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

cloaca

drink   coca cola
drool   glue
drink   coca(ine)
drool   glue shard
shard
glue

cesspool

Décio Pignatari,
beba coca cola, 1957

JAMIE HILDER

CONCRETE POETRY: FROM THE PROCEDURAL TO THE PERFORMATIVE

Perhaps the most difficult obstacle one encounters when writing about concrete poetry is figuring out exactly what the term means. Following closely behind that obstacle is the task of determining whether it is a movement or a form, or both, and when, if at all, it stopped being a viable category of poetic composition. Evidence of these obstacles appears in the scarcity of a defined critical tradition. Concrete poetry is referenced, though generally only cursorily, in wildly various discourses across disciplines and geographies, and commentators will often stretch the term "concrete" backwards and forwards to hook it onto a tradition or identify precursors or heirs. In one sense, its elasticity is an impediment. Without a solid understanding of what concrete poetry is or was as a movement or form, references to it can sound hollow, like relying on "abstract" to describe a painting or sculpture. A painter might today use Jackson Pollock's drip method, but that would not make her or him an "abstract" artist in the way s/he might have been in the 1940s or 1950s. Similarly, a performer might mount a stage in a silly outfit and recite nonsensical language, but s/he would refuse the label of a Dadaist. Though forms might repeat, historical conditions do not, at least not in the tidy way that the perseverance of these formal categories might suggest. Concrete only sounds like it is stable.

In another sense, concrete poetry's elasticity is a signal of how integrated the poetry is within the culture of communication technologies. It operates not only within the visual turn that is rooted in the development of photography and film, and which accelerated with television, advertising and now the internet and mobile phones, but also within the visual art and literary experiments that address how language appears and operates in everyday life. In this way, looking back towards concrete poetry as a defined movement and identifying where it overlaps with artistic and literary output on an international scale can help us understand how and to what end the visual representation of language persists, and how the work responds to various conditions. This terrain seems particularly significant when considering the routes globalization has forged over the last 60 years, where the increased circulation of goods and people developed in tandem with a veritable entrenchment of English as the world language of commerce and diplomacy. It should seem almost commonplace at this moment in history to point out that language carries power; a poetry that early on took aim at exactly how that power functions globally is worth another look.

The timeline to which I adhere for concrete poetry's development is, like the work's other histories, fraught with exceptions and counter-narratives. But it is an account I find especially useful in highlighting specific techniques and concerns that often get elided. At its beginnings I place the 1955 meeting between the Bolivian-Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer and the Brazilian Décio Pignatari in Ulm, Germany. It is at this moment that the two poets come to realize the work they had been producing independently of and across the Earth from each other, and which they both were beginning to refer to as "concrete," might operate on a scale grander than they had both imagined: the relatively recent scale of the global, which grew not only out of technological innovations in communication and transportation, but also out of the post-war understanding of the world as something that could be annihilated by nuclear weapons. It was out of this moment of urgency and possibility that Gomringer and Pignatari, along with his compatriots Augusto and Haroldo de Campos,
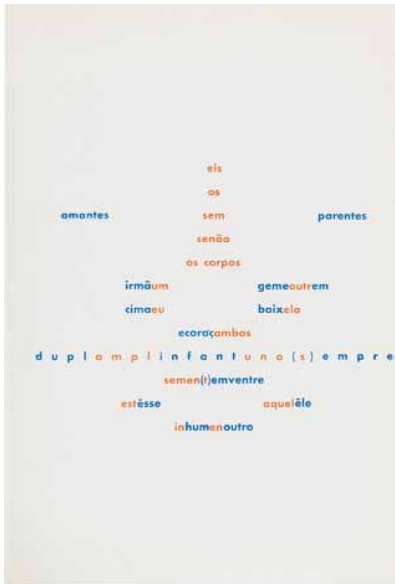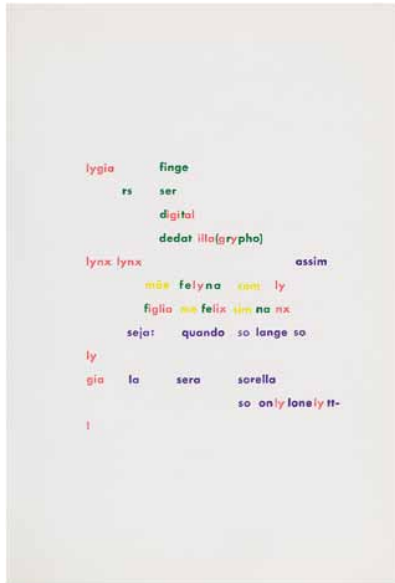
first theorized concrete poetry as a project to increase poetic understanding beyond national traditions, to break free of national languages where possible, or at least to write in a reduced syntax that was easily translatable, and which took the visual character of letters as a source of meaning. Gomringer's 1956 manifesto, "Concrete Poetry," which Gomringer wrote as an introduction to an anthology that never came to be, makes clear the relationship between concrete poetry and the technology of the period as well as the rise in the international exchange of culture:

> Concrete poetry is founded upon the contemporary scientific-technical view of the world and will come into its own in the synthetic-rationalistic world of tomorrow.…[The work's] intentional polyglotism shall bring some living languages into contact with each other as at a party, for instance, or on a flight where people from different backgrounds, abilities, and languages as well as outward appearances can be observed.[1]

The beginnings of concrete poetry proper are rarely disputed. Historians might point to the fact that Öyvind Fahlström wrote a manifesto of what he called "concrete poetry" in 1953, but the kind of poetry he was proposing was different than what would eventually be understood as concrete; it had more in common with Musique Concrète, which, though not unrelated, has a different trajectory and relationship to language. Similarly, critics might point to visual-based poetic work that predates the 1955 meeting between Gomringer and Pignatari: the work of the Italian poet and critic Carlo Belloli, who was making visual poetry in the 40s and early 50s; the calligrammes of Guillaume Apollinaire, the French Dadaist; and the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé, whose turn-of-the-century compositions played with the visual arrangement of words on a page in combination with varying typefaces and font sizes. But it is important to distinguish this work from concrete poetry, especially since anthologists in the 1970s, like Klaus Peter Dencker and Berjouhi Bowler, would often collapse all poetry with a visual character into a monolithic tradition stretching back to the first artefacts of written language. The result of this acritical homogeneity is a wide misconception of concrete poetry as *simply* visual, or shaped poetry, a position that has persisted in art historians' habitual dismissal of concrete poetry as naïve and decorative. If you attended elementary or high school in North America in the 1970s or later, you likely share this understanding; the term concrete poetry will conjure visions of George Herbert's *Easter Wings*, the seventeenth-century British devotional poem composed in two stanzas that mimic the shape of angels' wings; or, even worse, a poem about Christmas in the shape of a Christmas tree. Ironically, it is the same kind of expanded readership promised by shaped poetry—even children can read and write it!—that concrete poetry aimed for. The consequence of this broad marketing strategy, however, was that the work was considered too simple, too easy, and has been almost completely deflated as an innovative and critical moment in twentieth-century art and literature. When Gomringer wrote in his 1960 text "The Poem as Functional Object" that he wanted concrete poems to be as "easily understood as signs in airports and traffic signs," he did not mean for them to be as predictable and banal.[2]

silence silence silence
silence silence silence
silence   silence
silence silence silence
silence silence silence

Eugen Gomringer, *silence*, 1953

lygia finge
rs ser
digital
dedat illa(grypho)
lynx lynx assim
mãe felyna com ly
figlia ma felix sim na nx
seja: quando so lange so
ly
gia la sera sorella
so only lonely tt-
t

nossos dias com cimento
conchiglia
e o menoscabo em cubos
menos cubos como dias
men digos ao cabo frio
ao
fim
do triste
há manchas no assoalho
mendigos são os que sentam
dois nos bancas da praça ao
vento tão ventre
segurando tant o
as mãos s passos
e em boa noite e até per amanhã
t e a té t e afã
bem guntam fim?

eis
os
amantes sem parentes
senão
os corpos
irmãum gemeoutrem
cimaeu baixela
ecoraçambos
duplamplinfantuno(s)empre
semen(t)emventre
estésse aquelêle
inhumenoutro

Top left:
Augusto de Campos, *lygia*, 1953

Top right:
Augusto de Campos, *nossos dias com cimento*, 1953

Bottom:
Augusto de Campos, *eis os amantes*, 1953

Where concrete poetry ends is a much more contentious topic, a fact made evident by the continued use of the term to describe poetry which makes use of the enhanced visuality of a text. To even begin to identify an ending there must be a tacit recognition of the work as a movement, and not simply a form that endures. Richard Kostelanetz, the American poet, critic and anthologist, proposes January 1, 1970 as the date after which concrete poetry, as a term, should no longer apply. He suggests replacing it with "word imagery."[3] 1970 is also the year in which the British critic Nicholas Zurbrugg published a collection of pronouncements of the death of concrete poetry, by various practitioners themselves, in his journal *Stereo Headphones*. And in what is often a marker of the end of a movement's trajectory, concrete poetry was given a large-scale institutional retrospective in 1970–71 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, before the exhibition travelled to Stuttgart, Nürnburg, Liverpool and Oxford. So there are various reasons to consider the beginning of the 1970s the end of concrete poetry as a viable poetic mode. This position is somewhat refuted by the amount of concrete poetry published in the 1970s, particularly in Canada, where poets like bill bissett, bpNichol and Steve McCaffery continued to compose and publish work under the concrete label. They were certainly not the only ones doing so, but concrete poetry as it had formed within an international moment, and which was concerned with technology and culture on a global scale, had ceased to perform in the same way. There was a qualitative shift in the work being produced that has yet to trigger an in-depth investigation of how conditions had changed from the initial moment, and how those conditions might be read through the poems themselves.

I want to identify two strains of concrete poetry that speak to the development of the work over the span of its 15 to 20 year period. The first is the *procedural*, and applies to work that privileges rationality and design over expression. The poems have a mechanical, almost industrial quality and their meaning springs from the relationships between words or letters that will often closely resemble each other. The work of the Brazilian Noigandres group, which consisted of Pignatari and the de Campos brothers at its initial moment but grew to include other poets like José Lino Grünewald and Ronaldo Azeredo, is largely defined by a procedural character. Pignatari's *beba coca cola*, published in *Noigandres 4* (1958) is exemplary, as it takes the Portuguese slogan for Coca-Cola ("Drink Coca-Cola") and mutates it to produce an anti-imperial, anti-corporate poster poem. With a simple gloss or access to a basic Portuguese-English/German/French/etc. dictionary, a reader can glean that "babe" means "drink," but "beba" means "drool"; that "coca" refers to the source plant for cocaine, and "caco" means "shards" as well as "thief"; that "cola" means "glue," and also "tail" or "asshole"; and that "cloaca," the final word of the poem, means "cesspool," but can also refer to the final stage of the process of digestion. The poem functions by taking the language of an advertising slogan and playing with the meaning immanent in the words and letters offered, performing a type of resistance through the occupation of a particular style of language as it had come to operate in an increasingly media-saturated public space.

The poems of the Czech collaborative pair Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová also follow a procedural path. The work they composed from 1960–62 and later collected into the volume *Job-boj* consists of poems that often use simple processes to extract meaning from single words. An example would be the poems collected under the title *Vývoj I* (which

is the Czech name of a photographic developer chemical), where a word like "LASKÁ," the Czech word for "love," morphs gradually into the German word for love, "LIEBE." They implement the same technique to transform the Czech word for "freedom," "SVOBODA," into the English "FREEDOM."[4] The process results in a quintessentially procedural concrete poem: it operates visually inasmuch as the reader can follow the word as it shifts into another, and its title links it to a photographic process; its mechanical process alludes to electronic communication, a field that had expanded greatly since Alan Turing and his team's cracking of the Nazi's Enigma code in the 1940s; and it recognizes the global challenge of translation in an international community whose alliances could rapidly and violently shift. The choice of the German and Czech words for love expresses a related cultural anxiety, referring inevitably to the German occupation of Czechoslovakia and the cultural order it imposed. And the choice of the English and Czech words for freedom alludes to another geo-political reality of the time, with both operating under Cold War definitions and having almost diametrically opposed meanings.
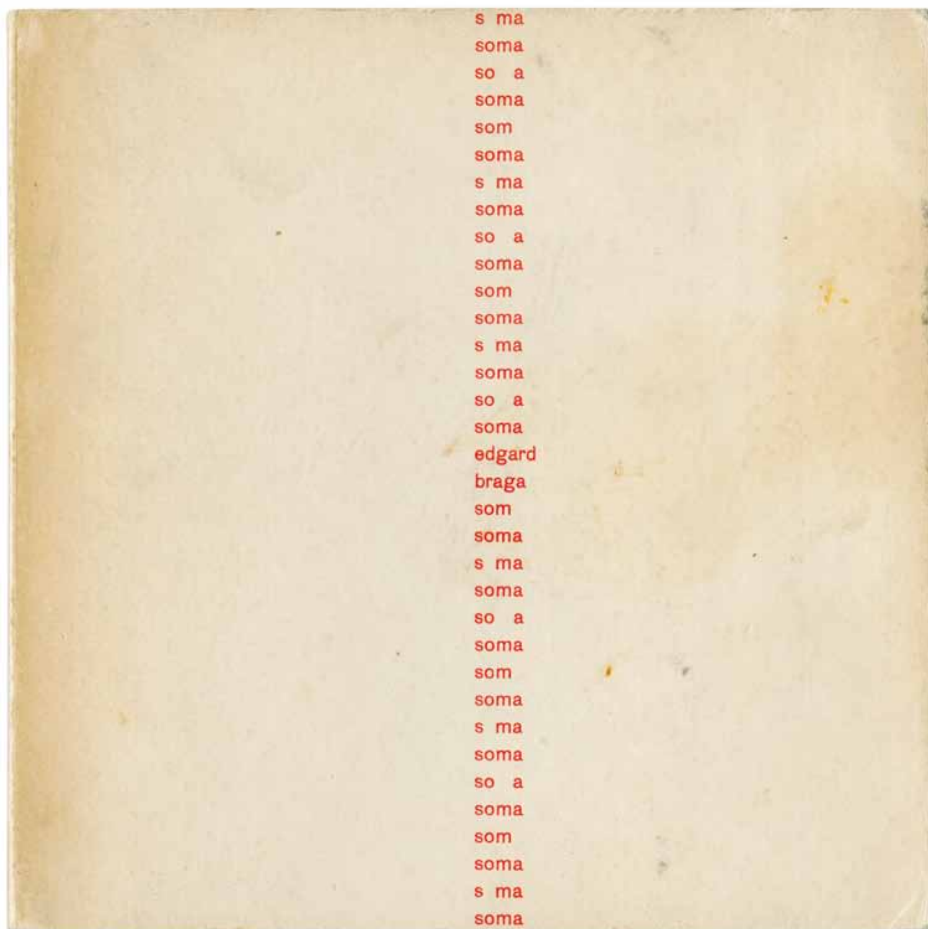
The other strain I want to propose is the "performative," which rejects the mechanical and ordered for the manual and excessive; it asks questions of language's ability to represent, and of its role in subject formation.[5] In designating the performative as "manual," I don't mean to suggest that it is handwritten while the procedural is typeset or printed on a press. Both strains, for example, make use of the typewriter, but while the procedural work might appear justified and in a grid, the performative typewriter poem would show the manipulation of the page by the poet. The words will be upside down or vertical instead of the regular horizontal; the poet might use the various colours offered by whichever model typewriter s/he is using; the lines will intersect with each other and often will obscure text to impede legibility. Beyond the page, performative work will often be published in a similarly manual form of chapbooks or small press journals, whereas the procedural work is more commonly found in the large folio texts of the professional printers and graphic designers involved with the Hansjörg Mayer Press, the Eugen Gomringer Press, and the Noigandres Press in Brazil, all of whom had connections to the advertising industry and its methods in one way or another. The performative strain moves away from the rigid order of graphic design and into the mark of the poet. It draws attention not away from national language, but towards the various forms of language (visual, written, spoken, body) and demands the reader pay attention to each, grammatically and poetically.

Steve McCaffery's *Carnival*, which has two volumes, or panels—1967–70 and 1970–75—is a strong example of how the performative functions within the concrete poetry tradition.[6] McCaffery composed the first panel entirely on a typewriter, using the red ink as well as the black; his second panel made use of rubber stamps as well as the typewriter. Both panels play with the space between the legible and the illegible, and use syntactical and narrative fragments to draw the reader/viewer closer to the page, so that there is a movement required of the reader to focus and re-focus. The text resists the identification of meaning; letters in some spots might cohere into words, and in others might fade into patterns, or blocks of ink. Letters are even split in half or into faded fragments at times, suggesting the purposeful

Bohumila Grögerová & Josef Hiršal, *Developer/Vývoj I*, 1964. Published in *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, by Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1970, page 146
Collection of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery Archives

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LIEBE          SVOBODA
IEBEL          VOBODAS
EBELI          OBODASV
BELIE          BODASVO
ELIEB          ODASVOB
LÁEBE          DASVOBO
ÁEBEL          ASVOBOD
EBELÁ          FVOBODA
BELÁE          VOBODAF
ELÁEB          OBODAFV
LÁSBE          BODAFVO
ÁSBEL          ODAFVOB
SBELÁ          DAFVOBO
BELÁS          AFVOBOD
ELÁSB          FROBODA
LÁSKB          ROBODAF
ÁSKBL          OBODAFR
SKBLÁ          BODAFRO
KBLÁS          ODAFROB
BLÁSK          DAFROBO
LÁSKA          AFROBOD
               FREBODA
               REBODAF
               EBODAFR
               BODAFRE
               ODAFREB
               DAFREBO
               AFREBOD
               FREEODA
               REEODAF
               EEODAFR
               EODAFRE
               ODAFREE
               DAFREEO
               AFREEDO
               FREEDOM
```

s ma
soma
so   a
soma
som
soma
s ma
soma
so   a
soma
som
soma
s ma
soma
so   a
soma
edgard
braga
som
soma
s ma
soma
so   a
soma
som
soma
s ma
soma
so   a
soma
som
soma
s ma
soma

Edgard Braga, *soma*, 1963.
Published by Edição Invenção,
São Paulo
Collection of the Morris
and Helen Belkin Art
Gallery Archives
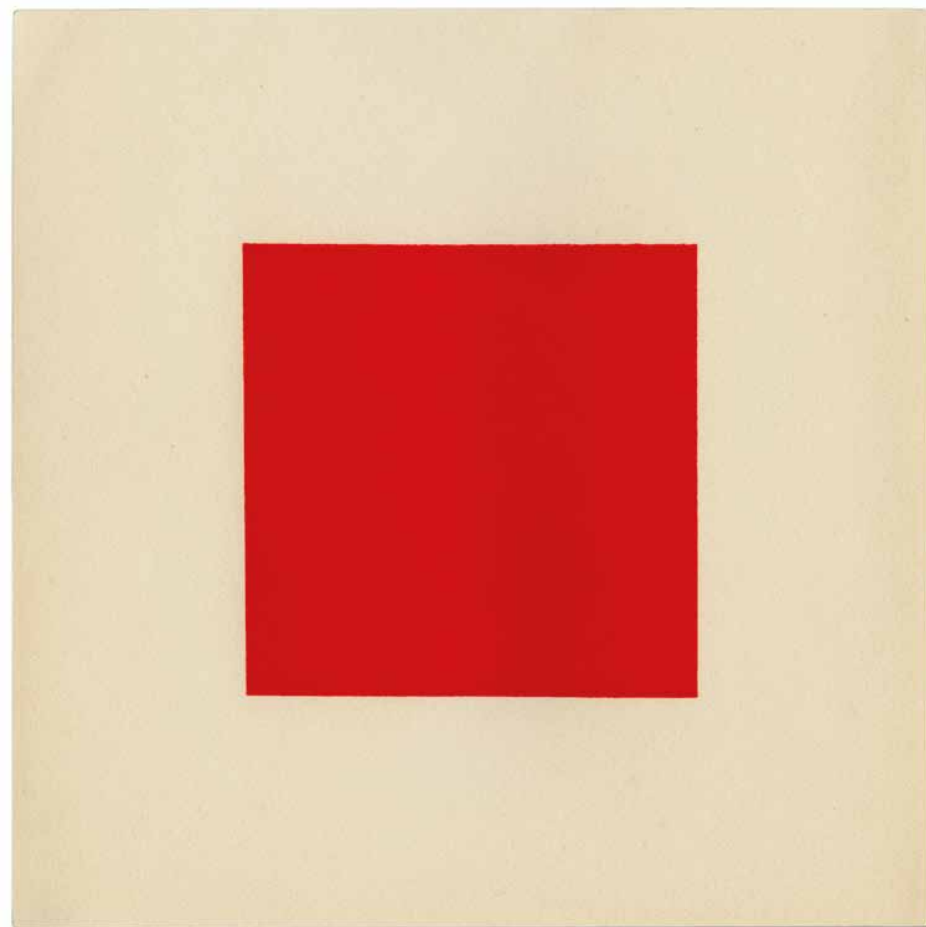
Edgard Braga, *Untitled*, 1963
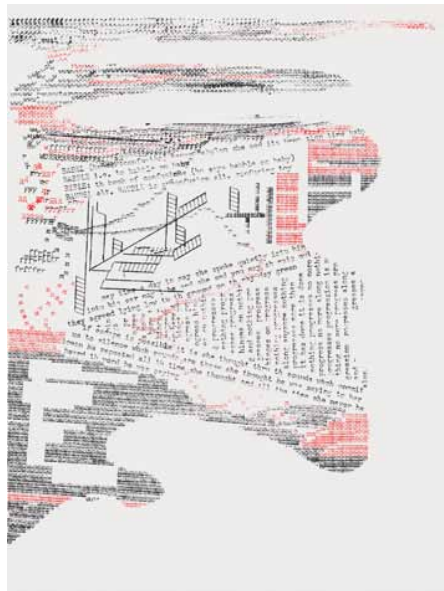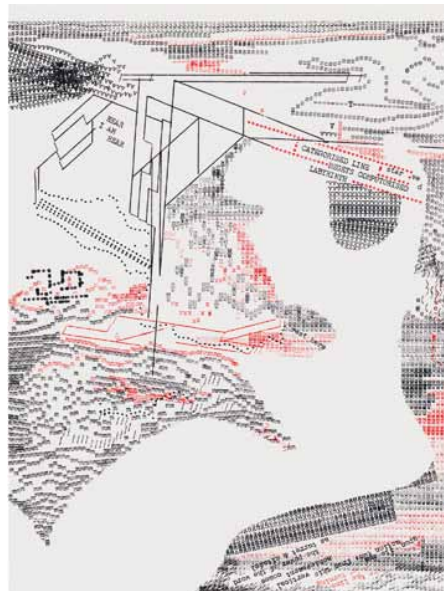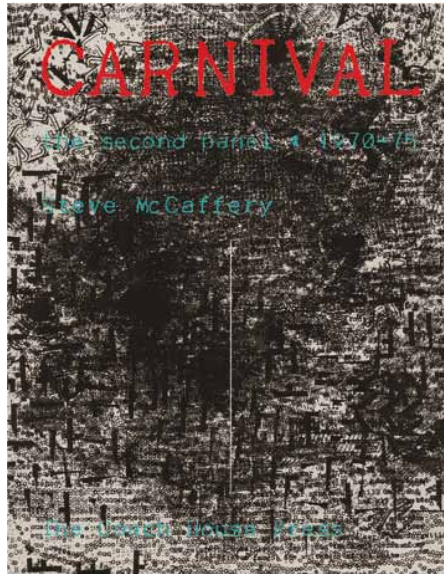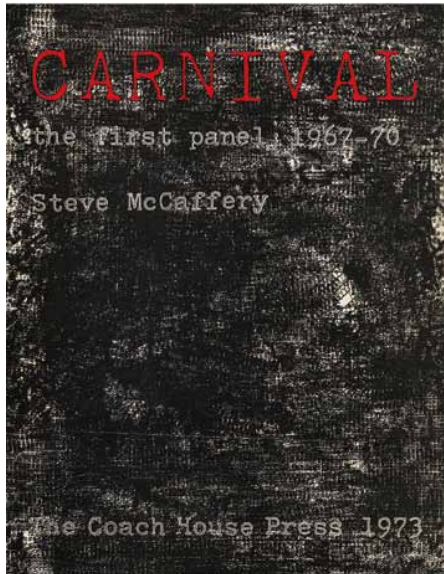
use of spent typewriter ribbons or the careful use of masks or stencils. The legible text is in either all upper-case or all lower-case characters, and if there is a theme that can be extracted at all, it would be the relationship between written language and speech: "voice" is paired with "void"; "deaf" with "death." On one page, amongst dots and lines and asterisks, the phrase "HEAR / I AM HEAR" appears. On another, in the midst of thick lines made from overlapping "m"s, "?"s, and "p"s, the label "GROUND PLANS FOR A SPEAKING CITY" comes through the disorder. McCaffery's text insists that the reader consider what language means to the body, not just in the audio-visual-tactile act of reading, but in speech as well. And he makes that relationship unavoidable through the physical format of *Carnival*, which he published as a book that can only be read in panel form if the pages are torn from their binding along a perforated edge. McCaffery dares the reader to destroy the book to make the poem; he invites them into a physical relationship with the work, to participate in the performance of the work alongside him.

The performative strain of concrete poetry is tied to the body in a way that the procedural is not. I want to suggest that each strain is influenced by its scale, or what is perhaps a more appropriate term, its scope. The procedural strain springs from geographies of modernist reconstruction and is characterized by a similar ambition. It comes out of the bifurcation of Germany in the wake of the Second World War, and the hyper-developmentalism of Juscelino Kubitschek's Brazil, where the capital city of Brasília was designed in high-modernist style and built at an accelerated rate between 1956 and 1960. The poetry's scope, as laid out in programmatic texts by Gomringer and the Noigandres group, was largely internationalist in character. It concerned itself with issues of economic blocs of power and culture, and the influence that advertisement had on the shifting of a readership bound to a national language into a viewership that operated in a much wider cultural sphere. The performative, however, turned its scope inward, toward the composing subject's dependency on language. Its international character was less concerned with the effect of current technology or geo-political structures than it was with the site/sight of language. In that way it is more non-national than international. It asks questions like: How does language effect subjectivity? How does it write the body? Is there any space outside of language? These questions bring the performative strain much closer to the post-structuralist moment that would develop in the 1970s and 1980s. The procedural operated as if language was transparent, like the use of glass in modernist architecture. The performative refutes that position by foregrounding disconnections, slippage and de-hierarchizing. If the procedural poets followed Le Corbusier, Norbert Wiener and Claude Lévi-Strauss, the performative poets looked to Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan.

There have been other attempts to reconcile the wide range of poetic practices implemented during what I have identified as the moment of concrete poetry. The British critic Mike Weaver positioned the "constructivist" style of some poems versus the "Expressionist" style of others, borrowing the terms from art history to emphasize the visual character of the work. The Scottish poet Ian Hamilton Finlay separated his own work into "suprematist" and "fauve," again referring to visual art to distinguish what he considers his more serious

Top left:
Steve McCaffery, *Carnival: the first panel: 1967–70* (cover), 1973

Top right:
Steve McCaffery, *Carnival: the second panel: 1970–75*, 1977, published by Coach House Press, Toronto, 1977
Collection of the Morris/Trasov Archive, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery

Bottom:
Steve McCaffery, *Carnival: the first panel: 1967–70* (detail, pages 11 and 16), 1973

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Steve McCaffery, *Carnival: the first panel: 1967-70*, 1973

poetic experiments from his playful ones. Perhaps the most enduring categories of concrete poetry have been the "clean" and the "dirty." This pairing is used widely in the tradition of Anglo-American concrete poetry, and positions poems that use sophisticated printing techniques and balanced, symmetrical composition against those that make use of over-inking, illegibility and hand-writing or drawing. The procedural/performative is meant as an updating of and improvement upon all those terms. It is still vulnerable to criticisms that will correctly point out that not all poems fit into one or the other, or that some poems appear to have the characteristics of both. But in looking at concrete poetry and trying to keep in mind what the conditions were that spurred such a drastic shift in poetic form, the procedural and the performative force the reader/viewer to understand the work as functioning on the hinge between Modernism and what comes after. The procedural embraces the International Style, and operates within the emancipatory potential of design, technology and electronic communication. It is a generally masculine technique. The performative is suspicious of the rational order the procedural assumes. It recognizes the complexity of the processes of history, of how power circulates through language, and how the body writes and is written. It is still, in practice, a masculine form—concrete poetry was overwhelmingly male—but it provides a bridge to the feminist theory and art practices of those who deal with semiotics and gender: Alison Knowles (who was included in Jean-Francois Bory's *Once Again: Concrete Poetry* [1968]), Barbara Kruger, and Martha Rosler, to name just a few.

In delimiting a historical moment and identifying the procedural and performative strains in concrete poetry, I want to encourage readers/viewers of the work to consider its political force. The discourse around concrete poetry has for too long neglected to engage the conditions of its production, not just materially in its printing techniques, but culturally within expanded global communication and commerce, as well as the rise of certain theoretical models around language. And while concrete poetry's international character is well established, the radicality of a poetry that seeks to operate outside of national languages is often overlooked. Within visual art, exhibitions of international artists are the norm. Within poetry—this is an obvious but necessary point—volumes are almost always published in one language. That fact remains a challenge for an increasingly connected global culture, and is one of the reasons for the privileged realm of the visual. Concrete poetry was an early response to those conditions, and it is for that reason the term "concrete" should be applied with care, and purpose.

NOTES

1. Eugen Gomringer, "Concrete Poetry," in *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, ed. Mary Ellen Solt (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968), 68.
2. Gomringer, "The Poem as a Functional Object," in *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, 70.
3. Richard Kostelanetz, Introduction to *Imaged Words & Worded Images* (New York: Outerbridge & Denstfrey, 1970).
4. Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová, *Developer/Vývoj I*, in *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, 146.
5. I am grateful to Adam Frank for initiating a conversation about the role of the performative in concrete poetry.
6. Steve McCaffery, *Carnival: the first panel: 1967–70* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1973) and *Carnival: the second panel: 1970-75* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1977).