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From Dante to the Post-Concrete: An Interview With Augusto de Campos

In 1956, a group of younger Brazilian artists—principally the poets Augusto de Campos, his brother Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari, the editors of the avant-garde magazine *Noigandres*—used the setting of an exposition at the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo to declare themselves to constitute a movement: *poesia concreta* (in English, “concrete poetry”). The 1956 event was the antitype of the *Semana de Arte Moderna* (“Modern Art Week”) of 1922, in which Oswald de Andrade, Heitor Villa-Lobos, Mário de Andrade, and other founders of Brazilian *Modernismo* had announced an aesthetic program cognate with French and Italian modernisms—and which was to tend, in 1928, to the proclamation of a new movement, “anthropophagy,” as a deconstruction of Brazil’s colonial matrix, “the critical ingestion of European culture and the reworking of that tradition in Brazilian terms.”¹ The aims of the *concretistas* in the 1950s were to reclaim the origins of Brazilian Modernism in the decisive events of the twenties, and to reassert its international prospects; they proposed to overturn the neo-classical certainties of the so-called “Generation of ’45” and to install Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de Dés*, Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, and the lyrics of Pound, Cummings, and Mayakovsky as the regnant international influences on Brazilian poetry and poetics.

The principal collections of Augusto de Campos’s poetry are *VIVA VALA: Poesia 1949–1979*, which was issued in a second edition by the publisher Brasiliense in 1986, and *Expoemas* (São Paulo: Entretempo, 1985). Some of Campos’s most recent books, published in São Paulo by Companhia das Letras, are *O Anticrítico* (1986), critical poems and translations of Dante, Donne, Dickinson, Stein, Duchamp, Cage, and others in an inter-textual, explicitly “anti-academic” collocation; *Linguaviagem* (1987), “criticism-via-translation” of Mallarmé, Valéry, Keats, and Yeats; *Mais Provençais* (1988), translations from Provençal including all the songs of Arnaut Daniel; and *À Margem da Margem* (1989), essays and translations treating marginal works by Flaubert, Zukofsky, Michel Butor, and Bob Brown. A third edition of *Teoria da Poesia Concreta*, the collection of manifestos written by the Campos brothers and Pignatari from 1950 to 1960, was published by Brasiliense in 1987.

The interview between Augusto de Campos and Roland Greene was begun in São Paulo and continued by correspondence through July of 1992, and is translated from Portuguese by Greene.

For forty years AUGUSTO DE CAMPOS has been one of the most influential poets, critics, and translators in Brazil.

¹ “Concrete Poetry and Beyond: A Conversation Between Haroldo de Campos and Julio Ortega,” trans. Alfred J.

Mac Adam, *Review: Latin American Literature and Arts* 36 (1986): 44.

RG: *A first question to identify assumptions. Why does concreteness, such as characterizes concrete poetry, seem to belong exclusively to lyric discourse? Does material narrative exist, either hypothetically or actually? Or concrete drama?*

AC: The problem has to do not only with concrete poetry, but with the nature of poetry itself. Paul Valéry emphasizes the essential difference between poetry and prose: in prose, he says, the form, that is to say the physical element, the sensible element, and the act of discourse itself are not conserved. Normally, prose does not survive our comprehension; it is spent when it delivers its message. And it's generally in poetry that this inextricable, molecular union is produced—a union of sound-and-sense, form-and-content—that is demolished when we try to “translate” it into prose.

A poem cannot be summarized, Valéry insists. A melody cannot be summarized.² This is valid, generically, for poetry of all times, whether Sappho, Dante, or concrete poetry. But it can be said that modern poetry, from the end of the last century, radicalized that difference, particularly with the work of Stéphane Mallarmé. Concrete poetry is a descendent of that line on its most extreme side, namely Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* (1897), which the concretist movement of the 1950s and 1960s rescued definitively from marginality and placed on the threshold of a poetics for our time.

In *Finnegans Wake*, James Joyce coined a word, *verbivocovisual*. In concrete poetry, the materiality of the word was given new emphasis: the *voco* and the *visual*, the sound and the graph—or the signifiers—live here in equal condition with the *verbi*—or the signifieds (to translate the elements of the Joycean word into the terms of modern semiotics: this, at least, is how we understand the word in our theoretical writings).

Now of course there is an “art prose,” which can be distinguished from pragmatic prose, and which, in its most experimental current, creates an area of confluence, where the criteria of poetry and prose co-exist in a boundary-situation, where the words of prose are as though ionized by their poetic function. Such is the case in *Finnegans Wake*, in many texts of Gertrude Stein, and in the *Diaries* of John Cage, which are analogous to those lyric works that incorporate the language of prose, such as certain passages in the *Galáxias* of Haroldo de Campos.

It's for that reason that we install the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake* in the constellation of our influences (Mallarmé–Joyce–Pound–Cummings) and adopt that word from page 341 of *Finnegans Wake*: “an admirable verbivocovisual presentment.” This, however, is not the norm in prose. In sum, the question doesn't present itself in the terms of classical rhetoric—in the terms of lyric, narrative, and drama—but in the last analysis, in relation to the essential nature of the “poetic function,” distinct from communicative discourse.

In the specific case of concrete poetry, in addition to its essential poetic nature, there are also its agrammaticality and its brevity, which are of course opposed to syntactic articulation and development, and which, more than any other factors, appear to make it incompatible with prose. In concrete poetry there was, in fact, a double radicalization—a radicalization of a radicalization—starting

² Paul Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Folliot, vol. 7 of *Collected Works*, Bollingen Series 45 (New York:

Pantheon, 1958), pp. 86–87, 156–57, and *passim*.

from the radical motions of the vanguards at the beginning of the century. In the 1950s, we felt this to be a necessary regeneration of language, to purify it of the abrasions of everyday use and of its literary abuse. Concrete poetry takes to its limit the idea of the short poem—an idea declared by Edgar Allan Poe in “The Poetic Principle” (1850): “I hold that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase, ‘a long poem,’ is simply a flat contradiction in terms.” (The idea was never elaborated by Poe, of course, for he also said “undue brevity degenerates into mere epigrammatism.”)³ And concrete poetry also tries to assume, as far as possible, that critical vision of the poetic act that presupposes a distrust of the inadequacy, and the excess, of words—seen as much in the current of Mallarmé-Valéry (in the “aesthetic of refusal,” in the “resistance to the facile,” carried even to the point of silence) as in the Objectivist current (the “don’ts” of Pound).

Thus, if the nature of the poetic function would tend to make the existence of concrete prose improbable, the radicalization of poetic elements proposed by *concretismo*—the showing forth of the text’s materiality, and the reduction of language to a minimalist substratum—assures that the concrete experience, as such, may be realized almost exclusively in the domain of poetry. Its extension into other areas is inhibited.

RG: We might say that most concrete poetry since the fifties inhabits the space between those two statements of Poe’s, which, taken singly, amount to little or nothing as criticism; taken together they are the prophecy of a poetry neither “long” nor “epigrammatic,” a short poem that somehow explodes the epigram. The substance of the statements—what Poe actually says about long poems, short poems, and lyrics of “merit”—is more an embarrassment than an instruction; but intuiting that something needed to happen between those dicta, he was, I think, clearing a conceptual space for that first “radicalization” you mention—which you and your contemporaries radicalized again.

I gather you would allow that the experience of concrete poetry itself inflects or modulates Valéry’s and Jakobson’s concepts of the poetic function—that aside from what it holds in common with other types of poetry, indicating that signs and referents are not identical and so forth and “promoting the palpability of signs,” concrete poetry involves something more: perhaps its metalinguistic dimension “along with the dominant poetic function,” or perhaps its deliberate focus on the (potential) materiality of the referent as well as the sign.⁴ What effects might be implicated in a specifically “concrete function”? And how might a concrete poet look back critically on that original idea of Jakobson’s, which one theorist has called “our Vulgate, the implicit fundamental article of our literary aesthetic”?⁵

AC: I think that the “concrete function” you speak of is a good name for the strategy we adopt to put that Jakobsonian poetic function in evidence, to carry it to its ultimate consequences through the making explicit of the material elements of the poetic text and, at the same time, the critical re-vision, with this apparatus, by collision and juxtaposition, of past and present poetics (a metalinguistic dimension). It’s difficult to establish all the effects and consequences of such a

³ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Poetic Principle,” *Selected Writings*, ed. Edward H. Davidson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), pp. 464–66.

⁴ Roman Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” *Style in*

Language, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), pp. 356–57.

⁵ Gérard Genette, “Valéry and the Poetics of Language,” *Textual Strategies*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 373.

concrete function. To the extent that it tends to identify and isolate pregnant words that enact a textual materiality, it's implicated in the most complete rejection of the more moderate resources involved in the usual practices of poetry, where instances of the poetic function are occluded by a sea of more or less sentimental circumlocutions. Thus perhaps the concrete poet situates himself in the position of a post-poet, a double poet because a critical poet, who disallows a poetry balanced on rhetorical ingredients of emotional origin in order to emphasize the essence of poetic language. Such a radicalization would furnish a basic strategy for advancing poetry in the direction of an iconic, non-linear form, since (in Wendy Steiner's words) "the entire tendency of Western art to achieve presence in the text, hence iconicity, hence the visual, has forced poetry to try to overcome the symbolic properties of language and to stress its iconical and indexical ones."⁶

RG: *It's sometimes said that concrete poetry distorts or denies the temporality of lyric discourse. I'm interested in asking what the temporality of the material poem might tell us about that of the lyric genre at large, or vice versa.*

AC: *Poesia concreta: tensão de palavras-coisas no espaço-tempo* is how I tried to define it, in 1956, in the manifesto that I published for the first National Exposition of Concrete Art, in the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo: "Concrete poetry: tension of thing-words in space-time."⁷ I don't believe it's possible to speak of a total abolition of temporality in concrete poetry. But it's undeniable that, as far as it coincides with the materiality of language, breaking physically with the linear structure of discourse, inducing the imagination to organize itself by juxtaposition and coordination (parataxis) rather than by subordination (hypotaxis), and permitting a multiplicity of readings and points of view through the exploration of graphic resources, concrete poetry interjects space into the temporality of language; it relativizes that temporality. This phenomenon was what motivated me to speak of space-time, although in an unorthodox way, with an obvious allusion to the conceptual universe of modern physics. In that sense, concrete poetry simply runs parallel to the developments of contemporary music. What is created is a perceptual ambiguity, which explodes the concepts of linearity and of temporality conventionally tied to these two types of artistic expression.

RG: *I wonder whether you would agree that space is always a crucial determinant of lyric time, that a poem's temporality is always "relativized" by the whiteness of typographical space or the silences of "non-events" within and around the lyric as a composition or an utterance; and that concrete poetry goes on to make explicit what is already at work, however unobtrusively, in the genre. I think of John Freccero's account of temporality in the most ambitious of lyric histories, Petrarch's Rime Sparse:*

In order to remove from the poems all traces of temporality and contingency, poetic instants are strung together like pearls on an invisible strand. The lyrics themselves counterfeit a *durée* by their physical proximity and so create a symbolic time, free of the threat of closure. The arrangement of these *rime sparse* . . . may be

⁶ Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation of Modern Literature and Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 203.

⁷ Augusto de Campos, "poesia concreta," in Augusto de

Campos, Décio Pignatari, and Haroldo de Campos, *Teoria da Poesia Concreta: Textos Críticos e Manifestos 1950-1960*, 3rd ed. (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1987), p. 51.

thought of as an attempt to spatialize time and so to introduce a narrative element in a way that does not threaten to exceed the carefully delimited confines of the text.⁸

What would you say, in general, about the intrinsic spatiality of "non-concrete" poetry—the sense in which, as Haroldo de Campos puts it in a recent interview, "Dante or Camões may be read as Concrete poets"?⁹ To understand either poems or poetry better, how might we get at this "lyric space" critically?

AC: As I've said, concrete poetry radicalizes and makes explicit a procedure that is inherent in the nature of poetry. Paronomasia (as Jakobson would have it) or paramorphism (as Pignatari prefers) is, without a doubt, the principal agent of this procedure, capable of provoking the "spatialization of time" that happens in poetry. In an essay entitled "The Illusion of Contiguity," Pignatari develops the conceit of paronomasia or paramorphism, linking it to the notions of parataxis, spatiality, and verticality, and referring it to rhyme as well:

Paronomasia breaks discourse (hypotaxis), turning it spatial (parataxis), creating a non-linear syntax, an analogical-topological syntax. In a poem, horizontal paronomasia (alliteration, colliteration) creates melody, just as vertical paronomasia is responsible for harmony. Rhyme is vertical paronomasia at its most common. Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* and later concrete poems work with audio-visual, horizontal, and vertical paronomasias.¹⁰

In its most orthodox phase, concrete poetry dispenses with the other elements of discourse and practically toils with paronomasias alone. Look at Pignatari's poem "hambre" ("hunger") (figure 1), which is composed of only three Spanish words—*hombre* ("man"), *hambre* ("hunger"), and *hembra* ("female")—substituting, for syntax, visual vectors that establish the connections between the words. The paronomastic cohesion is so intense that the poem cannot be written in Portuguese (*homem-fome-mulher*), nor translated into English ("man-hunger-woman") without losing the poetic function. But it's possible to find everywhere in poetry, if we put the secondary features aside, these same essential elements, the poetic medullae that are concentrated in concrete poetry.

As Jakobson saw in Poe's "The Raven" the vocabular mirror "raven-never," I see in Dante's verse "E caddi come corpo morto cade" ("I fell down there as a dead body falls," in Edwin Morgan's version), an iconic dramatization of the poet's fall, in the last line of Canto 5:

c
caddi
come
corpo
morto
cade¹¹

This spatial disposition, this concretizing, makes evident a compact structure of alliterative disyllables which has at its center the assonant bloc "corpo morto" while it emphasizes the semantic reference, the fall. It's this material character that

⁸ John Freccero, "The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch's Poetics," *Diacritics* 5 (1975): 39, rpt. in *Literary Theory / Renaissance Texts*, ed. Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 29.

⁹ H. de Campos and Ortega, "Concrete Poetry and Beyond," trans. Mac Adam, 40.

¹⁰ Décio Pignatari, "A Ilusão da Contigüidade," *Avances* 1 (1976): 36.

¹¹ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Charles S. Singleton, Vol. 1 of *The Divine Comedy*, Bollingen Series 80, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970–75), p. 56. Edwin Morgan's translation of the passage appears in *Mediaeval Age: Specimens of European Poetry From the Ninth to the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Angel Flores (London: Phoenix House, 1965), p. 433.

hombre	hombre	hombre
hambre		hembra
	hambre	
hembra	hembra	hambre

makes it impossible to substitute within the line. In Portuguese, circumstantially, an approximation is possible: — *e cai como corpo morto cai* — but I'm the first of many translators to keep the sound of the line, since the others gave no importance to the materiality of the text.¹² Dante created forms heavily impressed with the concrete material of language (including, as it happens, *terza rima*).

This is not to say that all poetry should be transmuted into concrete poetry, which obviously would be absurd. It's only to speak of seeing poetry with a new critical vision, which concrete poetry's disclosure of its values makes propitious. It's appropriate to add that this same strategic conceit perhaps allowed the concrete poets, after the phase of didactic orthodoxy (for us, through 1958), to re-incorporate phrasal elements that had been radically rejected; the equipped eye of the post-concrete poet can perspectivize and relativize these, and out of them re-establishes the priority of material elements in which the poetic function essentially resides.

Figure 1. Décio Pignatari, "hambre" (1957), *Poesia Pois É Poesia* 1950–1975, *Poete* 1976–1986 (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1986), p. 112.

RG: *The Philadelphia video artist Peter Rose writes of his own work that "I think of myself as a poet, trying to find that vertical dimension to experience that serves as a reprieve from the mercilessly forward narrative movement of time and history."*¹³ *I don't know of a better short statement of what lyric, any kind of lyric, does with temporality; and yet Peter Rose is a poet who doesn't come near the printed page, who creates animated concrete poems and visual statements. Likewise Sharon Cameron, in the one truly good book on temporality in poetry, writes that*

although lyric verbs often record temporal change, they also collapse their progressions so that movement is not consecutive but is rather heaped or layered. This stacking up of movement, temporal forays cut off from linear progression and treated instead as if they were vertically additive . . . is quite opposite to the way in which meaning "unfolds" in novels or in the drama. The least mimetic of all art forms, the lyric compresses rather than imitates life; it will withstand the outrage of any complexity for the sake of being able to present sequence as if it were a unity.¹⁴

It may be that concrete poetry, whether in print or video or any other medium, simply acts out—literally and unmistakably—what all poetry does. It represents the "space" that always creeps into our theoretical accounts of how poetry works, and therefore is a kind of critical or theoretical statement itself, especially because it uses space to grant us a perspective on the non-spatial processes of poems: on their temporality, voices, tropes, and so forth.

¹² Augusto de Campos, "Dante: Um Corpo Que Cai," *O Anticrítico* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1986), p. 15.

¹³ Peter Rose, "Some Remarks," privately printed and circulated in correspondence.

¹⁴ Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 240–41.

AC: Doubtless concrete poetry is part of a poetic universe. It does not create any new artistic genre, and so it's called by the name "poetry" and claims its antecedents. It acts out what all poetry does. But it does so in a specific, more literal way. I find that concrete poetry doesn't simply "represent space," but acts upon it, proportioning new spatio-temporal modes of apprehension of the text by the reader. The question has, for me, other aspects, which lead us to consider concrete poetry as a drastic recovery of the vanguard movements from the beginning of the century, and of processes implicit in the Futurist, Cubist, and Dada movements (collage, montage, simultaneism), linked to a new physicality in the relations between modern man and the world of signs. Modern physics prompts these new practices, as well as new technologies. Within this area, one would have to consider in concrete poetry the accentuation—through a spatial syntax—of paratactic constructions, instead of hypotactic, which tend not merely to make the concrete poem illustrative or demonstrative, but to give it the character of direct, disruptive action in the body of logical structures in discourse. I've noted with satisfaction the importance that Marjorie Perloff, in *The Futurist Moment*, gives to paratactic structures in the historical process of modernism, coming to the emphasis Pignatari gives it, as the module of a spatial, non-linear syntax.¹⁵ It's curious to observe that the word *vertical*, which appears in the statements of both Peter Rose and Sharon Cameron, also occurs in Pignatari's formulation, which I have already mentioned. We would have to add to these characteristics the iconic, non-verbal elements incorporated by concrete poetry, which bestow on it a special status, adjacent to or contiguous with that of the plastic arts. All this tends to make the concrete poem more than a critical or theoretical proposition, since a meta-language may be present in more than one dimension.

RG: It's also argued, of course, that concrete poetry distorts or denies the orality of lyric discourse. The North American poet and critic John Hollander, for instance, has written that "since a true concrete poem cannot be read aloud, it has no full linguistic dimension, no existence in the ear's kingdom."¹⁶ Haroldo de Campos has a poem, "o pavilhão da orelha" ("the outer ear" / "the pavilion of the ear") (figure 2), that not only (ironically) shows the Portuguese common usage of a phrase like Hollander's, but—as a critical poem, a kind that the Brazilian concretistas seem to specialize in—argues for the aurality of itself and poems like it.

AC: If concrete poetry were only "visual," Hollander's statement would be admissible. Such an assertion, however, like others he makes in more than one context—that concrete poetry is nothing more than "a branch of graphic art," or alternately "a purely graphic art"—betrays, in my view, an imperfect understanding of this type of poetry as it emerged in the theory and practice of its various creators, Eugen Gomringer as much as the Brazilians.¹⁷ In our experience, we always saw concrete poetry as a "verbivocovisual" proposition that did not exclude "the ear's kingdom," but integrated it into a new conception of concretude, of the materiality of poetic language. My earliest concrete poems—

¹⁵ Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 75.

¹⁶ John Hollander, *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 266.

¹⁷ John Hollander, "Concrete Poetry," *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger et al., rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 927; *Vision and Resonance*, p. 266.

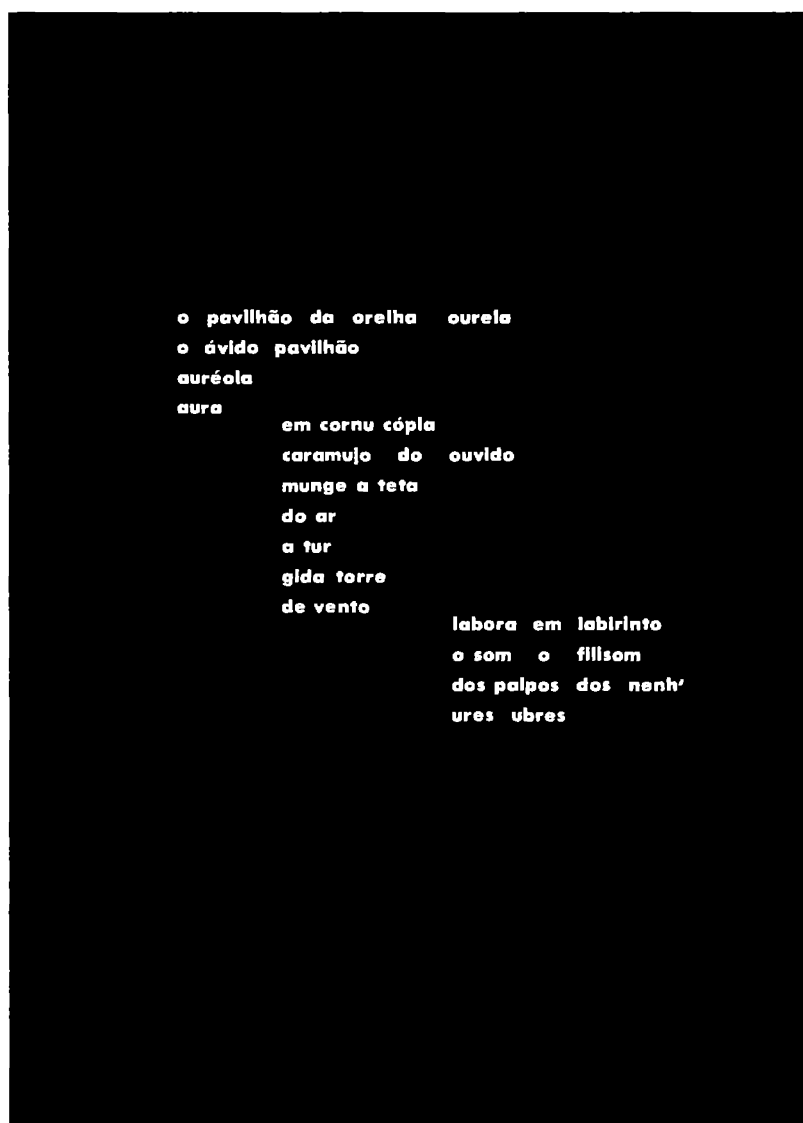


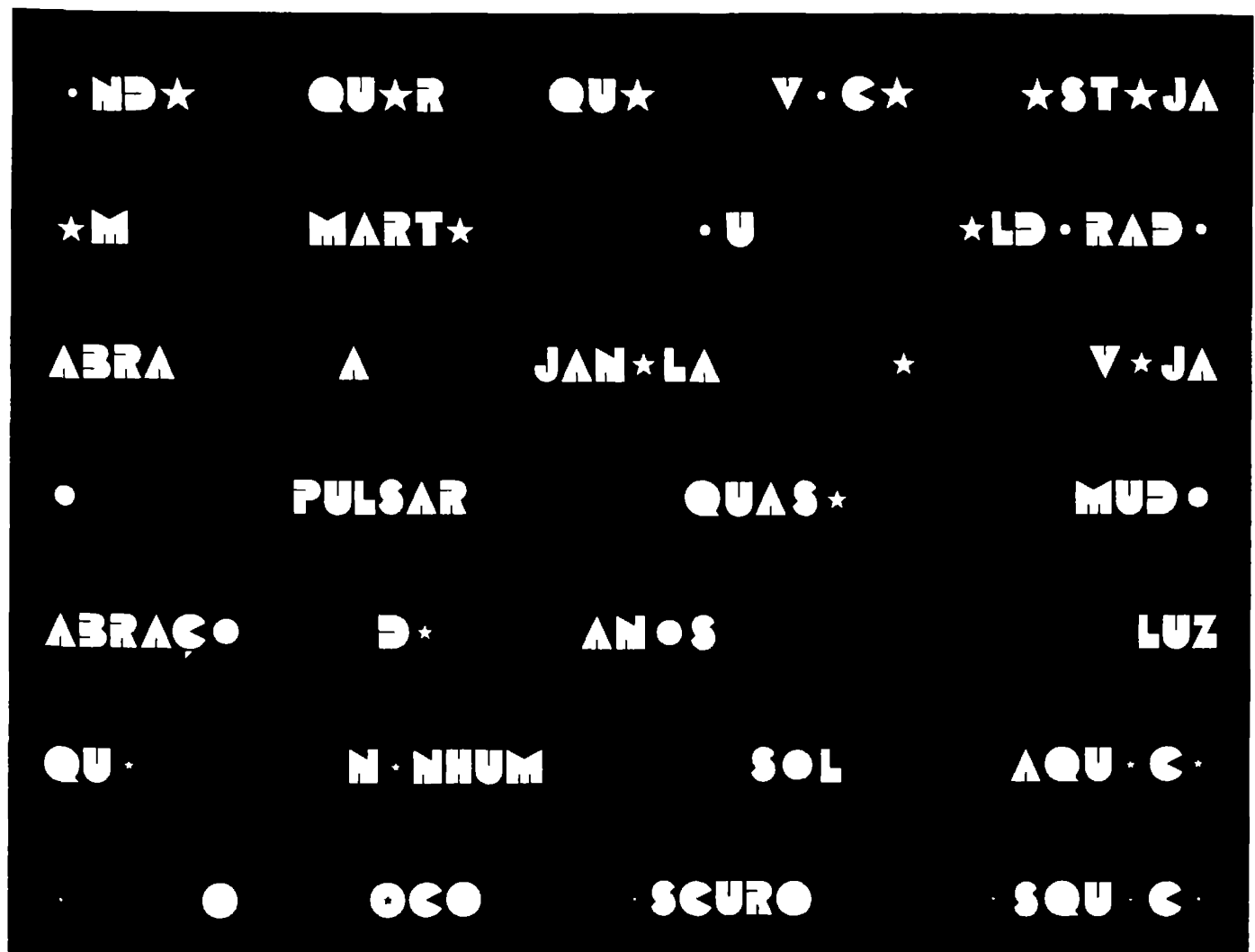
Figure 2. Haroldo de Campos, "o pavilhão da orelha" (1955-56), *Xadrez de Estrelas: Percorso Textual 1949-1974* (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1976), p. 74.

the cycle called *Poetamenos* (1953), which contains poems printed in color—were directly inspired by the *klangfarbe/melodie* of Anton Webern—a Schoenbergian idea which, for that matter, already suggests the dimension of sound (*klang*) next to the visual dimension of color (*farbe*), as part of the concept of tonal melody. And a large number of concrete poems have involved or emphasized the auditory level, in a way unexplored even by the traditional lyric.

Of course many of our poems have been performed by ourselves and others. For that matter, two of my volumes of poetry, *Caixa Preta* (1974) and *VIVA VIVA: Poesia 1949-1979* (1979), were published with a record that contains Caetano Veloso's beautiful spoken versions of "dias dias dias" (from *Poetamenos*) and "o pulsar" (from the series *Stelegramas*) (figure 3).¹⁸ Or one might recall the many musical works that have adapted their texts from concrete poetry: on Veloso's current American album, for instance, one song ("Circuladô de Fulô")

¹⁸ Augusto de Campos and Julio Plaza, *Caixa Preta* (São Paulo: Edições Invenção, 1975); Augusto de Campos,

VIVA VIVA: Poesia 1949-1979 (São Paulo: Livraria Duas Cidades, 1979).



is based on a poem from Haroldo's *Galáxias*.¹⁹ All this is empirical evidence that the general conception of concrete poetry has never implicitly excluded the aural dimension.

There are a small number of concrete poems that would privilege the visual element to the point of implying such an exclusion: for instance, my poem "olho por olho" (figure 4) or the code-poems of Pignatari, the latter a type of semiotic poetry. In the great majority of cases, however, we can say that the emphasis on the visual element, by means of repetition or paronomasia, sustains a parallel emphasis on the aural level. What's required, in this scheme, is a rupture with the linearity of a traditional reading: a convocation of various voices, a simultaneity or multiplicity of readings, the introduction of the pause or silence as a structural element. As Susanne Langer observed in *Feeling and Form*: "E.E. Cummings . . . gains tremendously by being read aloud."²⁰

Figure 3. Augusto de Campos, "o pulsar" (1975). VIVA VAIA: Poesia 1949-1979, 2nd ed., (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1986), p. 241.

¹⁹ Caetano Veloso, *Circuladô*, Elektra Nonesuch 9-79277, 1991. Some of the most popular musical adaptations are treated in Charles Perrone, "From Noigandres to 'Milagre da Alegria': The Concrete Poets and Contem-

porary Brazilian Popular Music," *Latin American Music Review* 6 (1985): 58-79.

²⁰ Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 277.

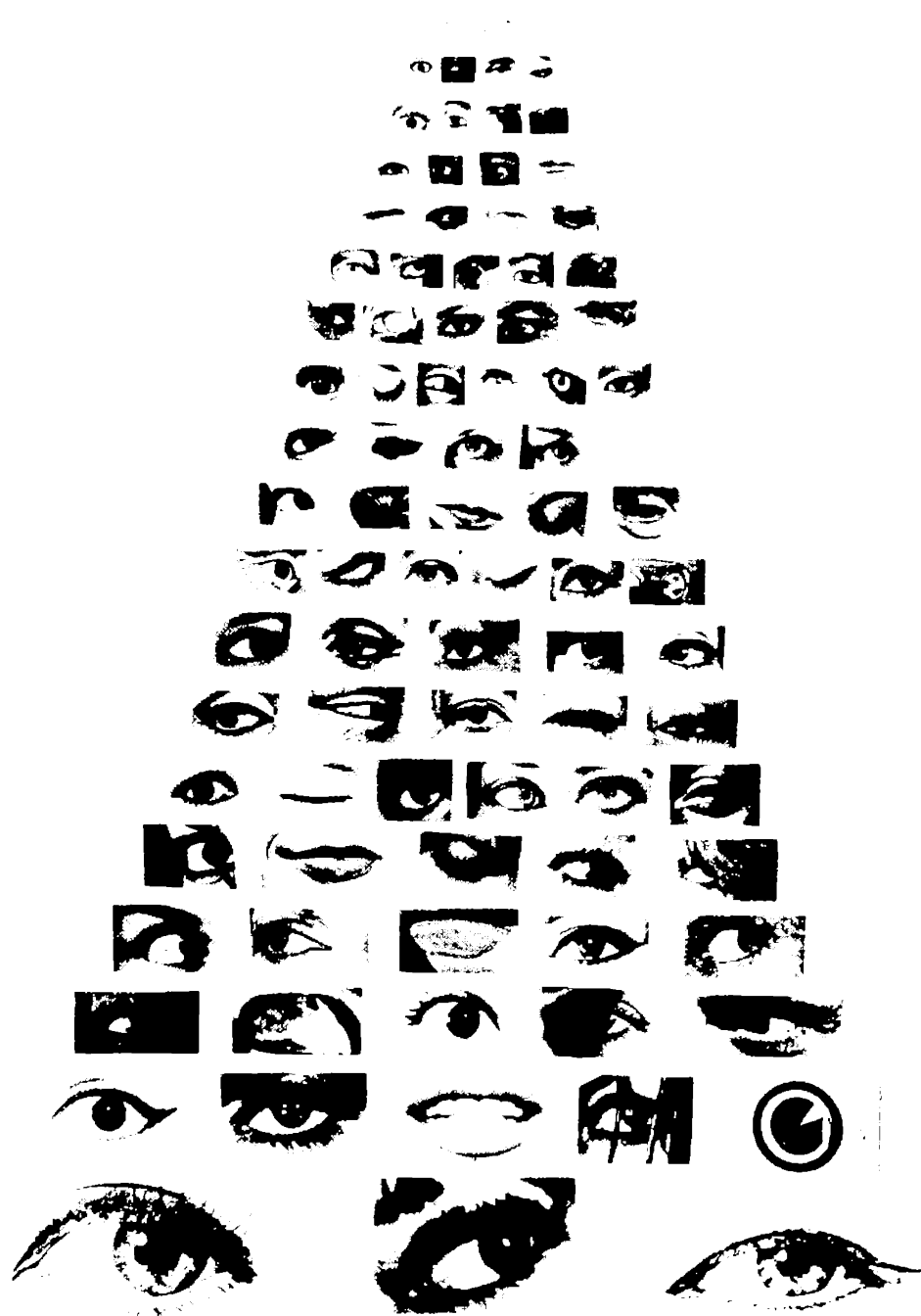


Figure 4. Augusto de Campos, "olho por olho" (1964), *VIVA VAIÁ*, 2nd ed., p. 125.

RG: Rudolf Arnheim, the psychologist of art, wrote sympathetically of "the temptation to complain about the simplicity of the typical concrete poem. It may be likened to the 'minimal art' seen in recent years in painting and sculpture, and we may assert that although a return to the elements can be therapeutic in certain historical situations, we must guard against granting full status to such diminished products."²¹ How do you respond?

²¹ Rudolf Arnheim, "Visual Aspects of Concrete Poetry," *Literary Criticism and Psychology*, ed. Joseph P. Strelka,

Yearbook of Comparative Criticism 7 (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), p. 99.

beba coca cola
 babe cola
 beba coca
 babe cola caco
 caco
 cola

 cloaca

AC: I think that Arnheim himself responds, in the same essay, where he goes on to speak of the fundamental difference between “memento” and “message.” For him, concrete poetry changes the nature and function of poetry from “message” to “memento” by “delivering it from the book,” and concrete poetry “aims at being a memento,” aspires to situate itself “as a sign or placard or icon in the daily traffic of market, pilgrimage, and recreation.” I think the difference established by Arnheim between the “message” (whose prototype would be “the letter sent by mail”) and the “memento” (an inscription, a monument, a graffiti) corresponds, up to a certain point, to the distinction I have already made between prose and poetry, radicalized to the maximum.²² Arnheim says, at the conclusion of his study, that “it is the double existence of words as species of pure shapes and as a non-sensory carrier of sense that has made language the most telling symbol of modern civilized life. This symbolic role of language is displayed in the images and verbal weaves of concrete poetry.”²³

RG: And yet this “memento” status that Arnheim would wish to confer on concrete poetry seems partly a way of circumscribing what we might call not merely its poetic function, but, adapting Jakobson’s term, its polemic-within-poetic function: I mean its potential role as a challenging kind of social criticism, which actually takes the most recognizable verbal artifacts, such as mottos, advertisements, and palavrões (“four-letter words”), and reconstitutes them either to lay bare the assumptions that propel their use or to expose even broader cultural issues. This is the sense in which Pignatari’s “beba coca cola” (figure 5) is social criticism: a familiar, domesticated “memento” begins to spew filth at us, like cuss words from a baby’s mouth, until we see—literally see—that the filth was there all along. Don’t we need to resist another attempt to turn the iconicity of concrete poetry into a longing for the background, another insistence that because it imitates inscriptions and epitaphs and so forth, it must wish to be among them? Doesn’t much of the best concrete poetry risk its “full status” deliberately, only to gain it back with a political-social-critical vengeance?

AC: When I accept Arnheim’s notion of “memento,” I think more of its physical, material, inscriptive aspect, characterized by brevity or necessity, than of the word’s usual semantic implications as a souvenir or relic. What interests me is

Figure 5. Décio Pignatari, “beba coca cola” (1957). *Poesia Pois É Poesia / Poete*, p. 113. The standard translation is by Maria José de Queiroz and Mary Ellen Solt, in *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, ed. Mary Ellen Solt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 108:

drink	coca cola
drool	glue
drink	coca(fine)
drool	glue shard
shard	
glue	
	cesspool

²² Arnheim, “Visual Aspects of Concrete Poetry,” pp. 100–102. ²³ Arnheim, “Visual Aspects of Concrete Poetry,” p. 109.

the counterposition of the idea of a brief, lapidary (non-linear, analogical, paratactic, iconic, spatio-temporal) poetic text against that of a logical, temporal discourse—which is what is usually meant by “message.” A four-letter word inscribed on a wall is still not a poem, but might be a “memento” in this special sense. Since in the case of concrete poetry, the signifieds are not abandoned, but elaborated in conjunction with audio-visual values, I believe there need be no “de-messaging” or depoliticization of the concrete text, just as a memento does not fail to carry signification.

This is the case with “beba coca cola,” an “anti-advertisement” that undoubtedly contains a social criticism, and which can be perfectly included in the category of mementos, even as, more appropriately, an anti-memento. But it’s evident as well that there’s a preconception in Arnheim against the category of mementos or, in the final analysis, of short poems, with which I can’t agree.

I believe that we can’t deny artistic status to a work simply because it avails itself of a minimal composition. This would lead us, for instance, to devalue some of the most extraordinary and influential works of modern art in all the media, such as those of Malevich and Rodchenko, Mondrian and Brancusi. Or the *magna opera minima* of Webern. Or even to a disowning of the long tradition of the Greco-Latin epigram, or of the Japanese *haiku*.

It’s true that brevity does not always signify intensity, and that a great number of experiences represented as concrete poems are characterized by a certain superficiality, wasting themselves on mere graphic effects. But this is one of the risks of this type of work, a risk which the indiscriminate proliferation of the international concrete movement made inevitable. This isn’t a problem of aesthetic definition, but simply one of quality. Likewise, there also exists a qualitative difference between a *haiku* of Bashō and an occasional or ornamental *haiku* which, in common practice, may have degenerated into a kind of facile society pastime. So did the sonnet in the West.

On the other hand, it isn’t possible to deny that concrete poetry has limitations: in fact it can be considered a “limit case” of poetic language, which does not have to exclude other possible means of attack. Even so, its implicit criticism of the confessional-and-conventional poetry that is everywhere to be found is still valid today. Concrete poetry, in its consequential and sophisticated products, attempts the most radical, coherent, and constructive re-enactment of the questioning that the vanguards, from Mallarmé to the Futurists and the Dadaists, made concerning poetic language: a questioning that cannot be ignored without our succumbing to the mimeticism and dilution that characterize the second-rate eclecticism of post-modern poetry.

RG: *Considering concrete poetry’s treatment of such constituents of lyric as temporality, orality, and so forth, how might one extrapolate its role as an agent within the lyric genre? Can concrete poetry be said to mimic, criticize, or parody lyric’s interests in a constructive way? Does the concrete poet have, either by choice or ex officio, a distinct responsibility to the genre?*

AC: Yes. I think that concrete poetry has tried to assume, or re-assume, the ideology of the poet-critic that was first incarnated in an integral way in the work of Mallarmé. Sartre observed very lucidly how Mallarmé’s poetry became “poetry conscious of itself, or critical poetry,” and quoted Mallarmé himself: “The

modern poet is a *critic* above all.” For him, according to Sartre, poetry becomes criticism and the poem, *la seule bombe*.²⁴ Valéry, on the other hand, in his *Letter on Mallarmé* (1927), clarifies what I have called an “aesthetic of refusal”:

Painstaking work, in literature, is manifested and operates in terms of *refusals*. One might say that it is measured by the number of refusals. . . . The rigorousness of the refusals, the number of solutions rejected, and the sort of possibilities that an artist will not accept, reveal the nature of the scruples, the degree of consciousness attained. . . . *Here is the point at which literature enters the realm of ethics*; and here it confronts the struggle between the natural and the willed; creates its heroes and martyrs of *resistance to the facile*.²⁵

It was exactly in this sense that I spoke, in my manifesto of 1956, of the “total responsibility [of concrete poetry] before language” (*uma responsabilidade total perante a linguagem*).²⁶ The experience of concrete poetry, as I understood it and still understand it, arrives at minimalism and the materiality of the text by the double intent of attaining the maximum of compositional rigor (which meant putting in parentheses all the excess verbiage) and of inciting to function in full all the constituents of the poetic word (as much in the graphic aspect as in sound)—which means, in turn, a revision and a liberation of the syntactic structures imposed on poetic discourse by the categories of logic. Such a consciousness of language would not allow the practice of the modern confessional-conventional lyric, before which concrete poetry is situated as the “consciousness of consciousness” (Valéry), in a critical posture of denial and negation.

RG: Is it feasible then to propose that concrete poetry is as much a species of literary theory as a type of poetry—or more so? Perhaps one of the reasons it has been so consistently devalued and marginalized as poetry is that we’re not setting it in the proper context, are asking the wrong things of it. To put it another way: one of the properties of lyric as discourse is its concreteness, which is at least latent in all lyric poems, and is actually exploited in a good many poems we don’t think of as specifically “concrete.” Now a certain class of poems, which we recognize as concrete, deliberately develops this property, and in doing so forfeits a number of other values we associate with lyric, but always to make a point or open up a question: to make us see more clearly certain means by which poetic language operates and, beyond that, certain strategies by which all poems are made. This extreme “consciousness of consciousness” is not what one would wish poetry to do all the time, and has its price—but is finally indispensable for a culture seriously interested in a speculative understanding of what poetry is and does.

AC: This is a way of looking at concrete poetry that seems valid to me, at least to a certain point. But our aspiration was that poetry, after this violent radicalization, would never be the same. That concrete poetry might come to be considered not only a type of poetry along with the other types, but a filter through which would emerge this “consciousness of consciousness” to disallow any innocence in relation to poems; in sum, the idea of a cultural shock, which would re-install the Mallarmaic consciousness at the heart of the notion of xzpoetry. All this belongs, perhaps, to the realm of Utopia. I don’t know first-

²⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Mallarmé (1842-1898),” *Situations, IX* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 197.

²⁵ Paul Valéry, “Letter About Mallarmé,” *Leonardo Poe Mallarmé*, trans. Malcolm Cowley and James R. Lawler,

vol. 8 of *Collected Works*, Bollingen Series 45 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 250.

²⁶ A. de Campos, “poesia concreta,” *Teoria da Poesia Concreta*, p. 50.

hand what happened with concrete poetry in other countries. But in Brazil, where concrete poetry really constituted a traumatic movement, to the extent of provoking passions and hatreds that survive even now, one critic came to refer to it as a kind of Hiroshima of the culture, and one poet asserted that concrete poetry walled in an entire generation for twenty years. It can be said that concrete poetry is a stone on the road of literature. And that the concrete poets are frequently regarded by other poets as terrorists—and collectively, as a kind of Big Brother—because we put in danger the centrist poetries of emotive, expressive, and persuasive discourse that continue to spread in the *geléia geral brasileira* (“general jam of Brazil”).²⁷

RG: Both you and your brother have insisted that to connect your early concrete and polemical writing with the developmentalist outlook of mid-1950s Brazilian society—especially the administration of President Juscelino Kubitschek (1956–61)—is far-fetched. Is it wrong to see the two phenomena as coming out of a common source in the culture? Is there an imaginable relation between concrete poetry and developmentalism?

AC: The activities that gave rise to concrete poetry began earlier in Brazil. Their antecedents are the Modernism of '22, especially in the work of Oswald de Andrade, who had already affirmed premonitorily, in the *Cannibalist Manifesto* (1928), “somos concretistas” (“we are concretists”); and after the war, in the constructivist poetry of João Cabral de Melo Neto, “the engineer” of modern Brazilian poetry.²⁸ The Noigandres group was constituted in 1952, and the compositions of *Poetamenos* all date from 1953. Kubitschek, then little known outside his state, was governor of Minas Gerais, and came to be a candidate for the presidency only in 1955. Connections with the developmentalism that characterized his administration were used by critics of a sociological orientation as an allegory, in an attempt to identify artificially the cosmopolitanism of concrete poetry with such facts as the implantation of an automotive industry in Brazil by multi-national companies: it was a demagogic comparison that aimed at representing the protagonists of concrete poetry antipathetically, as reactionaries or *entreguistas* (in the sense that development is the delivery [*entrega*] of the wealth of the nation for the exploration of foreign capital), at a moment in which the demands of the nationalists were in ascendance again. The military dictatorship that was installed in Brazil for twenty years from 1964, creating a cultural stew that exacerbated the so-called “ideological patrols” carried out by the left, sanctioned this negative vision of Kubitschek, in spite of his having been exiled, and in connection with this view maintained a preconception against the poetry of his era. Today, after the collapse of the Marxist utopia, the same Kubitschek administration is viewed with other, more positive eyes.

It's true that there are interesting coincidences, like the construction of Brasília—a vanguardist capital in the conception of its architects, Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa, disciples of Le Corbusier—and that we accentuated these, in naming our manifesto of 1958 a “pilot-plan for concrete poetry,” in

²⁷ “The Gentle Art of Making Enemies” (1976), an anthological section of Campos's *A Margem da Margem* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989), pp. 181–84, brings together these and other criticisms of concrete poetry from the fifties through the seventies.

²⁸ Oswald de Andrade, “Manifesto Antropófago,” *Do Pau-*

Brasil à Antropofagia e às Utopias: Manifestos, Teses de Concursos e Ensaos, introd. Benedito Nunes, 2nd ed., *Obras Completas* 6 (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1972), p. 18; the same is translated by Leslie Bary as “Cannibalist Manifesto” in *Latin American Literary Review* 38 (1991): 43.

the manner of Costa's "Pilot Plan for Brasília." But Niemeyer himself, a committed communist, didn't appreciate concrete art, preferring the figurative painting of Portinari for the alleviation of the *mauvaise conscience* of his palatial and official architecture.

I really don't believe that concrete poetry can be identified with the developmentalism of that period, which is an episodic event. I believe it was born out of a critical reflection which must be associated with the revision and recuperation of the values of experimental art after the paralysis brought on by the catastrophe of World War II. Concrete poetry is more appropriately associated with universal phenomena such as the redemption of the music of the Vienna School (Schoenberg, Berg, Webern) in the fifties by the activities of composers such as Boulez and Stockhausen, the rehabilitation of the vanguards (Futurism, Cubo-Futurism, Dada) and great marginalized figures such as Joyce, Duchamp, Ives, Varèse, and the emergence of ultramodernists such as Cage. In sum, what was being attempted in different parts of the world during the fifties was a recovery of the "language of rupture" of the vanguards. This recovery, which in Brazil produced concrete poetry, was accomplished here through a peculiar critical synthesis, very distant from the poetic practices then in vogue as much in Hispanic America as in the United States (the era of the Beat Generation), and derived, in some fashion, from surrealism. It's more pertinent to emphasize that Modern Art Week in 1922 and the National Exposition of Concrete Art of 1956 occurred in São Paulo, the major industrial center of South America, and here economic development plays a role because there is access to information on account of it. Remember, for instance, that on the initiative of the industrialist Cicillo Matarazzo and of the Museum of Modern Art that he had created in 1948, the first Biennial was inaugurated in São Paulo in 1951; from then on that event would regularly catalyze Brazilian culture, putting it in contact with the most advanced repertoires of contemporary art.

RG: *How do your translation projects, such as those in O Anticrítico, reflect your poetic program?*

AC: Translation, as Pound taught, is or can be a form of criticism. I don't mean literal translation, but that special type of translation that gains import as a recreation of the original, by operating through an equivalence of the aesthetic and semantic values of the base-text, such as Pound himself practices in his versions of Chinese poetry, of Propertius, and of the Provençal troubadours; or before him, as the *Rubaiyat* of "Omar Fitzgerald" exemplifies. I speak, then, of "transcreation" (as Haroldo de Campos names it) or of "art translation" (as I prefer to call it).²⁹ This type of translation, which has few practitioners in Brazil apart from Haroldo, Décio Pignatari, and myself, we applied at an early moment in order to install a "tradition of invention," injecting into Brazilian literature the new blood of radical works (many of them considered untranslatable) like those of Joyce, Cummings, Stein, and Khlebnikov, and at the same time to redeem, from a creative and not merely a didactic point of view, works of the past such as those of Arnaut Daniel, Dante, Cavalcanti, Villon, Donne, and many others. With this new tradition established, and with the work of "inventors"

²⁹ Haroldo de Campos, "Da Tradução Como Criação e Como Crítica" (1963), *Metalinguagem: Ensaio de Teoria e*

Crítica Literária, 2nd ed., Nosso Tempo 5 (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1970), pp. 21–38.

(in the Poundian classification) given new priority, it became possible to broaden the options and enfold other instances of poetic creativity, always under the radical criterion of art translation.³⁰ Thus appeared the more recent translations of passages from Ecclesiastes (by Haroldo), from Keats, Valéry, Block, and Rilke (by me), and from Shakespeare (by Décio). But it's always a past re-viewed by the modern eye that interests us: the syncopated concision of Emily Dickinson, the *Dinggedichte* (thing-poems) of Rilke.

RG: *How do you evaluate the work of the Noigandres group from today's perspective? Among the original purposes of the movement, what remains to be done? What is the place of concrete poetry among other poetics of the present?*

AC: It's not for me to make an appreciation of our work in terms of value. I believe, nevertheless, that concrete poetry has made a serious contribution toward the regeneration of poetic language and the criticism of contemporary poetics. It created patterns or models of non-syntactic, para-syntactic, and quasi-syntactic structures, showing that it is possible, through the disciplines of articulation and minimalism, to explore new ways of poetic understanding. Moreover, concrete poetry signals the future. Without intending, in any way, to fetishize the new powers of technology, I believe that a great part of the future of poetry will be affected by them. Some current experiences that are now just incipient, such as computer graphics, videotext, holography, and recording techniques, demonstrate that concrete poetry is at the base of a viable language for these media. Having little in common with the traditional forms of discourse, they are going to require new forms of linguistic codification that imply a stricter involvement between the verbal and the non-verbal, which is exactly the field of action of concrete poetry.

It is perhaps there—in the exploration of new technological media, and in their interaction with the spectacular arts or multi-disciplinary events—that we will find “what remains to be done,” probably not by us, but by still embryonic artists who will hold over us the advantage of having these new media at their disposal, and of having mastered them in their most complex and advanced forms.

I myself already have had the opportunity to experiment with almost all the available vehicles in that area, from videotext to illuminated panels, from computer graphics to holography and lasers. Among other texts, “pluvial” (1959) and “LUXO” (1965) have been reproduced in videotext, “o pulsar” (1975) and “sos” (1983) with computer graphics, “cidade / city / cité” (1963) and “o quasar” (1975) on electronic displays, “rever” (1970) and “risco” (1987) as laser holograms, and “poema bomba” (1987) as a computer hologram.³¹

The virtual movement of the printed word, the typogram, is giving way to the real movement of the computerized word, the videogram, and to the typography of the electronic era. From static to cinematic poetry, which, combined with computerized sound resources, can raise the verbivocovisual structures pre-conceived by concrete poetry to their most complete materialization. In this

³⁰ Ezra Pound, “How To Read” (1929), *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 23.

³¹ Designed as a hologram, with the letters in conical

perspective, “poema bomba” appeared in the exhibition “Ideologia” at the Museum of Contemporary Art at Ibirapuera Park, São Paulo, 1987.



Figure 6. Augusto de Campos, "poema bomba." This digitalized still from a three-dimensional video animation was realized at the University of São Paulo on a Silicon Graphics 4d/480VGS computer. In the video, the letters of "poema bomba" continually explode in the direction of the spectator in positive and negative images, synchronized with a recording of Campos's performance of the text.

moment of transition, marked by regressive in-definitions of the supposed "post-" (formerly, "retro-" or "anti-") modern, poetry can leave saturation and impasse for unanticipated flights into the beyond-the-looking glass of video, and depart on a broad inter- or multi-media voyage (figure 6). Moreover, automation, which frightens humanists so much, might perhaps be humanized through poetry and, enriching itself conceptually, attain the dignity that the mere games of electronic entertainment cannot confer on it.