the strongest and most original marks of postwar experimental poetry. It also gave poetry an unheard-of proximity to, indeed an overlap with, the visual arts. As Kitasono, quoting the French art historian Michel Ragon, put it in his 1966 essay “A Note on Plastic Poetry,” “The era of the spoken word is past and the era of the written word is ended. We have reached the era of image.”² A widespread sense of the limitations of verbal language, particularly as it is phonetically represented in modern Western script, and an attempt to overcome those limitations emerged contemporaneously in the work and programmatic writing of poets throughout the world. But not by chance, it was concrete poetry—a transnational

poetic practice and in dialogue with a carefully chosen set of texts from a wide range of literary traditions—the time and space (or “spacetime,” as they termed it, after James Joyce) of poetry and, more generally, of art in all its diverse forms. As Augusto de Campos elaborated elsewhere, the concrete poets took seriously—indeed almost literally—Jean-Paul Sartre’s claim that while prose understands words as signs, poetry must understand them as things.⁴

The Noigandres group were certainly not the first to incorporate graphic space as a meaningful element of poetic expression. In fact these poets were keen on acknowledging their predecessors, regarding their experiments as part of a lineage that extended back to Guillaume Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes* and, most significantly, to Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Coup de dés*. Even further back, it is possible to trace the origins of visual poetry in European languages to at least the Hellenistic peri-

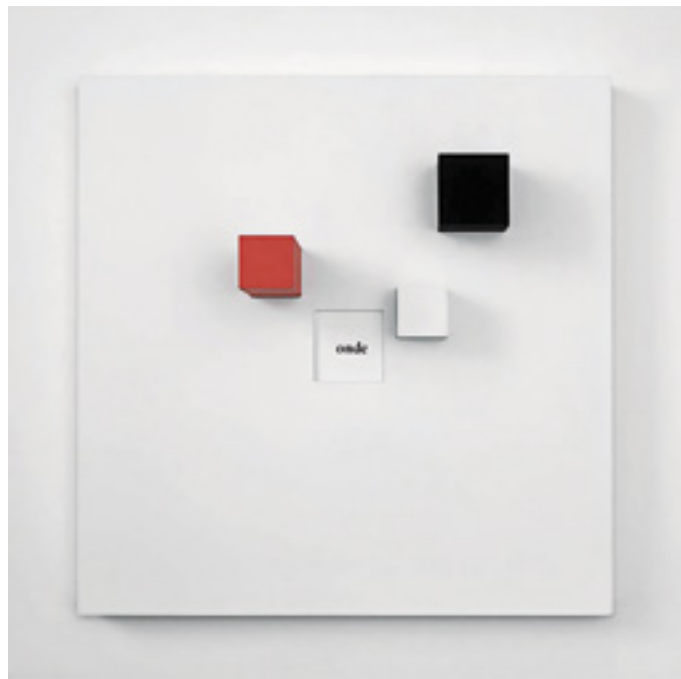


Fig. 3. Ferreira Gullar. *Onde*. 1959.
Acrylic on wood and vinyl, 40 × 40 cm. Collection Ferreira Gullar

avant-garde movement started by the Brazilian poets Décio Pignatari and the brothers Haroldo and Augusto de Campos, together with Ulm-based Swiss-Bolivian poet Eugen Gomringer—that most characteristically embodied such aspirations, to the point of becoming nearly synonymous with postwar visual poetry.

“Concrete poetry: tension of word-things in spacetime,” reads the “*Plano-piloto para poesia concreta*” (Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry), the movement’s manifesto, which was signed by Pignatari and the Campos brothers and published in 1958 in the fourth issue of the group’s journal, *Noigandres*.³ One of many definitions of the scope of their endeavor provided in this brief text, the sentence introduces not only a convergence between word and thing but an attempt to theorize—through

od, with Simias of Rhodes’s axe-shaped poem from the third century B.C.⁵ Yet it was precisely because of its historical consciousness, and its self-reflective and explicitly theoretical attitude toward the literary tradition and toward poetic composition itself, that concrete poetry came to occupy a hegemonic position in postwar visual poetry and poetics.

Borrowing the adjective “concrete” from music and the visual arts, the Noigandres group proposed to bring poetic technique up to date, to “synchronize” it with other realms of artistic creation. On the one hand, they argued, in the work of Piet Mondrian, Josef Albers, and others, time had intervened in painting, an art of space par excellence; on the other, Anton von Webern and his followers had introduced space into music, which is fundamentally an art of time.⁶ Meanwhile,

poetry occupied a more ambivalent position, since both its spatial and its temporal aspects could be taken as crucial depending on whether its written or its recitative form were privileged. Since its historical origins lay in spoken words, though, its temporal aspect could fairly be said to have predominated, and the mobilization of space for communicative potential is accordingly what first and most clearly distinguished concrete poetry (a quality that resonated with a number of contemporaneous poetic trends, notably Pierre Garnier's *spatialisme*). Yet this emphasis on space was coupled with a heightened focus on the poem's vocal, recitative element. Borrowing again from Joyce, the Noigandres poets referred repeatedly to the "verbivocovisual" essence of poetic composition. Indeed, in emphasizing space, it was ultimately the temporal aspect of poetry that their poems most deeply challenged and transformed. A clear example appears in the poems collected in Augusto de Campos's volume *Poetamenos* (Minuspoet, 1953), such as "lygia fingers" and "dias dias dias" (days days days), in which the use of graphic space and different-colored types was also meant to function as a guide for recitation in multiple voices.

The concrete poets were fascinated with Sino-Japanese ideographic script. Through the work of Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa, they discerned in the ideogram a model for poetic composition that could "share the advantages of nonverbal [visual] communication without giving up the word's virtuality."⁷ What interested them, more than the actual role of the ideogram as an element of Chinese and Japanese writing systems, was its function "as a method of composition based on direct—analogical, not logical-discursive—disposition of elements," in brief, as the "other" of Western linear script.⁸ In opposition to the linear succession of apprehensive acts prescribed by phonetic script, the ideogram model was thought to allow for the synchronous apprehension of multiple meanings in a single act.

The project of concrete poetry might sound like a rather formalistic utopia but it is worth emphasizing that what was at stake here was also to some extent a geopolitical endeavor. In the ideographic model of composition the concrete poets envisioned the basis for a new mode of transnational, translanguing communication based on the "lowest common denominator of language"—a mode that could almost dispense with the need for translation.⁹ In challenging linguistic borders they sought to establish a universal poetic syntax and ultimately a new kind of poetic universalism. Indeed, the Campos brothers' dedication to the theory and practice of translation from a wide range of languages was an aspect of their conscious effort both to overcome the supposedly peripheral position of Brazilian culture in the global panorama of cultural exchange and to challenge the center/periphery model in general. Transnationalism was an important feature of postwar artistic culture, but few artists were more actively engaged than the concrete poets in creating connections across national borders and in establishing an international community around an artistic ideal. In this context "synchronization" also implied the establishment of transnational contemporaneity by creating direct ties with artists in distant locales,

including periphery-to-periphery connections that could (ideally, at least) dispense with mediation by the center.

One example of such periphery-to-periphery connections was the long exchange between Brazilian and Japanese avant-garde poets during the 1950s and '60s. For the most part, the Noigandres poets' relationship to ideographic writing remained on an ideal and ideological level. Considering their strong interest in non-Western scripts, their failure to mention previous examples of visual poetry written in non-Western scripts, or of contemporary visual poets writing in Chinese and Korean, would be remarkable were it not an omission they shared with most European writers and scholars at the time.¹⁰ But they did forge a connection with Japanese poets that left an enduring mark on the panorama of avant-garde poetry in both countries. Introduced by Pound, Haroldo de Campos and Kitasono corresponded for years, and translated and published each other's poems. In 1960, the poet L. C. Vinholes, stationed in Tokyo as a Brazilian diplomat and well acquainted with the Japanese poetic avant-garde, organized an exhibition of Brazilian concrete poetry at the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, further facilitating this exchange. Later on, the Japanese poet Niikuni Seichi allied himself with the concrete movement, publishing a Japanese translation of the Noigandres poets' "*Plano-piloto*."¹¹ Even today, the resonance of Brazilian concretism can be spotted in the work of Gōzō Yoshimasu, one of Japan's most important contemporary poets.

Temporality, a fundamental issue for concrete poetry from its earliest stages, was also a crucial site of dissent between the Rio-based poet and critic Ferreira Gullar and the Noigandres poets of São Paulo, a dissent that culminated in Gullar's publication of the Neoconcrete Manifesto in 1959.¹² For Gullar, the synchrony envisioned by the Noigandres group was a useless pursuit. The concrete poem, he claimed, could at most provide the illusion of such simultaneity, since reading, unlike the act of viewing a painting, inevitably implies a succession of instants; it cannot take place in a single apprehensive act.¹³ In lieu of the search for synchrony, for the embodied, material relationship with the poem as a concrete thing Gullar proposed a poetics of duration, and he created devices to return the act of reading to its fully embodied essence. Since his first book-poems of 1956, he had been experimenting with the embodied temporality of the act of reading. With odd-sized pages containing as little as one single word, the book-poem calls attention to the act of reading as a participatory activity entailing as much bodily as intellectual praxis. Later on, in his spatial poems, words were hidden beneath a sort of wooden lid, and revealed only upon the lid's removal by the reader/participant (fig. 3).

With their increased emphasis on the bodily character of the act of reading, first in the simple act of turning pages and later in more complex ways to uncover writing—such as by lifting objects and even walking down stairs—Neoconcretism brought poetry closer to things and, to some extent, farther from words. Gullar's "Poema enterrado" (Buried Poem, 1960), in which the viewer must literally enter the "poem" and remove several objects in order to unveil a single word, can be regarded as the climax of this process. Yet Pape's books bring concrete poetry to an even

more radical level, insofar as they entirely eliminate verbal discourse from poetic composition. While Gullar put a sudden end to his Neoconcrete poetic experiments, afraid of having wandered too far from the poetic field and into the realm of the plastic arts, Pape refused to give up on the poetic identity of her wordless books. In their ambiguous position between poetry and the visual arts, between artistic practice and theoretical speculation, such works remain as open questions, both shortening and expanding the distance between words and things in the spacetime of concrete poetry.

- 1 See Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, 1973 (reprint ed. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), also Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1999), pp. 46–51.
- 2 Kitasono Katue, "Zōkei-shi ni tsuite no nōto [A Note on the Plastic Poem]," *Kaban no naka no getsuya: Kitasono Katue no zō'kei-shi* [Moonlight in a bag: The plastic poems of Kitasono Katsue] (Tokyo: Kokusho, 2002), p. 61.
- 3 Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari, "Plano-piloto para poesia concreta," *Noigandres* 4 (1958), Eng. trans. as "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry" in Haroldo de Campos, *Novas. Selected Writings* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), p. 218.
- 5 Augusto de Campos, "Poesia Concreta," in Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Pignatari, *Teoria da Poesia Concreta. Textos críticos e manifestos (1950–1960)* (São Paulo: Edições Invenção, 1975), p. 34.
- 6 On Simias of Rhodes's "Axe" see Luis Arturo Guichard, "Simias' Pattern Poems: The Margins of the Canon," in *Hellenistica Groningana: Beyond the Canon*, ed. Annette Harder et al. (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2006), p. 91.
- 7 Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Pignatari, "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry," p. 218.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid., p. 217.
- 10 Ibid., p. 218.
- 11 On modernist visual poetry in Taiwan and its relationship to the transnational avant-garde see Andrea Bachner, *Beyond Sinology: Chinese Writing and the Scripts of Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 74–91. On the political underpinnings of visual poetry in colonial Korea and the poetics of Yi Sang see Travis Workman, *Imperial Genus: The Formation and Limits of the Human in Modern Korea and Japan* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), pp. 240–48.
- 12 See L. C. Vinholes, "Intercâmbio, Presença e Influência da Poesia Concreta Brasileira no Japão," available online at www.usinadeletras.com.br/exibetexto.php?cod=43689&cat=Artigos (accessed March 2016).
- 13 Ferreira Gullar et al., "Manifesto Neoconcreto [Neoconcrete Manifesto]" in *Suplemento Dominical do Jornal do Brasil*, March 22, 1959, repr. in Aracy Amaral, ed., *Projeto Construtivo Brasileiro na Arte*, exh. cat. (Rio de Janeiro: Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, 1977), pp. 80–84.
- 14 Gullar, "Letter to Augusto de Campos," in Gullar, *Experiência neoconcreta: momento limite da arte* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2007), p. 113.