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**MANIFESTOS****From Line to Constellation (1954)**

Eugen Gomringer, Switzerland

Our languages are on the road to formal simplification, abbreviated, restricted forms of language are emerging. The content of a sentence is often conveyed in a single word. Longer statements are often represented by small groups of letters. Moreover, there is a tendency among languages for the many to be replaced by a few which are generally valid. Does this restricted and simplified use of language and writing mean the end of poetry? Certainly not. Restriction in the best sense- concentration and simplification- is the very essence of poetry. From this we ought perhaps to conclude that the language of today must have certain things in common with poetry, and that they should sustain each other both in form and substance. In the course of daily life this relationship often passes unnoticed. Headlines, slogans, groups of sounds and letters give rise to forms which could be models for a new poetry just waiting to be taken up for meaningful use. The aim of the new poetry is to give poetry an organic function in society again, and in doing so to restate the position of poet in society.

Bearing in mind, then, the simplification both of language and its written form, it is only possible to speak of an organic function for poetry in terms of the given linguistic situation. So the new poem 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 (*denkgegenstanddenkspiel*), its concern is with brevity and conciseness. It is memorable and imprints itself upon the mind as a picture. Its objective element of play is useful to modern man, whom the poet helps through his special gift for this kind of play-activity. Being an expert both in language and the rules of the game, the poet invents new formulations. By its exemplary use of the rules of the game the new poem can have an effect on ordinary language.

The constellation is the simplest possible kind of configuration in poetry, which has for its basic unit the word, it encloses a group of words as if it were drawing stars together to form a cluster. The constellation is an arrangement, and at the same time a play-area of fixed dimensions. The constellation is ordered by the poet. He determines the play-area, the field or force and suggests its possibilities. The reader, the new reader, grasps the idea of play, and joins in. In the constellation something is brought into the world. It is a reality in itself and not a poem about something or other. The constellation is an invitation.

(Translation: Mike Weaver)

**Max Bill and Concrete Poetry (1958)**

Eugen Gomringer, Switzerland

I was studying the essays of Max Bill when I began more and more to see the beautiful dishonesty and irrelevance of writing poems, for usually they come into being without enough distance created by thinking. It is clear that Bill's theory of concrete art in which he calls for production of the aesthetic object for spiritual use cannot be equally applied to linguistic constructions. Even in its most primitive usage language serves a spiritual use-so long as it is a language of words. Language with its building elements and rules is intelligible as an object.

What I could take over from Bill the artist was the modern functional interpretation of the aesthetic object. Bill talks about use (*gebrauch*). This discovery has its correlation in highly-developed interpretations of culture. To prepare a language for use which does not mean for low purposes-we must analyze its means and make them evident as possibilities. In this I see a correspondence with the efforts of modern linguistic science.

First it seemed important to me to isolate and present the already-existing word (so as to remain within a reasonable area of communication). Constellations took form in place of lines, which don't claim to be "Poetry": they have no more and no less to do with language. The name "concrete poetry," could be used because of this concern with use of the elements of language-with the word as a totality, for instance, reaching out to semantic, syntactic and pragmatic possibilities-an intelligible object treated with concrete intentions as a useful thing.

The meaning of "concrete" in relation to language does not imply the limitation of reference only, to concrete things, although in actual practice this connotation is apt. Since quite a number of poets of this generation in Europe, and particularly in South America, had come to the same conclusions, I put the name "Concrete Poetry" on the cover of an anthology containing similar examples of linguistic design.

It can be seen that the work of Max Bill, particularly his analytical thinking, greatly influenced our first intuitive attempts. But over and above that it becomes obvious once again that poets no longer have to address themselves exclusively to other poets to experience a new view of the world and new techniques. Today possibly more than ever it is thought structures which are decisive.

(Translated by Irène Montjoye Sinor, Mary Ellen Solt)

(From an essay in the Festschrift *Max Bill*)

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**Concrete Poetry (1956)**

Eugen Gomringer, Switzerland

Language structures in concrete poetry differ in several respects from poems and texts, which appear in the flow of literary production in our time.

The visual aspect. Concrete language structures either do not follow the traditional verse and line order or they follow it in such a limited way that one is not reminded of traditional forms (this refers only, to poetry). Longer texts preferably retain the traditional readable forms of presentation. Looking at them one can talk about the accumulation, distribution, analysis, synthesis and arrangement of linguistic signs, of letters and of words. The conventional distribution of these signs is taken into account as one possibility among others, but it is not accepted or used without being challenged. With most structures the distribution of signs follows an inherent law, and certain systems can evolve therefrom. This is a matter of bare linguistic structure, and the visible form of concrete poetry is identical to its structure, as is the case with architecture.

Let us, however, speak of content. The question of content is for the concrete poet strongly related to the question of attitudes toward life in which art is effectively incorporated. If the poet's attitudes are positive and synthetically rationalistic, his poetry will be so. It will not serve as a valve for the release of all sorts of emotions and ideas but will consist of a linguistic structure closely related to the tasks of modern communication, which are influenced by the sciences and by sociological factors. Content is then, only interesting for the concrete poet if its spiritual and material structure prove to be interesting and can be handled as language.

Information and communication. Concrete language structures are partly unreflected, partly reflected information. They are unreflected when their pictorial sign-character is at the same time a signal, which is like a command—followed by a predominately sensory reaction. They are reflected (or aesthetic) information when they are presented as sign schemes. In both cases the poet tries to use the concrete language structure as information conveyed in concise unveiled form. For reasons of communication. Because the basis of good linguistic communication consists of analogous thought structure—or to use behaviorist terminology: analogous pattern structure—as well as of analogous material (sign) structure by way of the open visible presentation of a structure and often psychologically motivated reduction to relatively few signs (or signals). Concrete poem structures can serve to unite various kinds of language, concepts of language and the body of existing signs. They can, or instance, unite the view of the world expressed in the mother tongue with physical reality. Concrete poetry is founded upon the contemporary

scientific—technical view of the world and will conic into its own in the synthetic-rationalistic world of tomorrow. If concrete poetry is still considered strange (aesthetically meager or overly-simplified) this is probably due to a lack of insight into the new directions in which our society is developing in thought and action, which in essence contain a new total view of the world.

International-supra national. It is a significant characteristic of the existential necessity of concrete poetry that creations such as those brought together in this volume began to appear almost simultaneously in Europe and South America and that the attitude which made the creation and defense of such structures possible manifested itself here as it did there.

I am therefore convinced that concrete poetry is in the process of realizing the idea of a universal poetry. The time has therefore probably, come for a thorough revision of concepts, knowledge, faith and lack of faith in poetics, if poetry is to exist in earnest and positively in modern society. Unfortunately one can still notice that even intelligent people pretend that they are more naive than they really are as soon as they appear as poets or conic into contact with poetry. As if one would have to speak naively about fundamental questions.

The main languages in this book are German and English. But this should not be considered a final choice of preferred languages. Besides these Spanish and French are also used. This intentional polyglotism shall bring some living languages into contact with each other as at a party, for instance, or on a flight people from different backgrounds, abilities, and languages as well as outward appearances can be observed. Therefore we also take into consideration modern dialect poetry knowing that dialects represent the linguistic storehouse out of which individual forms and fundamental linguistic experience can be won.

Translated by Irène Montjoye Sinor, Mary Ellen Solt

**The Poem as Functional Object (1960)**

Eugen Gomringer, Switzerland

Some years ago I defined the new poem as a functional object. This definition was accepted by some as a sign of the times and misguided youth and by others as a working hypothesis for different developmental procedures. At the same time in South America, or more exactly, in São Paulo, a group was formed whose definition of tile poem coincided with mine. I called my poems "constellations" omitting reference to earlier poems with the same title by other poets. Later, after similar and different forms had been created, my friends in São Paulo and I grouped all our experiments under the term "Concrete Poetry." One reason for this was to honor the concrete Painters in Zürich—Bill, Graeser, Lohse, Vreni, Loewensberg and others—a strong group

from which impulses felt throughout the world had been emitted uninterruptedly since the early forties. Since 1942 my creation of the constellations has been decisively influenced by this group. Today "Concrete Poetry" is the general term which included a large number of poetic-linguistic experiments characterized with either constellation, ideogram, stochastic poetry, etc.,—by conscious study of the material and its structure (for a short time there was a magazine with this name *linateriall* in Darmstadt): material means the sum of all the signs with which we make poems. Today you find concrete poetry in Japan, Brazil, Portugal, Paris, Switzerland, Austria and Germany.

For some younger poets the constellation is already old hat. That is it does not go far enough for them. Some of them work typographically more freely; others work typographically less imaginatively. Still others criticize me for trying to say too much. In spite of the fact that many of my purer constellations (for example "avenidas"/ "baum kind hund haus" (tree child dog house)/ "mist mountain butterfly" were preceded by divers experiments. Even today, again and again, I make logical, atomistic and graphic experiments, which serve only as stimulation and discipline.

I find it wisest to stay with the word, even with the usual meanings of the word. By doing this I hope, in spite of the apparent scarcity of my words as compared to the verbosity of non-concrete poetry, to stay in continuity with poetry, which emphasizes formal pattern. The purpose of reduced language is not the reduction of language itself but the achievement of greater flexibility and freedom of communication (with its inherent need for rules and regulations). The resulting poems should be, if possible, as easily understood as signs in airports and traffic signs. I see danger in taking away from Concrete Poetry its useful, aesthetic-communicative character on the one side by not understanding the simpler linguistic phenomena (by being over-fed -with words, and by lack of artistic sensibility) and on the other side by following the new esoteric of the typographic poets in whom one can sometimes notice a certain lack of imagination. To date I see only in the experiments of Claus Bremer, in his poems in the form of ideograms, genuine enrichment of the constellation. This selection is not comprised of pure constellation only. Each poem contains elements of constellation: the direct juxtaposition of words; repetitions and combinations; questioning of equivalent statements; over-all unity of themes; analysis and synthesis as poetic subject; minimal-maximal tension in the smallest space. I want especially, to show through this small variety that the constellation can be the rallying point as well as the point of departure. Anyone who makes use of the freedoms of the art of poetry in a reasonable way will see that the constellation is not a dead-end or an end at all, as the literary people have said, but on the contrary that it uses thinking and structural methods

which can connect artistic intuition with scientific specialization.

Concrete poetry, in general, as well as the constellation, hopes to relate literature as art less to "literature" and more to earlier developments in the fields of architecture, painting, sculpture, industrial design—in other words to developments whose basis is critical but positively-defined thinking.

Note: Originals of Gomringer's manifestoes and statements are printed without capitals.

Translation Irène Montjoye Sinor, Mary Ellen Solt  
(From the Foreword to **33 konstellationen**)

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### Concrete Poetry I (1965) / Max Bense, Germany

This is a kind of poetry which produces neither the semantic nor the aesthetic sense of its elements, words for example, through the traditional formation of linear and grammatically ordered contexts, but which insists upon visual and surface connectives. So it is not the awareness of words following one after the other that is its primary constructive principle, but perception of their togetherness. The word is not used primarily as an intentional carrier of meaning. Beyond that it is used as a material element of construction in such a way that meaning and structure reciprocally express and determine each other. Simultaneity of the semantic and aesthetic functions of words occurs on the basis of simultaneous exploitation of all the material dimensions of the linguistic elements which, of course, can also appear to be broken up into syllables, sounds, morphemes or letters to express the aesthetic dependence of the language upon their analytical and syntactical possibilities. In this sense it is the constructive principle of concrete poetry alone, which uncovers the material wealth of language.

Whatever consists of signs can be transmitted; that is, it is the subject, emission, perception and apperception of a communication scheme that can typify a specific design pattern which concrete poetry can show. Let us now enlarge the concept of concrete poetry. Concrete texts are often closely related to poster texts due to their reliance upon typography and visual effect; that is, their aesthetic communication scheme often corresponds to that of advertisements. The central sign, often a word, takes on polemical or proclaiming function.

Concrete poetry does not entertain. It holds the possibility of fascination, and fascination is a form of concentration, that is of concentration which includes perception of the material as well as apperception of its meaning.

Thus concrete poetry does not separate languages; it unites them; it combines them. It is this part of its

linguistic intention that makes concrete poetry the first international poetical movement. In South America and North America, in Germany, France, Italy, England, Portugal, Denmark, Sweden and Switzerland, in Czechoslovakia and Japan there is concrete poetry. Already well-known poets are making use of this important experimental way of writing . . .

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### Concrete Poetry II (1965) / Max Bense, Germany

The world is only to be justified as an aesthetic phenomenon; and if there is such a thing as an aesthetic conception, it is an artistic one. This has been known since Nietzsche. Much in modern art demonstrates the validity of these postulates, primarily the material concept of poetry—which is less poetry about a world than creation—with linguistic means. Design in words. Text design.

Concrete poetry is a style of material poetry if it is understood as a kind of literature which considers its linguistic means (such as sounds, syllables, words, word sequences and the interdependence of words of all kinds) primarily as representation of a linguistic world which is independent of and not representative of an object extrinsic to language or of a world of events. Furthermore the language of material poetry is not subject to the conventional rules of grammar and syntax in the common speech, but is ruled by unique visually and structurally oriented models. The communication scheme serves less an understanding of meaning than an understanding of arrangements. It is therefore an aesthetic communication scheme.

As to the term concrete, it is to be understood positively, as in Hegel, as the opposite of the term abstract. The concrete is the non-abstract. Everything that is abstract is based on something from which certain characteristics have been abstracted. Everything concrete, on the other hand, is nothing but itself. To be understood concretely a word must be taken at its word. All art is concrete which uses its material functionally and not symbolically. To some extent therefore concrete poetry can be considered to be material art. The “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry” published by the Noigandres group recognizes the verbal, the vocal and the visual materiality of the word and of language. However the problem is not to create a traditional linguistic sphere of communication, which conventionalizes meanings in exploiting the verbal function of the word. The word is being manipulated so-to-speak in three dimensions verbally, vocally and visually. Seen as material the communication sphere is three-dimensional. The word has simultaneously a verbal, a vocal and a visual positional value. This is the reason why a word that is to be used in a text should not be chosen according to its role or position in a possible sentence. Sentences are not the aim of concrete texts. What is to be created are

ensembles of words, which as unites, represent a verbal, vocal and visual sphere of communication—the three-dimensional language object, and this three-dimensional language object is the carrier of a specifically concrete aesthetic message. The graphic positional value of the word or the grouping of words on a surface must, it is evident, be considered in the same way in which phonetic phenomena are used on the acoustical borders of speech. It is equally clear that to the same extent to which the word is not the basis of the message of the text characterized by the linear distribution of the conventional communication sphere of classical poetry, it is being replaced by the surface arrangement.

Note: Originals of Bense’s statements were printed without capitals.

Tr. Irène Montjoye Sinor, M.E.S. 1965 (From *Konkrete Poesie International*)

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### Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry (1958) by Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatari, Haroldo de Campos: Brazil

Concrete Poetry: product of a critical evolution of forms. Assuming that the historical cycle of verse (as formal-rhythmical unit) is closed, concrete poetry begins by being aware of graphic space as structural agent.

Qualified space: space-time structure instead of mere linear-temporistical development.

Hence the importance of ideogram concept, 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.

“*Il faut que notre intelligence s’habitue à comprendre synthético-idéographiquement au lieu de analytico-discursivement*” (Apollinaire).

Eisenstein: ideogram and montage.

Forerunners: Mallarmé (**Un coup de dés**, 1897): the first qualitative jump: “*subdivisions prismatiques de l’idée*”; space (“blancs”) and typographical devices as substantive elements of composition.

Pound (**The Cantos**); ideogramic method.

Joyce (**Ulysses** and **Finnegans Wake**): word-ideogram; organic interpenetration of time and space.

Cummings: atomization of words, physiognomical typography; expressionistic emphasis on space.

Apollinaire (**Calligrammes**): the vision, rather than the praxis.

Futurism, Dadaism: contributions to the life of the problem.

In Brazil: Oswald de Andrade (1890-1954): “in pills, minutes of poetry.” João Cabral de Melo Neto (born 1920—

**The Engineer** and **The Psychology of Composition** plus **Anti-Ode**): direct speech, economy and functional architecture of verse.

Concrete Poetry: tension of things-words in space-time.  
Dynamic structure: multiplicity of concomitant movements.

So in music-by, definition, a time art-space intervenes (Webern and his followers: Boulez and Stockhausen; concrete and electronic music); in visual arts-spatial, by definition-time intervenes (Mondrian and his *Boogie-Woogie* series; Max Bill; Albers and perceptive ambivalence; concrete art in general).

Ideogram: appeal to nonverbal communication.  
Concrete poem communicates its own structure: structure-content.

Concrete poem is an object in and by itself, not an interpreter of exterior objects and/ or more or less subjective feelings.

Its material word (sound, visual form, semantic charge).  
Its problem: a problem of functions—relations of this material.

Factors of proximity and similitude, gestalt psychology.  
Rhythm: relational force.

Concrete poem,  
by using the phonetic system (digits) and analogical syntax, creates a specific linguistic area —  
“**verbivocovisual**”—  
which shares the advantages of nonverbal communication, without giving up word’s virtualities.  
With the concrete poem occurs the phenomenon of metacommunication: coincidence and simultaneity of verbal and nonverbal communication;  
only (it must be noted) it deals with a communication of forms, of a structure-content, not with the usual message communication.

Concrete Poetry aims at  
the least common multiple of language.  
Hence its tendency to *nounising* and *verbification*.  
“The concrete wherewithal of speech” (Sapir).  
Hence its affinities with the so-called **isolating languages** (Chinese):  
“*The less outward grammar the Chinese language possesses, the more inner grammar inherent in it*” (Humboldt via Cassirer).  
Chinese offers an example of pure relational syntax, based exclusively on word order (see Fenollosa, Sapir and Cassirer).

The conflict form-subject looking for identification, we call isomorphism.  
Parallel to form-subject isomorphism, there is a space-time isomorphism, which creates movement.  
In a first moment of concrete poetry pragmatics, isomorphism tends to physiognomy, that is a movement imitating natural appearance (**motion**); organic form and phenomenology of composition prevail.  
In a more advanced stage, isomorphism tends to resolve itself into pure structural movement (**movement** properly said);  
at this phase, geometric form and mathematics of composition (sensible rationalism) prevail.

Renouncing the struggle for “absolute,”  
Concrete Poetry remains in the magnetic field of perennial relativeness.  
Chronomicro—metering of hazard.

Control.

Cybernetics.

The poem as a mechanism regulating itself: feed-back.  
Faster communication (problems of functionality and structure implied) endows the poem with a positive value and guides its own making.

Concrete Poetry:  
total responsibility before language.  
Thorough realism.  
Against a poetry of expression,  
subjective and hedonistic.  
To create precise problems  
and to solve them in terms of  
sensible language.  
A general art of the word.  
The poem-product: useful object.

**Note:** Original printed without capitals. The “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry” presents a synthesis of the theoretical writings of the Noigandres group from 1950-58. The critical writings and manifestos of Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari and Haroldo de Campos have been collected in a volume: **Teoria da Poesia Concreta**, Textos Críticos e Manifestos 1950-1960, Sao Paulo, Edições Invenção, 1965.

Translated by the authors. 1958 (From **Noigandres 4**)