

**‘Ludic Passage’: Abstraction in Post-War British
Literature 1945-1980**

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Thesis Abstract

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This thesis traces a line of literary experimentation in post-war British literature that was prompted by the aesthetic, philosophical and theoretical demands of abstraction. Spanning the period 1945 to 1980, it observes the ways in which certain aesthetic advancements initiated new forms of literary expression to posit a new genealogy of interdisciplinary practice in Britain. It is the first sustained chronological study to consider the ways in which a select number of British poets, authors and critics challenged the received views of their post-war moment in the discovery of the imaginative and idealizing potential of abstraction. At a time in which Britain became conscious of its evolving identity within an increasingly globalised context, this study accounts for the range of Continental and Transatlantic influences in order to more accurately locate the networks at play. Exploring the contributions made by individuals, such as Herbert Read, Ian Hamilton Finlay and Christine Brooke-Rose, as well as by groups of practitioners, such as the British concrete poetry movement, small press initiatives and Art & Language, this thesis offers a comprehensive account of the evolving status of abstraction across cultural, institutional and literary contexts. The discussions build a vision of an era that increasingly jettisons the predetermined critical lexicon of abstraction to generate works of a more pragmatic abstract inspiration: the spatial demands of concrete poetry, language as medium in the conceptual artwork, the absence of linear plot in the new novel.

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Introduction

A 'World out of Gear': The Question of Abstraction in Post-War Britain

The ekphrastic tradition, by the mid-1950s, had reached a pivotal moment:

ON A PAINTING BY WILLIAM GEAR

FOR AN UNRECEPTIVE PERSON

The tall, exploding city's lurid glare
Tears through the pinstripes of the crawling flack.
Zigzagging madly, your dazed eye reels back,
Machinegunned to a blank and brittle stare.

Let me explain. Dressed up to kill, in fur,
Colour explicitly makes bombs her game.
Through hints of tumbling houses, ringed with flame,
She roams the canvas in a dazzling blur.

Don't think those whining yellows are an error,
The catsfoot purple padding in for style.
Sharp claws won't splinter in a mocking smile
But rip your plaster sneers up into terror.

Walk on, walk slowly through this flare-lit picture,
Black cats are lucky, you may need no stricture.

Blinded by flashes of bright white light, obscured by fractured lines, the scene disclosed by the young George MacBeth is under siege. It is a landscape of fragmentation; houses are 'tumbling', the city is 'exploding', a suited 'flack' is mown down by bullets. All is subject to flames, bombs, punctures, and lacerations, expressed with a ferocity that extends to the reader through the direct mode of address.

To look upon this unfolding destruction is to be at the receiving end of an attack – the ‘eye reels back, | Machinegunned to a blank and brittle stare’ – presupposing the initial response of a viewer faced with the dynamism of ‘this flare-lit picture’. The experience of seeing is central to the poem, as the division of space – ‘zigzagging’, ‘ringed’, ‘splinter’ – is so acute that from the first stanza it confounds the capacity to construct a frame of reference. The reader is at war with the act of perception.

Although never made explicit, it would have been clear to a contemporary reader that MacBeth’s 1954 poem makes reference to the public outcry provoked by one of the most controversial British paintings of the period, William Gear’s ‘Autumn Landscape’ (Fig. 1).¹ Marking the first instance of major state support for modern art since the formation of the Arts Council in 1946, sixty artists were commissioned to produce paintings of set specifications for *Sixty Painters for ’51*, an exhibition which toured twelve cities across the country before showing at the Royal Society of British Artists (R.B.A.) Galleries in London, as part of the Festival of Britain celebrations in the summer of 1951.² Awarded one of the festival’s five purchase prizes offered by the Arts Council, Gear’s painting was conspicuous as the only abstract composition of the pictures selected.³ Gear had spent three years prior to the festival living and working in Paris, and the paintings produced after 1947 confirm the influence of the work of artists such as Hans Hartung, Fernand Léger, and Nicolas de Staël on Gear’s approach, in their stark use of line, impasto blocks of colour and non-figurative compositions. As news of the award circulated, ‘Autumn Landscape’ was met with an overwhelmingly hostile public reaction, identified in the press as an object of national derision and even raised as a matter for discussion on the BBC Radio programme ‘Any Questions?’⁴ Journalists railed against the cost of the purchase of the painting, incredulous that a work of such an experimental nature should warrant government accreditation, the Chancellor of the Exchequer was called to its defence in the House of Commons, while the past president of the Royal Academy, Alfred Munnings, publicly

¹ George MacBeth, ‘On a Painting by William Gear’, *Adelphi*, 30.3 (1954), 166 (repr. in George MacBeth, *A*

² Anon., ‘Festival Paintings’, *The Times*, 22 June 1951, p. 3. See Philip James, ed., *Sixty Paintings for ’51* (London: The Arts Council for Great Britain, 1951). The Arts Council delivered and paid for the provision of canvases to each artist, stipulating the dimensions of the canvases as no smaller than 60 x 45 in.

³ Anon., ‘Choice of Paintings’, *The Times*, 21 April 1951, p. 8. The other pictures selected were Lucien Freud’s ‘Interior near Paddington’, Ivon Hitchens’s ‘Aquarian Nativity’, Robert Medley’s ‘Bicyclists against a Blue Background’ and Claude Rogers’s ‘Miss Lynn’.

⁴ John McEwen, *William Gear* (London: Lund Humphries, 2003), p. 57. It became the only picture of the five selected that was not purchased at the time by a public collection.

denounced the picture in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* as part of a ‘scheming, self-conscious, anglicised, fifty-year-old repetition of the École de Paris’.⁵ This ‘malady’, Munnings suggested, would eventually ‘reduce the fine arts to a dust heap’.⁶ Gear’s ‘foreign’ approaches, of such an ‘international modern nature’, were unwelcome in a climate intent upon fostering a ‘new-fashioned variation on the old-fashioned theme of patriotism’.⁷ As outlined by Anne Massey, the festival cultivated a British sensibility that ‘depended largely for its security on traditional values of the past to cope with the future’.⁸

⁵ Alfred Munnings, ‘These Defiant Modernists: Fine Art on The Dustheap’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 April 1951, p. 4.

⁶ Munnings, ‘These Defiant Modernists’, p. 4.

⁷ Gerald Barry, ‘The Festival of Britain’, *The Adelphi*, 27 (1951), 205.

⁸ Anne Massey, *The Independent Group: Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain 1945-59* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 17.



Fig. 1. William Gear, 'Autumn Landscape' (1950), oil on canvas, 1830 x 1270 mm, Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle Upon Tyne.

Debates surrounding the painting returned again and again to the same question: how could abstraction recapture or represent what it was to be British in the modern world? The Festival of Britain proposed a glimpse at a possible new vision for the country, contriving a new modern Britain full of colour, innovation, frivolity and prosperity, and yet this was also a future modeled on the values of the past.⁹ Celebrating the progress made by Britain in the century since the epochal Great Exhibition of 1851, the festival featured a great many models, objects and items of memorabilia from that founding Victorian moment, and adopted similar emphases of the era, such as exhibitions of

⁹ The Director General of the Festival Gerald Barry promised 'a year of fun fantasy and colour' in 'The Festival', *Manchester Guardian*, 15 October 1948, p. 4. See Jerry White, *London in the Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 46-61.

industrial progress, the applied arts and scientific discovery.¹⁰ The designed environment and printed ephemera that accompanied the festival also reflected this nostalgic turn: Nikolaus Pevsner noted that the florid ‘over-robust’ Victorian script employed for all signage and published text lent the exhibition a ‘Picturesque’ quality, highlighting the friction between a wistful style and the ‘smoothly plastered’ modernist architecture of the Southbank, between a retrogressive esteem, for the rural, for the domestic, for landscape, and a gleaming scale of ambition.¹¹ This conflict, between the familiar and the unfamiliar, was closely replicated throughout the festival site, with artworks of an advanced style of abstraction – such as murals by Victor Pasmore and Ben Nicholson, the ‘Contrapuntal Forms’ of Barbara Hepworth and the compelling symbol of futuristic determination epitomized by Powell and Moya’s Skylon – remaining ‘unusual’, in deference to a cultural climate long trained towards ‘narrative pictures’ and works of ‘an unstated convention of easily read, familiar subject matter’.¹² By the time MacBeth published his poem in 1954, the critical acrimony leveled at abstract art had reached a highpoint: debates were conducted at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (I.C.A.) and within the Artists International Association (A.I.A.) over the social, political and intellectual role of abstract art, the hold exerted over the British art scene by Sir Kenneth Clark, Sir Edward Marsh and Douglas Cooper was observed to stymie the display of and demand for contemporary abstract art, a dispute regarding the eminence of social realism over non-figurative art was voiced by John Berger, Patrick Heron and David Sylvester across the pages of *The Listener*, *The Nation* and *The New Statesman* between 1951-53, Victor Pasmore’s ‘conversion’ to abstract art was widely derided, and Lawrence Alloway considered the vocabulary of British abstraction to have reached a ‘limit’ point, an era of ‘semantic chaos’ and confusion reinforced by ‘the aesthetic evasions of dealers, critics, and artists’.¹³ This growing tide of reproach culminated in Wyndham Lewis’s attack *The Demon of Progress in the Arts*

¹⁰ Anon., ‘Festival of Britain’s Advantages’, *The Times*, 5 October 1949, p. 2; Anon., ‘Festival of Britain Exhibits’, *The Times*, 1 May 1951, p. 10.

¹¹ Nikolaus Pevsner, ‘Il Festival di Londra’, *Comunità*, 12 October 1951, pp. 48-51 (repr. in Mathew Aitchison, *Visual Planning and the Picturesque* (Los Angeles, Getty, 2010), p. 197). See Harriet Atkinson’s brilliant assessment of ‘Lettering in the Designed Environment’ in *The Festival of Britain: A Land and its People* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), pp. 133-140.

¹² Margaret Garlake, *New Art New World: British Art in Post War Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 220. The tradition for ‘narrative pictures’ had been ratified by Sacheverell Sitwell, *Narrative Pictures: A Survey of English Genre and its Painters* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1937).

¹³ For discussion of the collectors’ monopoly see Adrian Heath, ‘Adrian Heath: answers’, *Aspects*, 8 (Autumn 1979), 6-7. The ‘battle for realism’ is examined in James Hyman, *The Battle for Realism: Figurative Art in Britain During the Cold War 1945-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); ‘semantic chaos’ is discussed in Lawrence Alloway, ‘The Limits of Abstract Art’, *Art News and Review*, 5.16 (5 September 1953), 4.

(1954), describing a ‘martial pestilence’ and ‘contagion’ that had only resulted in ‘a vacuum – a time in which there is no rationale for visual expression’.¹⁴ By way of rebuttal, the exhibition ‘Nine Abstract Artists’ at Alec Tiranti in 1954 attempted to elucidate the finer points of contemporary abstraction, arguing that ‘British non-figurative art stands apart from the prevailing British style’ in order to embrace ‘an international flavour’.¹⁵ It had become evident that the ‘battle’ waged almost two decades earlier for a positive abstract art in Britain – made by artists, architects and writers such as Naum Gabo, Leslie Martin and Herbert Read – ‘had to be fought all over again’, initiating a second wave of British abstraction influenced by developments in technology, architecture and the environment.¹⁶

Alluding to the questions that were central to the development of new radical forms of expression in the visual arts, MacBeth offers an indication of the growing capacity of literature to address the same problematic discourse. This thesis takes as its starting point the contention that language and the literary were an integral part of the renewed ‘battle’ for abstraction in post-war Britain. The lack of opportunities to come into contact with the cardinal works of Modernist abstraction in British galleries or in mass reproduction had given rise to a generation of British artists reliant upon ‘the written word of the pioneers of abstract painting [...] the essays of Mondrian, Kandinsky, Arp and Vantongerloo’, as well as a growing fascination for the material of American pop culture.¹⁷ The lack of common terminology or a language of contemporary art was a formidable obstruction to an appreciation of recent developments in avant-garde practice, and in particular to an informed discussion of contemporary abstraction. In 1960, Richard Wollheim commented in *The Spectator* that ‘Since the war the Arts Council and British council have conducted a campaign under the heading “Wanted – A British Art”’, and as illustration of this uncertainty the period is curiously marked by a tentative, and often contradictory, search for a kind of word-stock or vocabulary, a working through and creation of new grammars of perception all with their own ‘inverted commas’:

¹⁴ Wyndham Lewis, *The Demon of Progress in the Arts* (London: Methuen & Co., 1954), p. 27.

¹⁵ Lawrence Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists: their work and theory* (London: Alec Tiranti Ltd, 1954), p. 16.

¹⁶ This ‘battle’ reached its most effective articulation in the following publications: Herbert Read, ed., *Unit One: The Modern Movement in English Architecture, Painting and Sculpture* (London: Cassell & Co., 1934); Myfanwy Evans, ed., *Axis: A Quarterly Review of Contemporary ‘Abstract’ Painting and Sculpture*, 1-8 (1935–1937); Naum Gabo, Ben Nicholson and John Leslie Martin, eds., *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art* (London: Faber, 1937); see Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2005), p. 10.

¹⁷ Adrian Heath, ‘In Answer to Predicament’, *London Magazine*, 1.4. (July 1961), 77-78. Heath ‘wrote Van Doesburg by mistake instead of Vantongerloo’, see Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England*, p. 257.

‘constructed abstract’, ‘superrealist’, ‘*Malerisch*’, ‘abstract expressionist’, ‘purist’, ‘taschiste’, ‘non-figurative’, ‘non-representational’.¹⁸ It was thought that this formal vocabulary could only be reevaluated by addressing two central questions: ‘what is the content of non-figurative art?’ and ‘what may “abstract” painting be about?’¹⁹ MacBeth’s poem faces both of these questions, designed to instruct the ‘unreceptive’ viewer in an appreciation of abstraction by demonstrating the vitality of the encounter. It could be argued that the formal temerity of the poem, written as a tightly devised sonnet of three rhyming quatrains and a couplet of iambic pentameter, works against the rougher, expressive purpose of Gear’s brushstrokes. MacBeth, however, performs something quite different to what might be expected from a work of ekphrasis, as a speaking out on behalf of the silent object or the imitation of abstract painting in verbal form, to interrogate the experience of looking at an abstract painting.²⁰ ‘Let me explain’, MacBeth intercedes at the beginning of the second stanza, and the explanation, of the clarifying nature we may expect, never comes. Instead one engages with the visual matter of the painting, its ‘colour’ becoming the active protagonist to be observed. ‘Colour explicitly makes bombs her game’: the act of looking – in piecing together constituent shapes, studying the colour palette, detecting signs of the artist’s hand – becomes a ‘game’ of assimilation to be played by both artist and spectator, poet and reader. Uncertainty is a symptom of this commitment to the formal relativity of the work. A clear sense of narrative is suppressed in favour of presentational expressivity, of the ‘experience you get from the artist’s experience in making art’, as endorsed in the *Daily Mail* by Ben Nicholson as a defence of Gear’s painting and other ‘modern works’ featured at the Festival of Britain.²¹

‘On a Painting by William Gear’ is very different in character to the ekphrastic works commissioned for the ‘Painter and Poet’ series of films screened in the Festival’s ‘Telekinema’, all of which worked to maintain an illustrative balance between word and image.²² Advocating the ‘walk’, the willingness to persevere in the face of perceptual uncertainty or disorientation, MacBeth’s poem

¹⁸ Richard Wollheim, ‘Is It Peace?’, *The Spectator*, 6900 (22 September 1960), 450-52 (p. 450).

¹⁹ Alloway, ‘The Limits of Abstract Art’, p. 4.

²⁰ See Valentine Cunningham, ‘Why Ekphrasis?’, *Classical Philology*, 102.1 (January 2007), 57-71.

²¹ Ben Nicholson, ‘Defending Modern Artists’, *Daily Mail*, 7 August 1951, p. 2.

²² Although it was named the ‘Telecinema’ in all of the Festival literature, the name of the outside of the building was ‘Telekinema’. See Sarah Easen, ‘Film and the Festival of Britain 1951’, in *British cinema in the 1950s: an art of peacetime*, ed. by Ian MacKillop and Neil Sinyard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 51-63. The artists involved included Ronald Searle, Henry Moore and John Minton.

exemplifies many of the questions beginning to take shape at the onset of the second half of the twentieth-century. What, it asks, is the nature of spectatorship? If the viewer is to collude in the creation of the artwork itself, in the 'walk' from mark to mark, are there any divisions to be defined between artwork, spectator and environment? And, most significantly, how is this experience effectively communicated? This thesis charts the course of abstraction in British visual culture from 1945 to 1980, to observe the ways in which certain aesthetic advancements initiated new forms of literary expression. This framework has been established with Joseph Frank's seminal series of articles 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature' (1945) in mind, which established the hypothesis that modernist writers 'ideally intend the reader to apprehend their work spatially, in a moment of time, rather than a sequence'.²³ Frank's theory of modern literature as spatially constructed as opposed to temporally directed reacted against Gotthold Lessing's foundational text *Laokoön* (1766), which maintained the existence of fundamental differences between the plastic arts and literature. Lessing defined painting as the visual apprehension of the arrangement of forms in a given instant and poetry as the comprehension of a sequence of semantic units over time. Modern literature, in Frank's formulation, proposed a 'complete reorientation in the reader's attitude to language', asking its readers to 'suspend the process of individual reference temporarily', and to persist with the fragmentation of semantic and syntactical continuities, until 'the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a reality'.²⁴ As this thesis will illustrate, variations on Frank's themes continued to emerge throughout the period, expanding upon the strategies of suspension in the reading experience to embrace a new reading experience that is necessarily suspicious of the structuring of perception. The critical protestations leveled against Frank culminated in W. J. T. Mitchell's 1980 reevaluation of spatial form to offer a 'general theory' of the interdependence of space and time in literature of the postmodernist era. As Mitchell claims, a far more complex intercourse between temporality, spatiality and visuality in literature and the plastic arts 'has unquestionably been central to modern criticism' in the twentieth-

²³ Joseph Frank, 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature: Part I', *The Sewanee Review*, 53.2 (Spring 1945), 221-240 (p. 225). The subsequent two installments of the essay were published in *The Sewanee Review*, 53.3 (Summer 1945), 433-456, and 53.4 (Autumn 1945), 643-653.

²⁴ Frank, 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature: Part I', 229-30

century.²⁵

By mid-century, the concept that poetry and painting continued to form the closest union in the discourse between word and image had been submitted to thorough investigation, as noted by the landmark 1965 exhibition 'Between Poetry and Painting' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. 'Today more than ever before', the curator Jasia Reichardt suggested, 'the realms of art, poetry, and typography are merging in the tradition of Picabia and Lisstisky', renouncing the constraints of literary genre and advancing the notion of author as 'designer'.²⁶ This thesis follows Reichardt's feeling for the inherently visual nature of all script, placing greater emphasis upon practitioners that overreach the genre definitions of poetry or prose to experiment with language. Critical focus has tended to privilege discussion of the supportive or derivative texts that accompany works of abstract art, such as titling, captions, manifestoes, theoretical tracts, or artists' statements, or upon 'modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse', but this thesis stakes out an area of creative literary activity that signaled new approaches to, and perceptual assaults upon, the representative function of literature.²⁷ It is the first sustained study to consider the ways in which a select number of British poets, authors and writers challenged the received views and literary forms of their post-war moment in the discovery of the imaginative and idealizing potential of abstraction. This potential has been interestingly portrayed as the application of mathematical or geometrical systems of arrangement to literary composition, such as Miranda Hickman's *The Geometry of Modernism: The Vorticist Idiom in Lewis, Pound, H.D. and Yeats* (2005), Robert Tubbs' *Mathematics in Twentieth-Century Literature and Art: Content, Form, Meaning* (2014), and Matthew Wickman's *Literature After Euclid: The Geometric Imagination in the Long Scottish Enlightenment* (2016).²⁸ It is also noticeable that critical attention has focused far more upon the dynamics of American, rather than British,

²⁵ W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Spatial Form in Literature: Towards a General Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 6.3 (1980), 539-67 (p. 539).

²⁶ Jasia Reichardt, 'Introduction', in *Between Poetry and Painting*, ed. by Jasia Reichardt (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1965), pp. 9-14 (p. 9).

²⁷ The quotation is taken from Rosalind E. Krauss's seminal book *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 9. For discussions of supplementary texts in art see W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994); James A. W. Heffernan, *Cultivating Picturacy: Visual Art and Verbal Interventions* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006); Liz Kotz, *Language to be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

²⁸ Miranda Hickman, *The Geometry of Modernism: The Vorticist Idiom in Lewis, Pound, H.D. and Yeats* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Robert Tubbs, *Mathematics in Twentieth-Century Literature and Art: Content, Form, Meaning* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014); Matthew Wickman, *Literature After Euclid: The Geometric Imagination in the Long Scottish Enlightenment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

interdisciplinary activity, exemplified by seminal monographs such as Marjorie Perloff's *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters* (1977), Charles Altieri's *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* (1989), and Edward Ragg's *Wallace Stevens and the Aesthetics of Abstraction* (2010), which have done much to strengthen an understanding of the character of abstraction in literature, evaluating works of the avant-garde imagination as interdisciplinary agents of aesthetic, philosophical and cultural change.²⁹ My argument is for a shift in critical focus from the dominant discourse taking place across the Atlantic to recognise the work conducted at a local level by individuals, groups and institutions in Britain, and for an expansion of the critical parameters beyond the dichotomy of poetry and painting to include discussions of the novel, film, prose, screenplays, sculpture, installation and kinetic literature. Attention is paid to figures or groups that have long been cast at the fringes of the British literary establishment, to challenge the notion of exceptionalism so often visited upon interdisciplinary work and to contemplate a broader conception of the post-war literary avant-garde. The identifying title 'British' is used with due reservation, simply as a means of situating the selected circles of activity within a geographical framework; as Britain became conscious of its evolving identity within an increasingly globalised context, so too to will this study admit Continental and Transatlantic influences to more accurately locate the genealogies and networks at play within this realm of literary experimentation.³⁰

Principally interested in the shifting definitions, character and influence of abstraction, this thesis proceeds in broadly chronological fashion to exemplify how it came to be discovered, absorbed and recast in literature. The preliminary chapter examines the overarching influence and aesthetic philosophy of Herbert Read, holding in balance his activities as establishment figure, art historian, and poet. It argues for the centrality of his undervalued poetic sequence 'Vocal Avowals' (1959), to which he returned repeatedly throughout the final decade of his life, to posit the collection as the most radical attempt made by Read to disturb the expressive potential of language, approached in much the

²⁹ Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); Charles Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Edward Ragg, *Wallace Stevens and the Aesthetics of Abstraction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2010).

³⁰ See Judith Mastai, Hanif Jan Mohamed and John O'Brain, eds, *Ideologies of Britishness in Post-War Art and Culture* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Forum Society, 1995); John A. Walker, *Cultural Offensive: America's Impact on British Art Since 1945* (London: Pluto Press, 1998); David Peters Corbett and Lisa Tickner, eds, *British Art in the Cultural Field 1939-69* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2012).

same way as his reformulations of formal vocabulary familiar to fine art with the advent of abstract art. Referring to correspondence with T. S. Eliot, Ben Nicholson and other contemporaries, the discussion considers the occasion of the collection's composition – his “abstract” poetry – as one charged with a confluence of Read's intellectual, creative and philosophical motivations, as well as the drawing together of Continental and American influences both before and after World War Two. The second chapter analyses the emergence of the British concrete poetry movement, surveying the ways in which the poetic ‘object’ was pulled in one of two directions: fauvist or suprematist, figurative or abstract, or what was described as ‘expressionist’ or ‘constructivist’ modes, mirroring the dialectical tendency of the artistic community in the 1960s. Reviewing the extent to which it became a revolutionary aesthetic movement in poetry, through the lens of Ian Hamilton Finlay's optical works, kinetic booklets and ‘constructed abstract situations’, the argument considers the oft-overlooked influence of antecedent Modernist models of abstraction as indispensable to concrete poetry and constructed abstract art. Placing pressure on the precise quality of optical effects, the spatial dimensions of the page and the act of perception, the chapter argues for the concrete project as one galvanized by the vital ontological imperative of language. The third chapter plots a perceived shift in aesthetic preoccupations from minimalism to conceptualism in literature and art, interrogating the activities of a number of lesser-known journals, bookshops, publishers, galleries and workshops in the late 1960s and 1970s, such as the ‘miniaturist’ poets and critics that made up Ian Hamilton's *The Review*, the environmental poem-sculptures, post-concrete protestations, and graphic icons of the Tarasque Press, the bookworks of artists and printmakers such as Ken Campbell, Tom Phillips and Telfor Stokes, and the foundational achievements of Art & Language. This chapter proposes an expanded field of literary practice, broadening critical approaches to literary activity at the end of the 1960s to include notions of literature as object, as instrument, and as installation, prompting a total reassessment of the form and role of the book. These interdisciplinary practices embraced anti-compositional methods of design, problematised the ready symbiosis of word and image and queried the necessity of a known audience, to establish a new dynamic between the role of the spectator and the role of the reader. The final chapter moves away from earlier conceptions of abstraction in literature elucidated in the thesis, such as a literature that is non-representational, iconographic or

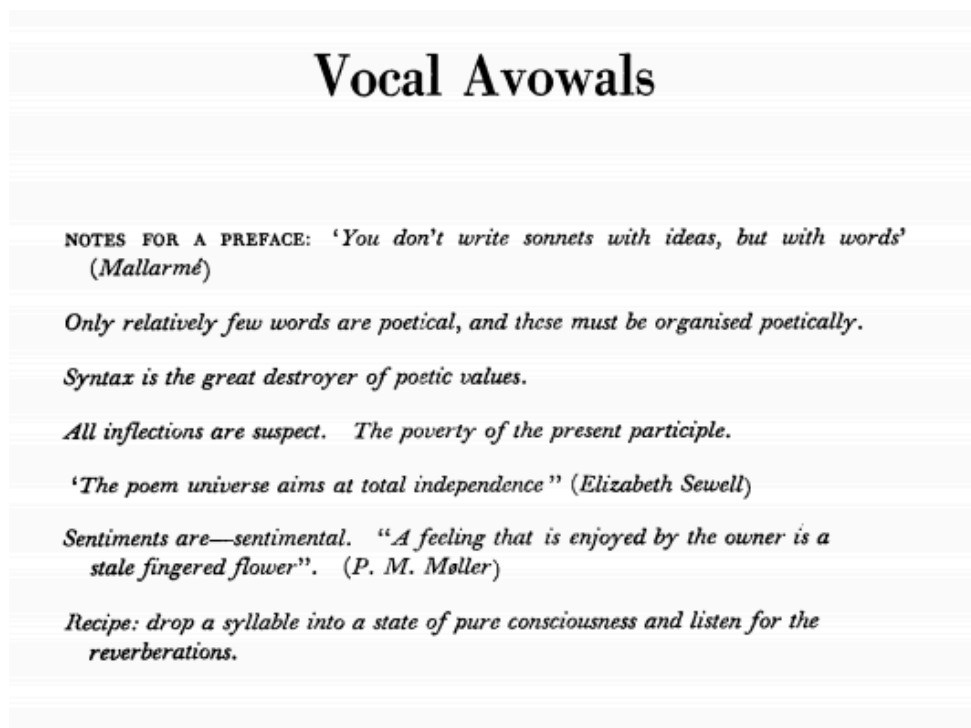
satirical of its own existence as art, to mark out the rising ambitions within the British post-war novel towards a new brand of visualization influenced by screen culture. Considering the varied approaches the novelists John Berger, Christine Brooke-Rose and B.S. Johnson took towards the novel as a construct, as novel and as ‘anti-novel’, the discussion scrutinises the visible layers of truth and artifice in fiction in order to prompt new and more resonant ways of looking in, at, and through literary narrative.

‘On a Painting by William Gear’ ends with the enigmatic word ‘stricture’, implying both a critical remark and a restriction placed upon a person or activity. MacBeth’s ‘unreceptive’ viewer, once educated in the ways of the painting, ‘may’ find that they ‘need no stricture’, no means of affront, no ‘mocking smile’ as weaponry. This study is cognizant of its own strictures, careful to revise where necessary a critical vocabulary that is subject to several mutations and inconsistencies of use throughout the decades following World War Two. The discussions stem from literary works that appropriate or reshape the methodology, visual aspect or terminology of abstraction, or begin to labour against its totalizing vision. According to Edwin Morgan, the diffidence of the ‘unreceptive person’ towards abstraction persisted well into the second half of the twentieth-century, but those misgivings had been transferred from art to literature: ‘Abstract painting can often satisfy, but “abstract poetry” can only exist in inverted commas’.³¹ Where abstract art may have come to fulfil or fortify an impression of post-war taste, abstraction in literature was persistently subject to suspicion, even by its own practitioners. This leads to my underlying question: to what extent was Britain’s literary culture as responsive to change as her artistic culture?

³¹ Edwin Morgan, ‘Statement’, in *Between Poetry and Painting*, p. 69.

Chapter One

Visual Signs: Abstraction, Poetry and The Pope of Modern Art



1. 'Only relatively few words are poetical': Herbert Read and the Vocal Avowals (1959)

In the early springtime of 1959, a curious instance occurred across the pages of the literary magazine *Encounter*. Poetic utterances of a peculiar nature, Herbert Read's 'Vocal Avowals' were announced with no more than the sequence title and a fragmented prefatory paragraph, 'Notes for a Preface', that offered a small number of his own pithy single line reflections as well as quotations from sources as culturally diverse as Stéphane Mallarmé, Elizabeth Sewell, and P. M. Møller. Provided as a means of explanation for his new poetic affiliations, and perhaps in defence of his

radically altered style, form and voice, this list of short declarative statements volunteers a framework by which the ensuing ‘abstract’ verses may be read. ‘You don’t write sonnets with ideas, but with words’, Read intones through Mallarmé.¹ Even syntax is doctrinaire, ‘the great destroyer of poetic values’, as it preordains and contextualises words, or even ‘syllables’, over that of a dynamic lyric sensibility. Inflections too are to be treated as ‘suspect’, sully the purity, and therefore immediacy, of the word through the incursion of gender, temporality, or circumstantial specificity. Alerting the reader to the death or dearth of the continuous tense in the following poems, Read finds only the ‘poverty of the present participle’, and in its omission a hard-edged, finite quality of expression.

The final poem of the selection, ‘or organ’, is representative of its compact expression and atypical poetic technique:

or organ

simply say softly well welter
tennis effort ex- if not
lustless bones thy river
red snow repeat milk sting
stagger hock cry cluster
oosh and the curls wait
sweat sweet silver wheat
white lintel
o’er

In a processional string of words, made singular in their semantic détournements, the kinship of sound is privileged over sense. This poem, along with the preceding five short poems, ‘hot rod’, ‘little war’, ‘fellow men’, ‘fur matrix’, and ‘mason bee’, were almost indistinguishable from what the literary establishment had come to expect of the celebrated art critic and poet, Herbert Read. He was a disciple of Shelley, John Ruskin and William Wordsworth, a believer in the certain inward perspective of the poet, an advocate of the ‘true voice of feeling’, and yet here no one selfhood or

¹ Herbert Read, ‘Vocal Avowals’, *Encounter*, 12.3 (March 1959), 42-43 (p. 42). The quotation is a translation of ‘Mais, Degas ce n’est point avec des idées que l’on fait des vers... *C’est avec des mots*’ (Mallarmé’s emphasis). As reported by Valéry in his ‘Degas Danse Dessin’, as fragments first published in *Nouvelle Revue Française* (October 1935 and April 1938), before his *Degas, danse, dessin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938).

sensation is to be privileged.² Impressions awkwardly aggregate in their lack of grammatical governance, stacking into the discrete scenic impressions offered at each line break. Emblematic objects linger: the marrow of the 'lustless bones' pools scarlet in the 'red snow', the knuckled 'hock' of meat will 'stagger', 'cluster' and 'sting' before the 'curls', and 'sweat sweet silver wheat' is threshed over a pure 'white' crossbeam. This was a language that called attention to its own artificiality, at several removes from the object, subject or scene, made meaningful in the imaginative free association of its onomatopoeic equivalences.

Stephen Spender, an old friend and admirer of Read's and the editor of the literary magazine *Encounter*, received the poems with great enthusiasm, and had agreed to publish some of them – 'hot rod', 'little war', 'fellow men', 'fur matrix', 'mason bee' and 'or organ' – in the poetry section of *Encounter*.

I do like these poems extremely. In fact, they seem to me in some way the best I have ever seen of yours. A fusion of your preoccupation with art, with your poetry: your critical awareness of something very pure and beautiful in abstraction suddenly flowering into life in your poetry. I am very thrilled by these and shall be most proud to publish them.³

Although T. S. Eliot is the literary figure with whom Read was most closely associated, the friendship and confidence that existed between Read and Spender was a deep bond of reciprocal taste, of mentor and acolyte.⁴ Where Read grew increasingly impatient with Eliot as a 'gloomy priest presiding over my affections and spontaneity', the youthful Spender here exhibits a genuine delight at the discovery of this impulsive 'fusion' of poetry and art.⁵ The six poems printed were capsule-like in their concision, compatible with the qualities of verse from the twentieth-century 'modern movement' that most excited Spender: 'clear hard imagery, their boldness of experimentation, and their search for means of expressing complicated states of consciousness and acute sensibility'.⁶

² See Herbert Read, *The True Voice of Feeling: Studies in English Romantic Poetry* (London: Faber & Faber, 1953).

³ Stephen Spender, letter to Read, dated 18 February (c.1959 – the poems appeared in *Encounter* in March 1959), Victoria, British Columbia, McPherson Library (McP), Sir Herbert Read Fonds 1893-1968 (HR) box 9, fol. 59, 48.133; Stephen Spender, *Poetry Since 1939* (London: Longmans Green, 1946), p. 22.

⁴ Kieron Winn, 'Read, Eliot and the Shadow of Morality', in *Rereading Read: New Views on Herbert Read*, ed. by Michael Paraskos (London: Freedom Press, 2007), pp. 168-179 (p. 168).

⁵ Herbert Read, letter to Richard Church, dated 26 April 1943, quoted in James King, *The Last Modern: A Life of Herbert Read* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1990), p. 76.

⁶ Stephen Spender, *World Within World: The Autobiography of Stephen Spender* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1951), p. 95.

Spender had grouped Read within this category, and yet he had confessed to finding Read's poetry lacking in a 'compulsive inevitability'.⁷ As his spirited approval above suggests, it was precisely this quality – a vital 'flowering into life' – that Spender found so pleasing in this new collection. Chiming with Read's sense of a poem as a 'manifestation of being', these were objects of action and affect – the sudden 'fusion' and 'flowering' of a new kind of artistic sentiment.⁸

There is so little written about this odd moment in the poetic industry of Read's later years for it to be particularly compelling.⁹ The subsequent critical disregard for Read's attempt to deploy those 'few words' deemed to be 'poetical' enough for the purpose could be explained by T. S. Eliot's refusal to publish the collection as a book.¹⁰ A scattering of concise critical reviews emerged, but these were occasioned by the later reprinting of the 'Vocal Avowals' in two further volumes: as *Worte sagen aus* (1962) by the Swiss publisher Tschudy-Verlag and as the concluding section to Read's final *Collected Poems* (1966).¹¹ In the years that fall between the earliest drafts of 'Vocal Avowals' and his final revisions of these poems for the purposes of the *Collected Poems*, Read made some of the most profound theoretical and artistic shifts of his mature life. Arguably, these 'experiments' heralded a tipping point. They were composed during the compilation of Read's seminal *Art Since 1945* and *A Concise History of Modern Painting* (1959), coincidental with his gradual shift in emphasis from a Freudian model of the creative unconscious to a Jungian notion of a collective unconscious, drafted during the collation of the essays he was privately to consider as 'his major work' and most thorough statement in his theory of art and literature, *The Forms of Things Unknown: Essays Towards an Aesthetic Philosophy* (1960).¹² In this compendium Read was to delineate, in both 'art' and 'language', 'two competing systems of communication, one based on *sound*, the

⁷ John Sutherland, *Stephen Spender: A Literary Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 159.

⁸ Herbert Read, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), p. 274.

⁹ In contemporary criticism there is mention of 'silk wrist' in Kieron Winn, 'The Poetry of Herbert Read', in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, ed. by David Goodaway (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998), pp. 13-29; 'basic black' is used as an epigraph in Kevin Davey, 'Herbert Read and Englishness', in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, pp. 277-286 (p. 277).

¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, letter to Herbert Read, dated 30 March 1962, McP HR/TSE 219, box 8, fol. 33, 48.32, p. 1.

¹¹ The contemporary reviews were mainly in continental publications: *St. Gallen Tagblatt* (28 May 1963); H. W. Häusermann, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (25 August 1963); J. D. Hodin, 'Livres: Worte sagen aus', *Quadrum*, 16 (1964), 169. Both of the British reviews were dismissive: C.B. Cox, 'The Painter's Eye', *The Spectator*, 20 May 1966, pp. 22-23; and Ralph J. Mills, 'Herbert Read as Poet', *Poetry*, 110.1 (1967), 45-47.

¹² David Thistlewood, 'Herbert Read's Organic Aesthetic [II] 1950-1968', in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, pp. 215-232 (p. 237).

other on *sight*'.¹³ It was only through the means of what Read called the 'shock tactics' of 'visual signs', the severance of expectation from reality, abstracting language from sound, sound from image, that the 'apathetic public' may be reawakened to the possibilities of expression and perceptual effort. He believed it was ultimately of pedagogical benefit, giving 'eyes to the blind', which would 'correct the bias of an exclusively linguistic mode of thought' and in so doing 'correct the bias of a mechanised mode of life'.¹⁴ This chapter will consider the extent to which the 'Vocal Avowals' became this radical attempt by Read to disturb the expressive potential of poetic language, in much the same way that he had readdressed the formal vocabulary familiar to fine art with the emergence of abstract painting. Read was an 'indispensable ambassador' of abstract art in Britain, crafting the discourse that elucidated the metaphysical creativity of the Unit One artists, accounting for the recognisable symbols of personal projection in child art, defending the 'revolutionary' departure from representative painting by Victor Pasmore, and identifying the 'iconography of despair' of post-war sculptors such as Robert Adams, Reg Butler and Lyn Chadwick.¹⁵ How did the expanding character of abstract art apply pressure to Read's literary efforts?

¹³ Herbert Read, *The Forms of Things Unknown: Essays Towards an Aesthetic Philosophy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1960), p. 46.

¹⁴ Read, *The Forms of Things Unknown*, p. 46.

¹⁵ Patrick Heron, 'A Conversation between Patrick Heron and Benedict Read', in *Herbert Read: A British Vision of World Art*, ed. by Benedict Read and David Thistlewood (Leeds: Leeds City Art Galleries, 1993), pp. 140-145 (p. 142).



Fig. 2. Patrick Heron, 'Herbert Read' (1950), oil on canvas, 762 x 635 mm, National Portrait Gallery, London.

2. 'vocal illyrian avowals': Herbert Read, T.S. Eliot and the 'flashes of the old fire'

'It is difficult to believe that the public sensibility is so dulled that it will accept as poetry any drab words that may be dressed in Faber's smart typography,' Read reflected in an article for *The Kenyon Review* in 1939.¹⁶ The 'new Dark age' occupied much of Read's literary commentary in the years leading up to and following the Second World War.¹⁷ Scrutinising 'The Present State of English Poetry' with a frank despondency, it 'cannot be altogether satisfying', he contends, as it seems to have forgotten a 'precision of expression and vitality of image' as that which 'animated us', referencing the work of F.S. Flint, T.S. Eliot and H.D., '...just before the War'.¹⁸ The work of the

¹⁶ Herbert Read, 'The Present State of Poetry: 1. In England', *Kenyon Review*, 1.4 (1939), 359-398 (pp. 364-65).

¹⁷ Herbert Read, letter to Edward Dahlberg, dated 29 June 1958, McP HR box 9, fol. 87, 49.3.

¹⁸ Read, 'The Present State of Poetry', 359.

new generation merely mimes the energy of its forebears, dressed in the authority of its stock typeface. He diagnoses a 'poverty of texture' as well as a 'lack of intrinsic pleasurable quality' in the poetry of the new generation, who are too preoccupied with conveying an idiosyncratic intellect or social agenda to create 'an aesthetic entity'.¹⁹ On the whole, poetry has fallen victim to the 'pervasive standards of journalism', which he observes in both the 'revue "lyrics" of Cole Porter and Noel Coward', as well as in the 'laxity' of rhythm and deliberateness of wit endemic to the verse of W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice and Stephen Spender.²⁰ Read highlights their rejection of 'poetic diction' as the most significant characteristic of their generation, querying whether in its absence 'there is some other quality which can make up for the lack of an aural appeal?'²¹

By the early 1960s, Read observed those 'flashes of the old fire' to have left even the parameters of T. S. Eliot's editorial and poetic province.²² The foremost example of what Read would view as Eliot's retreat from experiment to a more 'conventional', dogmatic 'determination of purpose' had personal implications for Read.²³ Eliot's rejection of the 'Vocal Avowals', refusing to print them as a collection in book form in a firmly worded letter of 30 March 1962, was given under the auspices of Faber and Faber. His reluctance to accept the poems is accentuated by his misgiving over their denomination as "'experiments'": 'Frankly, I myself can't make head or tail of these poems, and they seem to me to need an essay on poetics to explain and justify this type of writing'.²⁴ Eliot employs a turn of phrase to voice his bewilderment, in his insistence to 'make head or tail' of these poems, or to attempt to apply a similar linear logic to any poetry, betraying what Read later reproached as Eliot's 'habit of rationalisation'.²⁵ The apparent incomprehensibility of the 'Vocal Avowals', as Read vouches in just such an 'essay on poetics', 'What is a Poem?', is predicated on the sense of a poem as an 'intellectual or moral or social communication [...] enhanced by a

¹⁹ Read, 'The Present State of Poetry', 364.

²⁰ Read, 'The Present State of Poetry', 363.

²¹ Read, 'The Present State of Poetry', 365-66.

²² Herbert Read, 'T.S.E.: A Memoir', *The Sewanee Review*, 74.1 (1966), 31-57 (p. 53).

²³ Read, 'T.S.E.: A Memoir', 53.

²⁴ T. S. Eliot, letter to Herbert Read, dated 30 March 1962, McP HR/TSE 219, box 8, fol. 33, 48.32, p. 1. By the time the poems were included in Read's *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), Eliot had passed away.

²⁵ Read, 'T.S.E.: A Memoir', 57.

meaning'.²⁶ Read, however, does not accept a poetry that is a 'statement', an intention, or a grand enactment, but a poetry which is 'concerned with the truth of what is, not what is truth'.²⁷

One of the few recent critics to make critical mention of the 'Vocal Avowals' and to consider their role in the relationship between Eliot and Read, Kieron Winn, demonstrates that the rejection was 'not absolute'.²⁸ Eliot's response seems to have arisen after a period of committee deliberation: 'We have been thinking very hard about your DAPHNE and other poems'.²⁹ As the 'Vocal Avowals' had been appended to the end of the submission, Eliot thought of them as a discrete 'collection', and encouraged Read to publish them as 'a small volume by themselves and publish them preferably under the ~~impression~~ imprint of some small firm specialising in verse, and in the most modern type of verse'.³⁰ However, Eliot tersely suggests that their appearance alongside poems 'of a more usual type' would not be advantageous to either kind, intending to consign the 'Vocal Avowals' to a fringe 'movement' with which he wearily supposes Read is already involved: 'I know you will probably say that there is some movement along the road leading to these "experiments"'.³¹ Read was frequently berated for his reputation for a shifting ambulatory criticism, of 'following too many gods' in his 'compulsive necessity always to have a theory', and to be buffeted by the tide of whatever new – indeed, 'as long as they were new' – school of thought, crop of poets, group of artists that may have been in vogue.³² The first question he asks of the poetry of the twentieth-century in 'The Drift of Modern Poetry' is if it has 'acquired any significant character', a character which he concludes is of 'miserably low' account.³³

Although this was not the first time Eliot had rejected a Read manuscript, his rejection of the 'Vocal Avowals' was his most resolute.³⁴ Read often attested to the intellectual debt he owed

²⁶ Read, *Collected Poems*, p. 274.

²⁷ Read, *Collected Poems*, p. 274.

²⁸ Kieron Winn, 'The Literary Work of Herbert Read' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 1998), p. 101.

²⁹ Eliot, letter to Herbert Read, dated 30 March 1962, McP HR/TSE 219, box 8, fol. 33, 48.32, p. 1.

³⁰ Winn, 'The Literary Work of Herbert Read', p. 101.

³¹ Eliot, letter to Herbert Read, dated 30 March 1962, McP HR/TSE 219, box 8, fol. 33, 48.32, p. 1.

³² Henry Treece, 'Introduction', in *Herbert Read: An Introduction to his Work by Various Hands*, ed. by Henry Treece (London: Faber & Faber, 1944), pp. 7-41 (p. 25); Kathleen Raine, 'Herbert Read as a Literary Critic', in *Herbert Read: A Memorial Symposium*, ed. by Robin Skelton (London: Methuen & Co., 1966), pp. 135-157 (p. 142).

³³ Herbert Read, 'The Drift of Modern Poetry', *Encounter*, 16 (1955), 3-10 (p. 3).

³⁴ Eliot had previously rejected *Education for Peace* in 1949, as well as Read's radio-play (which was also rejected by the BBC) *The Parliament of Women* in 1959.

Eliot, fostering Read's early career with a favourable review of his second collection *Naked Warriors* (1919) and publishing subsequent poetical and critical works through Faber & Faber. When Read originally sent Eliot the 'Vocal Avowals', however, he noted that 'they are like abstract painting in that one either sees the point of them or they are altogether meaningless', in which he made his first explicit connection to Eliot between these sound poems and their commitment to modern painting.³⁵ Read intended to appeal to Eliot's cultural curiosity and lyrical intuition, and perhaps here overlooks what he observed in his memoir published in the year following Eliot's death in 1965, as what he judges to be a limited regard for, or sensitivity to, the plastic arts: 'I do not think he had any direct sensuous appreciation of the visual arts. After our lunch at The Grove he would sometimes return to the museum with me to see some particular treasure I had mentioned, but he did not respond to such things with more than a respectful curiosity'.³⁶ Such aspersions cast over the nature of Eliot's aesthetic judgements raise a question: does the point at which Eliot and Read diverge in their reading of contemporary poetry become a point of painting?

In spite of Read's charges against Eliot's regard for the visual arts, Eliot was not at all unfamiliar with the practice of painting. A 'serious, sustained and continually formative' appreciation of art throughout his youth and middle age produced a number of unpublished writings on early Italian Renaissance painters, such as Fra Angelico, Fra Filippo Lippi and Paolo Uccello, informed his adoration of the 'treasures in Bruges and Antwerp and Brussels! Memling, van Eyck, Matsys, David, Breughel, Rubens', and impelled his later line of questioning directed at Ezra Pound into the work of Kandinsky and Picabia, for whom he had 'much respect'. He also made hopeful notes to feature those 'important people in Paris...Picasso, Modigliani, Matisse, Marchand etc' in editions of *The Dial*.³⁷ Eliot's richest source of painterly knowledge, however, was most probably the result of prolonged sittings for his many portraits. As one of the 'most

³⁵ Read, quoted in George Woodcock, *Herbert Read: The Stream and the Source* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), pp. 118-19, but no reference.

³⁶ The lunches to which Read refers are those regular editorial meetings of the *Criterion*; Herbert Read, 'T.S.E.: A Memoir', p. 57.

³⁷ Nuzhat Bukhari, 'The Distinguished Shaman: T. S. Eliot's Portraits in Modern Art', *Modernism/Modernity*, 11:3 (2004), 373-424. The unpublished manuscripts on the early Italian masters are 'Notes on Fine Art' held in the T.S. Eliot Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Eliot's comments on the painters of Flanders are taken from a letter to Conrad Aiken in 1914 and his remarks concerning Kandinsky are taken from a letter to Ezra Pound, 2 February 1915, in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot: Volume I: 1898-1922*, rev ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 94. See Charles Altieri, 'Visual Art' in *T. S. Eliot in Context*, ed. Jason Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2011), pp. 105-113.

pictorially depicted poets of the twentieth century', Eliot was to endlessly observe his likeness take shape in a multitude of manners: mosaic, iron, watercolour, ink, photography, caricature, pencil, clay and etchings.³⁸ Indeed, so impressed was the painter Patrick Heron while completing the eleven studies for his final 1949 expressive oil portrait of Eliot (Fig. 3), that he called him the 'most sublime of sitters...accommodat[ing] a painter's needs...anticipating highly technical requirements'.³⁹ Heron recounts Eliot's total awareness as model in his every subtle shift in posture or angle, as exhibiting a 'validity' that 'normally one only encounters in the casual remarks of painters and sculptors themselves'. Crediting Eliot with an astute sense of form, spatial planes and the integrity of gesture, Heron realised 'at that moment' that Eliot's 'genius extended far beyond the sphere of the verbal'.⁴⁰

³⁸ Bukhari, 'The Distinguished Shaman', 375.

³⁹ Patrick Heron also painted a portrait of Herbert Read in the following year, undertaken at the suggestion of T. S. Eliot (Fig. 2). Materials related to the portrait and its commission can be found NPG46/47/29, Registered Packet 4654 'Sir Herbert Read by Patrick Heron', National Portrait Gallery Archive [NPG], London. Richard Ormond evaluated the picture as part of 'Recent Gallery Acquisitions' in 'Patrick Heron's "Portrait of Sir Herbert Read", 1950 (National Portrait Gallery)', *The Burlington Magazine*, 111.799 (October 1969), 618.

⁴⁰ Patrick Heron, 'The Lost Portraits of a Poet', *The Guardian*, 24 September 1988, p. 34. Materials related to the portrait and its commission can be found NPG46/45/46, Registered Packet 4467, 'Thomas Stearns Eliot by Patrick Heron'.

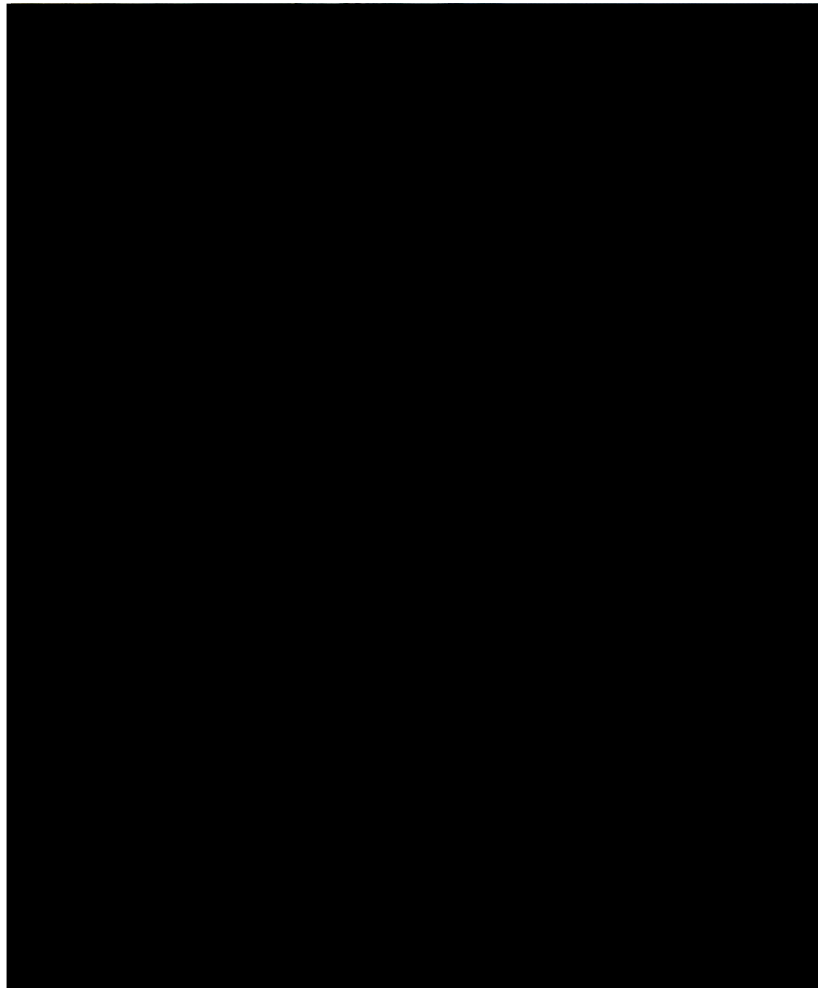


Fig. 3. Patrick Heron, 'T. S. Eliot' (1949), oil on canvas, 762 x 629 mm, National Portrait Gallery, London.

The portrait itself, however, depicts a man not entirely at ease. He may have been no stranger to the intimacies and inscrutabilities in the provenance of painting, as a subject who was at every moment 'keenly and consciously self-fashioning his image', but this relationship to the visual arts does not allay what Charles Altieri suggests was a 'wariness before all visual experience'.⁴¹ A sense of Eliot's notional anxiety when confronted with the articulation of painting can be found amongst his 'Poems Written in Early Youth', particularly the pensive sonnet 'On a Portrait'.⁴² Painting here is presented as unreadable, a well of 'secrets hid from us', a force brimming with the portent and malevolence of some 'pensive lamia'.⁴³ It was with this same tentative approach that

⁴¹ Heron, 'The Lost Portraits of a Poet', p. 34; Altieri, 'Visual Art', p. 105.

⁴² T. S. Eliot, 'On a Portrait', *The Harvard Advocate*, 86.9 (1909) (repr. in Editor, 'The Undergraduate Poems of T. S. Eliot', *The Harvard Advocate*, 132.2 (1948), 3-7 (p. 6)).

⁴³ Eliot, 'On a Portrait', 6.

Eliot was to criticise Read's first published collection, *Naked Warriors* (1919), in his professorial survey of contemporary poetry for *The Egoist* in July 1919, for the emphasis it placed upon visual impressions. In a series of 'Reflections' that posit 'experience' and the efforts made to relate intimate 'experience' as that which defines the 'bearers of a tradition', Eliot examines those current texts that broach that desired 'fertilisation' in their independence and originality of thought. Extremely selective of those 'books of verse' for review as representative of the 'Contemporary', only discussing Read, Tristan Tzara, and Conrad Aiken, Eliot refers to these collections as illustrative of his introductory thesis concerning the uncertain nature of the 'experiment' in modern poetry. Beginning with Read's collection, he concedes that it is on 'a very high level of war poetry', if not the 'best war poetry [he] can remember having seen', praising the 'honest', 'unpretentious', and uncommon and unabashed 'quiet and careful conviction' of the poetic voice when faced with the barbarism of war.⁴⁴ The poems are striking and indelible, riven with bitter and nihilistic images of human loss and natural devastation. However, the collection, or rather Read himself, is 'handicapped' by his 'imperfection of musical sense' and his predilection for the visual: 'His vision surpasses his ear; and he has, I guess, been impressed – how could he escape it? – by Wyndham Lewis who is a visual and only occasionally an auditory writer'.⁴⁵ Further evidence of Read's admiration of the avant-garde exuberance of Lewis's Vorticist movement and its fiery disavowal of Victorian complacencies, is displayed on the cover illustration of *Naked Warriors*, a woodcut by Lewis. Eliot identified Read's predilection for the poem as 'a succession of effects of ideas and images, rather than the sharp and indefinable effect of the poem as a whole', as a locus of values as opposed to a valuation of loci.⁴⁶

Although this critical exchange predates the 'Vocal Avowals' by 40 years, it is significant to note that Eliot's attitude towards Read's 'experiments' has changed little, as sceptical of Read's 1959 'experiments' as he was in 1919. With a cautionary didacticism, Eliot suggested in his 1919 survey that 'We can raise no objection to "experiments" if the experimenters are qualified; but we can object that almost none of the experimenters hold fast to anything permanent under the varied

⁴⁴ T. S. Eliot, 'Reflections on Contemporary Poetry', *The Egoist*, 6.3 (July 1919), 39-40 (p. 39).

⁴⁵ Eliot, 'Reflections on Contemporary Poetry', 39.

⁴⁶ Eliot, 'Reflections on Contemporary Poetry', 39. For intolerance of 'Mr Read's ear' see Hugh Gordon Porteus, 'Poems 1914-1934', *The Criterion*, 15.57 (July 1935), 703-706.

phenomena of experiment'.⁴⁷ In 1919 Read's 'experiments' were guided by their attempt to find a poetic or linguistic equivalent of Vorticism.⁴⁸ In 1959, Eliot again subtly posits that Read is similarly swayed by 'some movement along the road' that is 'leading to these "experiments"', casting no doubt here over his poetic capabilities – Read is 'qualified' – but rather over the mercurial and non-committal nature of his lyrical fidelities. It does not appear to matter what this next movement may be, or how close Read may come to a faithful emulation of this new progressive aesthetic in verse, as it is simply another sidestep within his endlessly sifting plain of modernisms. Although Read had cautioned in his submission letter that the poems are 'like abstract painting in that one either sees the point of them or they are altogether meaningless', the main 'point of Eliot's refusal is that they are unrecognisable in Read's letters and verse, as they 'don't fit in with other poems in the volume, or with anything you have done before', meaningless not in and of themselves but as an unexpected deviation.⁴⁹ Eliot does not decline the poems on the grounds that they are 'altogether meaningless' – they are not abstract in the sense that they have been divested of all meaning or that they perform an objectionable withdrawal from social or political realities – but that they are bewildering. They warrant a corroborative discourse, to 'explain' and 'justify' the occasion of their being and 'this type of writing', an interpretative substructure by which a reader may better navigate these oblique patterns of sentience.⁵⁰ Eliot's comments clearly remained with Read, but the explanatory commentary proposed was achieved in a very different way. Seeking a collaboration with Ben Nicholson in order to publish the poems with another press, did Read consider the inclusion of abstract images as this necessary aid to interpretation?

3. A Preoccupation with Art: 'Vocal Avowals' (1959) and *Worte sagan aus* (1962)

It was on the point of painting or a 'preoccupation with art' that the 'Vocal Avowals' had an ardent reception elsewhere, after an 'unhappy' Eliot condemned them to a 'much smaller...pamphlet

⁴⁷ Eliot, 'Reflections on Contemporary Poetry', 39.

⁴⁸ See Hugh Cecil, 'Herbert Read and the Great War', in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, pp. 30-45.

⁴⁹ Eliot, letter to Read, dated 30 March 1962, McP HR/TSE 219, box 8, fol. 33, 48.32, p. 1.

⁵⁰ Eliot, letter to Read, dated 30 March 1962, McP HR/TSE 219, box 8, fol. 33, 48.32, p. 1.

form' of publication.⁵¹ In August 1960, Read wrote a letter to Ben Nicholson to act upon his presentiment of this symmetry. Inked out in hurried lines with his light blue pen, Read committed one paragraph, containing a proposition, more carefully to the page:

I saw more of Mrs van Hoeboken in Zurich and I am a bit clearer about what is proposed. You will receive one or more of the Quadrant books edited by Gomringer and published by a chap called Hilty. What is proposed is that they should do a volume of my "abstract" poems, possibly with German trans – editions by Mrs Van H., & that you should contribute four (or perhaps six) drawings to the book, as Max Bill has done in one vol. of Eugen [...]⁵²

Read refers to them as "abstract" poems', which is of note when considering the artist to whom the letter is addressed and Read's own evolving awareness of an "abstract" (pointedly in inverted commas) poetry. This meeting of Nicholson on his own terms, and in his own terms, is suggestive of the artistic affinity Read felt:

This would please me very much, for I believe there is a sympathetic relationship between some of my poems & your abstract work. The drawings need not be specially done – there is no question of "illustrating" the poems – just four or six abstract drawings available for reproduction.⁵³

Approaching the subject with a frankness intended to persuade, Read emphasises the connection he has long felt to Nicholson's 'abstract work', underlining his own sense of that 'sympathetic relationship'.⁵⁴ From the tone of the letter, and the force with which Read expresses his belief in their artistic bond – underlining his own pleasure at the prospect while cautious to limit its bearing to only 'some' of his poems – one might assume that a connection between the two had never before been made as explicitly. The idea of a 'poet-painter' collaboration had previously been proposed to the pair, however, by the New York gallerist Morris Weisenthal, of the Morris Gallery,

⁵¹ Eliot, letter to Read, dated 30 March 1962, McP HR/TSE 219, box 8, fol. 33, 48.32, p. 1.

⁵² Herbert Read, letter to Ben Nicholson, dated 28 August 1960, London, Tate Gallery Archive (TGA), Ben Nicholson Papers 1903 – 1982, TGA 8717/1/2 3737, pp. 1-2 (p. 1).

⁵³ Read, letter to Nicholson, dated 28 October 1960, TGA 8717/1/2 3737, pp. 1-2. Read's own underlining.

⁵⁴ Read's sense of a 'sympathetic relationship' echoes his estimation almost forty years previously of T. E. Hulme's 'empathetic identification'. Hulme's defence of abstraction in modern British art was edited and reissued by Read under the title *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. by Herbert Read (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1924).

in an approach Read put to Nicholson in a letter dated 12 December 1956.⁵⁵ The portfolio was originally conceived in 1951 by the American sculptor and engraver Peter Grippe, director of the printmaking studio Atelier 17, with the printmaker S. W. Hayter in New York. Grippe began an association with Morris Weisenthal and the Morris Gallery when Atelier 17 disbanded in 1954, at the same time as Grippe was producing artfully designed plates of Dylan Thomas's poems, and continued the project under the Morris imprint. The final portfolio, clearly stimulated by the Gallery's proximity to the 'cresting of the heroic period' of New York School creativity, largely represents the influence of abstract expressionism on contemporary poetry, comprised of prints such as Willem de Kooning and Harold Rosenberg's 'Revenge', Letterio Calapai and William Carlos Williams' 'To a Poor Old Woman', and Franz Kline and Frank O'Hara's 'Poem'. Read and Nicholson formed a cooler 'linear abstract' contribution, 'TENEMENT' (Fig. 4), for the series and subsequent exhibition, '21 Etchings and Poems', held at the Morris Gallery in 1960.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Herbert Read, letter to Ben Nicholson, dated 12 October 1956, TGA 8717/1/2 3719, pp. 1-5 (p. 5): 'P.S. There is a chap called Weisenthal in NY (morris Gallery) who may write to you & suggest that you should do an etching in a series he is to publish of "poet-painter" – ie a poem of mine accompanied by an etching of yours'.

⁵⁶ Various Artists and Poets, *21 Etchings and Poems* (New York: Morris Gallery, 1960); John Ashbery, 'Jane Frelicher', in *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles 1957-1987*, ed. by David Bergman (New York, Knopf, 1989), pp. 239-245, has a characterisation of this 'heroic period'.

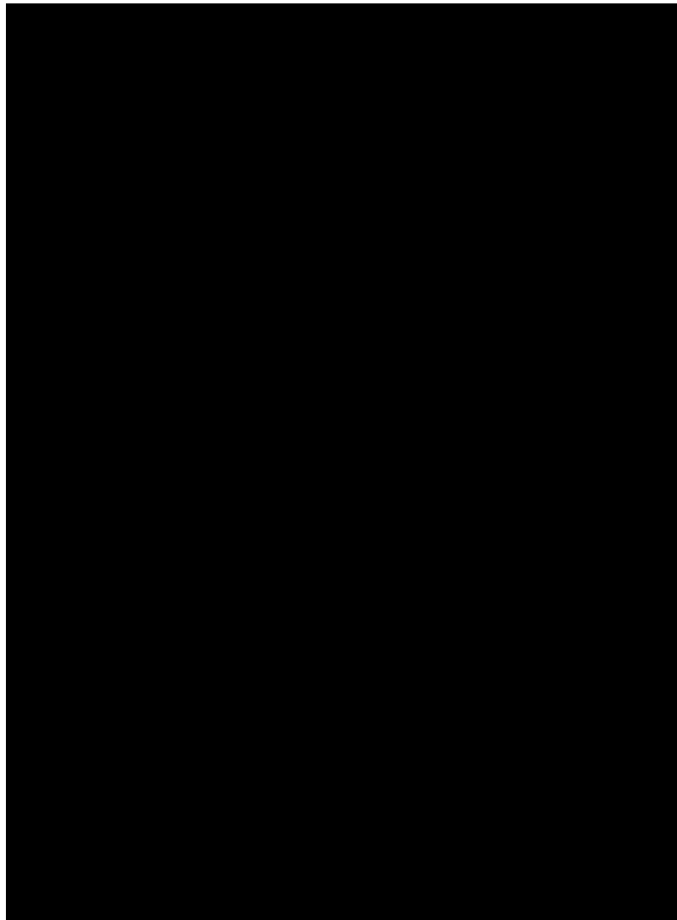


Fig. 4. Ben Nicholson and Herbert Read, 'Tenement' (1957), dry-point and etching, edition of 50, 176 x 138mm, (1987 0411.21), The British Museum Collection of Prints and Drawings, London.

It is odd that there is no mention made of this earlier collaboration in Read's approach to Ben Nicholson in 1960, as what is intended appears to follow a similar format and again to feature Nicholson's 'drawings' or etchings. Read is clearly mindful of causing Nicholson any offense in the ease with which he marries the language of poetry with his abstract compositions and reliefs, expressing his distaste for those derivative couplings of poetry and painting, in which one only serves mimetically to undermine the other. Perhaps Read also highlights this point in an effort to soothe Nicholson's vexation as a result of the earlier '21 Etchings and Poems' collaboration, as Nicholson was irritated by the incorrect printing of some of the sheets in which his etching was placed alongside Read's poem plate, as opposed to above the poem.⁵⁷ The piece was unique in the series in that it was the only work in the portfolio to be printed from separate plates, while all the

⁵⁷ Ben Nicholson, letter to Morris Weisenthal, undated c.1957, University of Texas, Harry Ransom Center (HRC) Morris Weisenthal Collection 1955-1962, box 1, fol. 2, pp. 1-2 (p. 1). Nicholson won the 1957 São Paulo Bienal International Prize for Painting.

other partnerships had worked as one into their single plate.⁵⁸ Peeved by the gallery's mistake, Nicholson clearly valued a necessary subtlety of engagement between picture and image as highly as Read, and perhaps felt that an arrangement side by side set too obvious and tempting an equivalence. In the etching, Read's neatly tabulated poem is placed below the deliberation of Nicholson's line, enhancing the minimalist expression of the four discrete stanzas, stacking the separate planes of expression like the 'glint[ing]' reflections in Read's 'other windows'. Each delineates constituent shapes within space, squares within squares; a two-up, two-down tenement 'block' rationale. Nicholson's lines are bold yet flow with a regularity of thickness and density. Many of his lines return inward, snapping back upon themselves to arc and triangulate points, ending as they meet the central diameter line. Read's rhythmic patterning also makes several returns, in which his alliterative insistence at 'w' compels a temperateness of tone, in which 'windows' reflect the 'winter', a 'wire sings', all is 'sinister / within', and the 'wren' takes to the 'wall'. Each of Read's stanzas can be read as discrete units, or can be read horizontally across the enjambment to the corresponding line of the opposite stanza, with rhymes extending across stanzas. Nicholson's etching too posits unassuming moments of density, 'uncertain tracery', blocking in one 'L' shaped form to anchor the composition in the bottom left corner. There is an ambivalence over which line to follow, what is open and what is closed, which reflection is true. It is unclear as to whether the poem is to be read stanza-to-stanza, left-to-right, or in two columns. The poem compels multiple readings, looping a reader's interrogations of the indefinite 'Tenement'.

Read had previously explored an 'illustrative' collaboration with Henry Moore, who had been commissioned by Peter Gregory and Edward Sackville-West to produce a number of figurative watercolours and drawings in 1946 for a sequence of Read's poems.⁵⁹ The project proposed by 'Gomringer and Mrs. Van H.' was of a different character.⁶⁰ Under the title *Worte sagen aus*, the book would couple German and English language versions of the poems with Nicholson's images. The publishing house behind the project, Tschudy-Verlag, was founded by Henry Tschudy, a master printer and bookbinder, who prized the 'St. Gall' utilitarian approach to book design:

⁵⁸ Daniel E. Stetson, '21 Etchings and Poems', in *Portfolios: In and Out of the 1960s* (New York: Syracuse University Art Gallery, 1979), pp. 6-7.

⁵⁹ See Ann Garrould, ed., *Henry Moore Complete Drawings 1940-1949* (London: Lund Humphries, 2001), p. 249.

⁶⁰ Read, letter to Nicholson, dated 28 August 1960, TGA 8717/1/2 3737, p. 1.

readability of typeface, plainness of production and reticence of tone. A small town 50 miles east of Zurich in Switzerland, St. Gallen was home to a prolific community of innovative book designers, printers and typographers. From 1938, Tschudy oversaw the printing of numerous poetry collections, short stories and philosophical treatises, and the Swiss writer and translator Hans Rudolf Hilty commanded Tschudy-Verlag's series of *Quadrat-Bücher*, 'square books' from 1959 to 1964, of which *Worte sagen aus* was number 25. These followed on from the celebrated *Reihe poetic Kleinwerke* series edited by Swiss writer and educator Traugott Vogel, which had begun in 1950. Read references this series above when he refers to the book designed by Max Bill, *33 konstellationen*, by 'Eugen', meaning the Swiss Bolivian concrete poet Eugen Gomringer.⁶¹ Read's would be a 'volume' that would allow the incorporated artwork to remain separate and distinct from the poems. This was significant, as it would avoid the illustrative implications of the 'Blakean tradition' cited by the Morris Gallery as its governing principle, and exist outside of a gallery context to situate itself within the contemporary discourse between word and image. "TENEMENT" reappeared in this collection recast as a sequential line of four stanzas, as opposed to the bisected, window-like arrangement in the piece for the Morris Gallery.⁶²

tenement

third block
four up
the window shut
blank uncurtain'd

other windows
glint grin
all sinister
within

reflect
rainy clouds
uncertain tracery
of winter twigs

a wire sings
an insulator
clings
like a wren to the wall.

⁶¹ Tschudy-Verlag are best-known for publishing the seminal concrete poetry collection by Eugen Gomringer, *33 konstellationen* (St Gallen: Tschudy-Verlag, 1960).

⁶² Herbert Read, 'tenement', *Worte sagen aus*, pp. 38-39.

As Read suggests, what was proposed was not the task of illuminating the often imperceptible strands of narrative within Read's abstract poems or of illuminating them at all, what Read calls "illustrating" the poems. *Worte sagen aus* was to be a show of mutual regard, between Read and Nicholson, or in so far as the two would regard one another in coincident 'reproduction' in the book, it was to show their mutual feeling for abstraction. This was a feeling that had developed over several decades of personal attachment and professional collaboration, working together to advance the programme of British abstraction. In order to understand the nature of the 'sympathetic relationship' between Read and Nicholson's work, it is necessary to trace the history of their connection.

4. An Unexpected Harbour: Herbert Read and 'Superrealism'

In 1933, Herbert Read moved to No. 3, The Mall, Parkhill Road, in Hampstead, London. Following a spell occupying the empty studio of Henry Moore, with only the 'Reclining Figure in brown Horton stone' and the 'butter-girl' for company, Read 'set up house' with his second wife as studio neighbour to Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth, Cecil Stephenson and Moore.⁶³ Close by, on the other side of Haverstock Hill, Paul Nash – the 'grand seigneur' – lived in a house on Eldon Road.⁶⁴ Nash was also involved with the practice and discussions taking place between the group, albeit radiating more of a 'polemical spirit' than those gathered in 'The Mall'.⁶⁵ Read's induction to the group was through Moore, whom he first met in 1928 at the introduction of Eric Maclagan at the Victoria & Albert Museum.⁶⁶ Hepworth, Moore and Read were all native to Yorkshire, which Read later perceived as having grounded an 'initial basis of sympathy', enforcing this 'core of the

⁶³ Herbert Read, 'A Nest of Gentle Artists', University of Leeds, Brotherton Collection [BLL], Herbert Read Archive MS 20c box 1A MS 5ff, pp. 1-5 (p. 2); published as 'A Nest of Gentle Artists', *Apollo*, 77.7 (1962), 536-40.

⁶⁴ Read, 'A Nest of Gentle Artists', BLL MS 20c, Box 1a, 5ff, p. 2.

⁶⁵ Read, 'A Nest of Gentle Artists', BLL MS 20c, Box 1a, 5ff, p. 3.

⁶⁶ Read, 'A Nest of Gentle Artists', BLL MS 20c, Box 1a, 5ff, p. 2.

group that was to grow to intimacy in the following years'.⁶⁷ Along with Nicholson, the four enjoyed years of 'lively' correspondence, both in terms of a personal exchange of letters, anecdotes, objects, polemics and postcards, as well as a more public exchange of analogous ideas and intentions.⁶⁸ Read recounted the five years of residence in Hampstead as the 'happiest period of his life', visiting each of the studios on a daily basis and constructing a small wooden hut in the garden in which he was to compose his only novel, *The Green Child* (1935).⁶⁹ In one of his earliest interactions with Nicholson, as he decorated his own 'white' and 'pale blue' studio, Read noticed the artist's instinctual grasp of space and treatment of colour. Upon visiting the newly painted studio, Nicholson rushed out to return with a 'round cork table-mat...painted scarlet', and nailed it high up on the clean white wall: 'The whole place was transformed by this accent of colour, perfectly placed'.⁷⁰ This was an early intimation of what Read came to observe and celebrate as Nicholson's astute deliberation, an artistic development that had proceeded from a 'native sensibility with the materials of his craft'.⁷¹

Read believed this 'nest of gentle artists' were the vanguard of British art, identifying with the revolutionary potential of abstract art. This opinion informed his first serious art criticism in regular contributions to the 'Notes on Art' column in *The Listener*, his widely-read primer *The Meaning of Art* (1931) and *Art Now* (1933).⁷² 'A work of art is not present in thought, but in feeling', Read asserted in 1929, and this statement became central to his conception of abstract art in *Art Now* as an art derived from, and interpreted through, emotional sensitivity: it 'exists not relatively to anything else, but in its own proper nature, producing its own proper pleasures'.⁷³ As the 1930s proceeded under the imminent threat of war, the artistic community in this corner of London again

⁶⁷ Read, 'A Nest of Gentle Artists', BLL MS 20c, Box 1a, 5ff, p. 2.

⁶⁸ Ben Nicholson, 'Tribute to Herbert Read', in *Ben Nicholson: a Studio International Special*, ed. by Maurice de Sausmarez (London: Studio International, 1969), p. 55.

⁶⁹ Benedict Read, 'Herbert Read: An Overview', in *Herbert Read: A British Vision of World Art*, ed. by Benedict Read and David Thistlewood (Leeds: Leeds City Art Galleries, 1993), pp. 11-24 (p. 11). For discussion of Read's only novel see Bob Barker, 'Herbert Read as Novelist: *The Green Child*', in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, pp. 100-122.

⁷⁰ Read, BLL MS 20c, Box 1a, 5ff, p. 3.

⁷¹ Herbert Read, 'Introduction', in *Ben Nicholson: Paintings, Reliefs, Drawings*, vol. 1 (London: Lund Humphries, 1948), pp. 13-22 (p. 17).

⁷² See Sam Rose, 'The Visual Arts in the BBC's "The Listener", 1929-1939', *The Burlington Magazine*, 155 (September 2013), 606-611.

⁷³ Herbert Read, 'The Meaning of Art', *The Listener*, 2 (25 September 1929), i-viii (supplement). This was the first of 54 contributions. See also Herbert Read, *Art Now* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), p. 116.

grew with the arrival of Walter Gropius in 1934, Naum Gabo, Marcel Breuer and László Moholy-Nagy in 1935, and finally, at Ben Nicholson's invitation, Piet Mondrian in 1938.⁷⁴ Living in such close proximity to these luminaries of Bauhaus modernism, constructivism and geometric abstraction emboldened Read's attitudes towards concrete, non-representational compositions.⁷⁵ It did not, however, inhibit his fascination for what he viewed as abstraction's opposing force in modern art, Surrealism. Read was witness to the concurrent rise of the two movements in Britain, leading to the creation of a key theoretical framework in his appreciation of modern aesthetic advancement that would counterpoint the two tendencies. The most fleeting of his aesthetic affiliations, which he later characterised as an 'intrusion' and a startling 'invasion from Paris', Surrealism disrupted Read's linear 'organic' sense of progress in British art and letters.⁷⁶ In England its emergence largely took place within the parameters of the establishment, within the pages of 'university magazines, in texts written by dons or students', and was little contemplated by the wider public until the 1936 exhibition.⁷⁷ However, the establishment was divided. Eminent art historians and writers such as Kenneth Clark and J. B. Priestley criticised the 'bad jokes and bad drawing' of this 'deepening twilight of barbarism', while academics and critics such as Henri Fluchère in *Scrutiny* and Anthony Blunt in *The Spectator* displayed a more inquisitive hesitancy.⁷⁸

Read's revised edition of *Art Now*, published 'prematurely and incomplete' to meet with the publication of Alfred H. Barr Jr.'s celebrated paradigm (Fig. 5) in *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936), addressed the contiguity of abstract art and surrealism, or under his preferred name 'superrealism'.⁷⁹ Barr's thesis gave authority to the prominence of cubism in a modernist sensibility, and differentiated between alternate degrees of abstraction: '(abstract) Expressionism', '(abstract)

⁷⁴ See Sophie Bowness, 'Mondrian in London: Letters to Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth', *The Burlington Magazine*, 132.1052 (November 1990), 782-788.

⁷⁵ See Judith Collins, 'An Event of Some Importance in the History of English Art', in *Herbert Read: A British Vision of World Art*, ed. by Benedict Read and David Thistlewood (Leeds: Leeds City Art Galleries, 1993), pp. 63-71.

⁷⁶ Herbert Read, 'A Nest of Gentle Artists', BLL HR MS 20c box 1A MS 5ff, p. 4.

⁷⁷ Michel Rémy, *Surrealism in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 33.

⁷⁸ Kenneth Clark, 'The Zwemmer Gallery', *New Statesman and Nation* (22 December, 1934), 938-39; Henri Fluchère, 'Surréalisme', *Scrutiny*, 1.3 (1932), 219-33; Anthony Blunt, 'Art – The Beaver and the Silkworm', *The Spectator*, 5549 (2 November 1934), 15; J. B. Priestley, quoted in Neil Matheson, *The Sources of Surrealism: Surrealism in Context* (London: Lund Humphries, 2006), p. 658.

⁷⁹ See David Thistlewood, 'Herbert Read's Organic Aesthetic [I] 1918-1950', in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, pp. 215-232.

Dadaism', '(abstract) Surrealism'.⁸⁰ Read makes a similar claim for superrealism on the part of the modernist trajectory offered by Barr as emanating from certain cubist practices, to suggest that Surrealism was not a movement of singular zeal, though it may be comprised of singular eccentricities, but a creative ideology gauged on a scale between realism and abstraction. Read's paradigm, expressed in the 'Epilogue 1936', is far less comprehensive than Barr's iconic mapping of the modern aesthetic cosmos, which was programmatically revisited throughout the Museum of Modern Art's ensuing publications and curatorial schema.⁸¹ The comparison is not a fair one, however, as where Barr's paradigm was 'intended as an historical survey of an important movement in modern art', Read's sought to illustrate that abstraction and superrealism could be understood as different aspects of a single aesthetic enterprise.⁸²



Fig. 5. Alfred H. Barr Jr, 'Evolution of Abstract Art', *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936).

⁸⁰ Alfred J. Barr Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), pp. 10-19. See Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

⁸¹ Herbert Read, *Art Now*, sec. ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), pp. 145-155.

⁸² Barr Jr, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, p. 9. For an in-depth discussion of Read's position see David Thistlewood, *Herbert Read Formlessness and Form: An introduction to his aesthetics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 76 -104.

In line with this parallelism Read would continue to propose the divergence between the two disciplines, while suggesting that they both contributed to this uniquely creative ‘time of transition’.⁸³ The first was figured as ‘positive’ and ‘essentially formalist’ – in that it ‘appeal[s] to our sensibility for reasons which cannot be stated with any clarity’ – ‘plastic, objective and ostensibly non-political’, represented by such painters and sculptors as Constantin Brancusi, Naum Gabo, Jean Hélion, Barbara Hepworth, Piet Mondrian, Moholy-Nagy and Ben Nicholson.⁸⁴ Superrealism, evident in the work of artists such as Hans Arp, Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, and Yves Tanguy was ‘negative and destructive’, ‘literary (even in paint), subjective, and actively Communist’, incited by its ‘forceful expositors’ to discredit bourgeois values in art and to attack the austerity of the academy.⁸⁵ For Read, the superrealists were undergoing a period of revolution, dynamic but temporary, the destructive ‘art of a transitional period’ that broke down bourgeois values, while the abstractionists had largely undergone their period of revolution, and were creating a more latently effectual ‘art in pickle’, applying themselves ‘to the great work of reconstruction’ of building a new, classless society.⁸⁶

Eager to demonstrate the interdependence of the two tendencies, Read presented his theory in separate terms to his two separate audiences. This was most clearly outlined in two articles written for the respective organs of abstraction and surrealism, *Circle* and the *London Bulletin*. The former was entitled ‘The Faculty of Abstraction’ and served the intention of the editors J. L. Martin, Naum Gabo and Ben Nicholson in their pioneering 1937 publication to represent ‘the constructive trend in the art of our day’, while the latter, ‘An Art of Pure Form’ was published in E.L.T. Mesens’s *London Bulletin* in 1939.⁸⁷ In so far as Superrealism could be said to circumvent the intellect, in order to engage with the latent imagery below the conscious level of the mind, so abstraction could penetrate the intellect, in order to resolve the contradiction that lies between the original concept and the perceptual form. This established a means by which one may contemplate

⁸³ Herbert Read, ‘What is Revolutionary Art?’, in *Five on Revolutionary Art*, ed. by B. Rea (London: Artists International Association, 1935), pp. 11-22 (p. 18).

⁸⁴ Read, ‘What is Revolutionary Art?’, p. 18.

⁸⁵ Read, ‘What is Revolutionary Art?’, p. 18.

⁸⁶ Read, ‘What is Revolutionary Art?’, p. 18.

⁸⁷ Herbert Read, ‘The Faculty of Abstraction’, in *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art*, ed. by Naum Gabo, J. L. Martin, and Ben Nicholson (London: Faber & Faber, 1937), pp. 61-66; Herbert Read, ‘An Art of Pure Form’, *London Bulletin*, 14 (1939), 6-9. Originally printed in Herbert Read, *Art & Society* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936), pp. 124-6.

avant-garde practice in Britain, examining the ‘true function of thought’ or the perceptual directness of surface tension. Most significantly, it is the concept of ‘space’ upon which the two approaches coalesce. By ‘space’ Read here offers pictorial space, giving the examples of two key painters. Space is

very evident in the work of a surrealist painter like Dalí; Dalí contradicts the rational concept of space in a fantastic manner, giving to his picture what we might call ‘a dream perspective’. This very contradiction of space makes us vividly aware of its reality. But an abstract artist like Mondrian attacks the same concept frontally. He presents us with a bare arrangement of lines and two or three pure colours which create and affirm the concept ‘space’ in the most direct and unequivocal manner. The purer and more fundamental the elements which are used, the acuter and purer is our *emotional* awareness of ‘space’.⁸⁸

Read’s argument here hinges on a spatial dialectic, by which Dalí approaches space from behind that of an assumed integrity, violating the recesses of the unconscious mind, while Mondrian confronts space ‘frontally’, foregrounding the fundamental elements and outlines that comprise form and composition. Both Dalí’s phantasms and Mondrian’s axiomatic palette enforce the existence of space, in their defamiliarisation of content and form within the pictorial plane. While one may proceed from below and the other from above, one from the ‘knowledge embedded in psychoanalysis’ and the other in the ‘abstract concepts of physics and dynamics, geometry and mathematics’, both value a variegated, shifting perspective.⁸⁹ If at their extremes the two movements – ‘a Mondrian against a Dalí’ – appear to have little in common, this was nonetheless a binary Read was to prize throughout his life, writing many years later in 1962 of this opposition and the personal coordinates by which he was to plot the shifting determinations of the avant-garde: ‘As I write, two pictures face me on the wall, one a pure abstraction by Ben Nicholson, the other a surrealist fantasy by Paul Delvaux. By chance their colours harmonise; if there is any contradiction in their forms, it must correspond to a contradiction in my own mind, for both appeal to me with equal force’.⁹⁰

This dialectic shaped Read’s conception of the Modernist project, using Henry Moore as the primary example of an artist who occupied the centre-ground between surrealism and

⁸⁸ Read, ‘The Faculty of Abstraction’, p. 65.

⁸⁹ Read, ‘The Faculty of Abstraction’, p. 66.

⁹⁰ Read, ‘A Nest of Gentle Artists’, p. 2.

abstraction to produce works of ‘organic vitalism’.⁹¹ This was a model that would accommodate artists that alternated between ‘outwardly addressing nature (creating natural equivalents), inwardly addressing self-ordered preferences (exploring abstract relationships in a spirit of play or nervous replenishment)’, devoting himself to the promotion of work that navigated this axis.⁹² Read perceived a cultural rift between the establishment distaste for the experimental and the lack of adequate representation for new movements in art throughout the years leading up to the war, but it was the acquiescence of existing institutions to accept ‘modern art’ which he came to view as far more deleterious to the project of modernism in Britain. Read confessed in an undated 1938 letter to Ben Nicholson to feeling ‘rather depressed and frustrated by the general situation’ in Britain.⁹³ Surrealism had seemingly come to an end, and Read was disillusioned with its achievements.⁹⁴ He was more deflated, however, by the continual dismissal and predicted demise of ‘abstract art...and all that sort of thing’ made by the Director of the National Gallery, Kenneth Clark, Read felt that Clark’s public sponsorship of a ‘revival of “the picture with a story”’ was indicative of the broader British attitude towards abstract art.⁹⁵ In an alarming paragraph, Read suggests that there are two wars present in Britain, the war for abstraction and the war in Europe, and to win one war was to lose the other. Should Britain triumph, the ‘new kind of world they want is a world safe for mediocrity’, and therefore it is only by ‘putting into power the same kind of people who rule in Germany’ that a modern art was to be acknowledged and encouraged.⁹⁶ These are sentiments expressed not in support of Nazi Germany, but to highlight the absurdity of the ‘nice clean healthy nature’ enjoyed by the establishment, and the archaism of public figures such as Clark, when faced with the extremist convictions and postures of Fascism.⁹⁷ A letter that mounts in exasperation, Read reflects with regret upon Peggy Guggenheim’s apparent lack of interest and feckless patronage of a proposed new ‘living museum’ for London, and even threatens to leave Britain to follow

⁹¹ Herbert Read, *Philosophy of Modern Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952) p. 209.

⁹² David Thistlewood, ‘Herbert Read’s Paradigm: A British Vision of Modernism’, in *Herbert Read: A British Vision of World Art*, pp. 76-94 (p. 79).

⁹³ Herbert Read, letter to Ben Nicholson, undated c.1938, TGA 8717.1.2.3652, pp. 1-6 (p. 3).

⁹⁴ Read broke with the Surrealist movement in 1940. See Paul C. Ray, ‘Sir Herbert Read and English Surrealism’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 24.3 (1966), 401-413.

⁹⁵ Read, letter to Nicholson, undated c.1938, TGA 8717.1.2.3652, p. 2.

⁹⁶ Read, letter to Nicholson, undated c.1938, TGA 8717.1.2.3652, p. 2.

⁹⁷ Read, letter to Nicholson, undated c.1938, TGA 8717.1.2.3652, p. 1.

‘Huxley, Auden, Aldington’ to America, finally venting his irritation at the tactical curatorial dogma employed by the Royal Academy, belying their deep-seated suspicion of ‘modern art’:

The admission of “modern” art to the Winter Exh at the R.A. is being welcomed as a triumph for modern art. Don’t you believe it. It is a sinister manifestation of middle class or rather “popular front” tactics – popular front inspired by Berlin rather than Moscow. They feel, the R.A.’s, that modern art is hard hit by the war & they are disposed to be charitable; to admit you & Harry and a few others to show what an insignificant minority you are – something too weak to be afraid of, too small to worry about. They see that modern art has gathered strength from opposition: they now open their ranks & hope to absorb the enemy – rather in the way that China lets its enemies invade the country then quietly swallows them. I am sure the right policy would be one of absolute non-cooperation – no truck with academics or govt art councils or any form of all-inclusive patronage. What we mean by modern art is in danger of losing its identity.⁹⁸

As Read suggests above, between the patronising ‘charitable’ level of engagement offered by the R.A. towards ‘modern art’ and the pre-war squalling for an ‘all-inclusive patronage’, the only possible course for modern art now is ‘absolute non-cooperation’. To be taken up by ‘academics or govt. art councils’ would only lead to further usurpation of identity, in the necessity to attune and justify one’s means, sense and practice to that of a presiding external arbiter. It was a year of polarizing opinion regarding the support and display of modern art in Britain’s institutions, with the Royal Academy’s 1938 summer exhibition becoming one of the most controversial in its long history. The committee had rejected Wyndham Lewis’s innovative portrait of T. S. Eliot (Fig. 6), which subsequently prompted Augustus John’s resignation from membership in protest, and in turn, provoked a number of public criticisms of the Academy’s contemporary criteria.⁹⁹ The painting largely abided by the conventions of portraiture, and bore no resemblance to the far more radical work of the day, epitomised by the white reliefs of Ben Nicholson, but it was thought too experimental in character. The media circus raised allegations of censorship and debated the existence of phallic depictions on the scrolls to the left of Eliot’s shoulder.¹⁰⁰ Suggesting that the Academy exhibition rooms could be more usefully employed as ‘dance halls and skating rinks’,

⁹⁸ Read, letter to Nicholson, undated c.1938, TGA 8717.1.2.3652, pp. 3-4. ‘Harry’ refers to the sculptor Henry Moore.

⁹⁹ Virginia Woolf noted the ‘Row’ in her diary: *The Diary of Virginia Woolf 1936-1941*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth Press, 1984), p. 139.

¹⁰⁰ Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 455-516 (p. 466).

Lewis denounced the summer exhibition as ‘a disgusting bazaar in which every sort of filth is accumulated every year’, claiming that his submission of the painting was a ‘plot’ to reveal the deep-seated prejudices of the Academy, for which it was widely known he had little regard.¹⁰¹ Reveling in the aftermath, Lewis believed the Royal Academy had finally been ‘caught’, exposed as an institution eager to vilify those in opposition to a curatorial approach ‘exclusive in the narrowest commercial sense’.¹⁰²



Fig. 6. Wyndham Lewis, ‘T. S. Eliot’ (1938), oil on canvas, 1333 x 851 mm, Durban Municipal Art Gallery, South Africa.

¹⁰¹ Wyndham Lewis, ‘Academy Called a “Filth Bazaar”’, *The Daily Herald*, 22 April 1938, p. 5; Wyndham Lewis, ‘What I Think of the R.A.’, *The Star*, 30 April 1938, pp. 4-5.

¹⁰² Wyndham Lewis, ‘The Rejected Portrait’, *The Times*, 4 May 1938, p. 10.

What was the identity of modern art and literature? What new boundaries were being broken? By 1938, the challenges posed by Lewis and the ‘men of 1914’ had become part of a familiar literary landscape, but Lewis’s artistic mode of expression evidently continued to prove provocative.¹⁰³ The rejection of the portrait had not only called into question the conservatism of the adjudicators, or the myopic attitudes of the academy, but more fundamentally ‘whether England’s visual culture was as amenable to change as her literary culture’.¹⁰⁴ Read stood at this divide, writing with equal scholarly acuity about art and literature, and yet the two disciplines rarely had occasion to meet in his criticism of this period. The exception to this, however, emerged in his writings on the ‘poetic’ work of Ben Nicholson.

5. Poet, Painter and Propagandist: Ben Nicholson and the ‘poetic idea’

A member of the ‘7 & 5’ Group (1925-1936), Unit One (1933) and the Parisian *Abstraction-Création* (1933-1935), and, with J. L. Martin and Naum Gabo, as a co-editor of *Circle*, the influential and international review of constructive art published once in 1937, Nicholson was engaged from the very beginning of his career with the creation of a discourse surrounding ‘non-figurative’ art in Britain. This was amplified by his carved and painted reliefs of blocked colouring and spatial configuration produced in the 1930s, signature works in the developing architectonic style. Nicholson was involved in the promotion of abstraction, present at public discussions and featured in pivotal exhibitions, such as ‘Cubism and Abstract Art’ at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, the ‘English Art’ exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the touring British exhibition ‘Abstract and Concrete’, all held in 1936, and co-authoring the *Circle* ‘manifesto’ of 1937, yet he was never publicly effusive or dogmatic. His ‘Notes on Abstract Art’, published in *Horizon* in October 1941, was his most clearly conceived exposition of abstract art, having previously published his aphoristic ‘Quotations’ in *Circle* (1937). The ‘Notes’ served as a defence of abstraction in the wake of popular critical misgivings over whether works of abstraction could be understood as

¹⁰³ Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1967), p. 256.

¹⁰⁴ Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis*, p. 466.

art, and if they were deemed to be works of art, then to what degree they were ‘unlike the works of Tintoretto’.¹⁰⁵ Nicholson viewed these remarks as narrow-minded in terms of the ‘recent liberation of the powerful forces of form and colour’, and therefore uncompromisingly determinate of the nature of painting, sculpture and artistic practice. In an attempt to make the critical discourse relatable and to diffuse the intellectualist and anti-intellectualist attitudes that were being leveled at abstract art, he offered a poetic remonstrance: ‘One can say that the problems dealt with in “abstract” art are related to the interplay of forces and, therefore, that any solution reached has a bearing on all interplay between forces: it is related to Arsenal v. Tottenham Hotspur quite as much as to the stars in their courses’.¹⁰⁶ This notion of abstraction having a ‘bearing on all interplay between forces’, as much on the outcome of the match as on the outcome of all pre-existing, concurrent, and subsequent matches, within and without the pictorial plane, stretching to the infinities of stars above, related to Read’s rejection of the idea that abstraction only offered a ‘kind of stalemate’.¹⁰⁷ Abstract art is created from its implied tensions, not from the sum of its parts or from the sequential appreciation for its shapes and forms. The most effective abstract work, Nicholson appears to suggest, is achieved in the balance between intuited meanings, and yet it is also ready to confound singular readings or solitary perspectives, epitomized by the chiasmic credo in his ‘Statement’ of January 1957: ‘My “still-life” paintings are closely identified with landscape, more closely than are my landscapes which relate perhaps more to “still-life”’.¹⁰⁸

This growing sense of coherence around a pre-war English ‘non-figurative’ avant-garde found its ‘effective spokesman’ in Herbert Read, who wrote numerous embattled missives and monographs on their behalf.¹⁰⁹ Nicholson’s work was promoted in four of Read’s major contemporary studies, *Art Now*, *The Philosophy of Modern Art*, *A Coat of Many Colours* and *A Concise History of Modern Painting*, and celebrated in a great many catalogue essays, articles, lectures and

¹⁰⁵ Ben Nicholson, ‘Notes on Abstract Art’, *Horizon*, 4.22 (October 1941), 272-76 (repr. in *Ben Nicholson: Paintings, Reliefs, Drawings*, pp. 23-28 (p. 24))

¹⁰⁶ Nicholson, ‘Notes on Abstract Art’, p. 24.

¹⁰⁷ Read, *A Coat of Many Colours: Occasional Essays* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1945), p. 80.

¹⁰⁸ Ben Nicholson, ‘Statement, January 1957’, in *Ben Nicholson: a Studio International Special*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁹ Maurice de Sausmarez, ‘Preface’, in *Ben Nicholson: a Studio International Special*, pp. 5-7 (p. 6).

broadcasts before and after the Second World War.¹¹⁰ Read's introduction to the 1948 monograph on Nicholson is his greatest attempt at placing the painter within the 'historical phenomenon' of abstraction, heralding Nicholson as the 'leading representative in Great Britain of that tendency in art which has been called *abstract*'.¹¹¹ The introduction positions Nicholson's paintings, reliefs and constructions as marking a significant evolution in contemporary practice and aesthetic philosophy, deeply bound to the 'historical origins' of all modes of expression and depiction.¹¹² Tracing the historical origins of abstract art in the first paragraphs of his essay, Read centres upon a key text in the critical discourse written by Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (1908), as a remarkable instance in the modern conception of abstraction.¹¹³ Inspiring artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Pablo Picasso and Naum Gabo, the study only received limited reception in Britain in 1914 following a lecture given by T. E. Hulme, which was subsequently published in a collection of Hulme's essays in 1924 edited by Herbert Read.¹¹⁴ As *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* was not translated into English until 1953, Read considers the main implications of Worringer's ideas through the 'adequate summary' made by Hulme, who offered an outline of Worringer's fundamental distinction between 'two kinds of art, geometrical and vital'.¹¹⁵ Utterly distinct from one another, the two tendencies are considered to 'pursue different aims', to have been 'created for the satisfaction of different necessities of the mind' and to have served separate cultural expectations. Vital art, allied to naturalism or realism, is described as the objectification of one's feeling for, and the pleasure found in, movements and forms found in nature, whereas geometrical art – epitomizing 'the tendency to abstraction' – was understood as the construction of an order separate to the external world, deriving no inspiration or pleasure from nature.¹¹⁶ Abstraction is therefore characterised as a 'feeling of separation' from the external world, which in turn bifurcates into two further kinds of approach: one of fear or 'mental space shyness' ('*Raumscheu*') when faced with the

¹¹⁰ Jeremy Lewison, 'The Making of a Reputation', *Ben Nicholson* (London: Tate Gallery, 1993), pp. 70-83 (p. 71); see 'Bibliography' in Jasia Reichardt, ed., *Ben Nicholson* (London: Methuen, 1962), n.p.

¹¹¹ Read, 'Introduction', in *Ben Nicholson: Paintings, Reliefs, Drawings*, p. 17.

¹¹² Read, 'Introduction', in *Ben Nicholson: Paintings, Reliefs, Drawings*, p. 17.

¹¹³ Joseph Frank developed connections between literature and *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* in his celebrated essay in three parts 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature', *The Sewanee Review*, 53 (Spring, Summer, Autumn 1945).

¹¹⁴ Read had published this lecture as editor of the 1924 collection of Hulme's writings: T. E. Hulme, 'Modern Art and its Philosophy', in *Speculations*, ed. by Herbert Read (London: Routledge, 1924), pp. 73-109.

¹¹⁵ Read, 'Introduction', *Ben Nicholson: Paintings, Reliefs, Drawings*, p. 13.

¹¹⁶ Read, 'Introduction', *Ben Nicholson: Paintings, Reliefs, Drawings*, p. 14.

seeming arbitrariness or lack of order in the world, and one of ‘contempt’ for the external world, in which the feeling of human separateness has a religious or metaphysical basis.¹¹⁷

In the post-war era, Read suggests, there is a new ‘complexity’, unforeseen by Worringer and Hulme. The influence of Existentialism and Heidegger’s fear of ‘nothingness’ concentrates attention upon the power of the individual consciousness within the world as opposed to Worringer’s notional communities, classes or societies, marking a shift from an emphasis upon collective expression to individual presence. As Read suggests, ‘What we must now affirm is the possibility, not merely of an individual reaction, but even of the alternation, within the individual consciousness, of both attitudes’.¹¹⁸ In its simplest form this is no more than the switching between ‘optimistic and pessimistic attitudes’. At its most complex, it is the co-existence of the vital and the geometrical: ‘to tend in one psychological phase towards an affirmation of the world which results in a naturalistic style, and in another psychological phase to tend towards a rejection of that world which results in an abstract style of art’.¹¹⁹ For Read, Nicholson’s work encapsulated this degree of complexity, as the work of an artist saturated in the formal languages of the objective and non-objective worlds. In an earlier version of his essay, Read argues that Nicholson’s preoccupation with geometric forms is a consequence of his ‘mystic’ perception of the reality beneath appearances: ‘He does not draw the intuition of reality out of a vacuum, but out of a mind attuned to the specific forms of nature – a mind which has stored within it a full awareness of the proportions and harmonies inherent in all natural phenomena, in the universe itself’.¹²⁰ It is his prerogative to ‘express the essential nature of this reality’, a point which Read stresses by pointing out the prefix ‘geo’ to ‘geometric’ as pertaining to the ‘earth’, and Nicholson’s repeated use of the circle, line and square as forming discrete natural phenomena.¹²¹

Read’s exploration of certain symbols, familiar shapes, constant factors, and their repeated variations in Nicholson’s painting, builds a compelling visual language. As the power of this formal

¹¹⁷ Hulme contrasts the primitive and Byzantine attitudes to clarify Worringer’s position: Hulme, ‘Modern Art and its Philosophy’, quoted in Read, ‘Introduction’, *Ben Nicholson: Paintings, Reliefs, Drawings*, p. 15.

¹¹⁸ Read, ‘Introduction’, in *Ben Nicholson: Paintings, Reliefs, Drawings*, p. 16.

¹¹⁹ Read, ‘Introduction’, in *Ben Nicholson: Paintings, Reliefs, Drawings*, p. 16.

¹²⁰ Read, *A Coat of Many Colours*, p. 82.

¹²¹ Herbert Read, ‘Introduction’, in *Ben Nicholson, Volume 2: work since 1947* (London: Lund Humphries, 1956), pp. 5-6 (p. 6).

vocabulary lies in its capacity for allusion, to what extent does it act like poetic language? It is important to note that the dialectical character apparent in Nicholson's art was often expressed as 'poetic' by both Nicholson and Read, in which his forms, colours and shapes are revisited in slightly different formulations to create intuited meanings or sense impressions. They appear to collapse time, as 'constructions in space and matter, with all the attributes which such constructions can possess – rhythm, balance, chiaroscuro and concrete finality'.¹²² The evocative nature of Nicholson's painting is often described using the word 'poetic', or deemed to adopt a 'poetic mood' or 'poetic understanding', resistant to the more directive 'literary space' of figurative or realist painting.¹²³ Read felt that there was a peculiarly 'English' quality to Nicholson's work, achieved in what he referred to as a 'cool lyricism', comparable to 'the distinctive quality of our Gothic illuminated manuscripts and glass-painting, of our school or watercolour painters, of Gainsborough, Constable, and Turner' and found in 'English poetry too'.¹²⁴ Nicholson, evidently aware of the discussion surrounding his work, also distinguished between the 'poetic idea' and the 'literary content' of his painting, in which the 'poetic idea' allows the artist to transmit a sense of the underlying reality of appearances:

The geometrical forms often used by abstract artists do not indicate, as has been thought, a conscious and intellectual mathematical approach – a square or a circle in art are nothing in themselves and are alive only in the instinctive and inspirational use an artist can make of them in expressing a poetic idea.¹²⁵

The forms themselves do not provide the clues to a decipherable riddle. The outline may delineate a recognisable jug, table, or elements of a landscape, but the power of Nicholson's formal vocabulary lies in the implicit and complicit tensions between constituent forms, and the attempt at universality in the arrangement of these forms, colours or lines into coherent systems of meaning. The poetic, for Nicholson, was intimately connected to the act of composition, as a process in continual

¹²² Read, 'Introduction', in *Ben Nicholson: Paintings, Reliefs, Drawings*, p. 19.

¹²³ David Baxandall, 'Nicholson's Work', in *Ben Nicholson*, ed. by Jasia Reichardt (London: Methuen, 1962), n.p.

¹²⁴ Herbert Read, 'Ben Nicholson', carbon typescript, n.d., McP HR box 5, fol. 14, item 37.95, pp. 1-4 (p. 1).

¹²⁵ Nicholson, 'Notes on Abstract Art', p. 26.

revision, in which the slightest quaver of the pen or brush can pin the most fluttering of formations:

If you take a large ultramarine blue and a small cadmium red square and place them on a cool white surface along with a pencilled circle, you can create a most exciting tension between these forces, and if at any time this tension becomes too exciting you can easily, by the smallest mark made by the compass in its centre, transfix the circle like any butterfly!¹²⁶

John Newenham Summerson suggested that one painting in particular that ‘illustrates this with peculiar force and simplicity’ is ‘still life (poisonous green)’ (1947), comparing it to a ‘verbal image’ as it ‘can be “read” in a dozen ways, all of them, probably, equally wrong, but all bearing some relation to the actual process of the painting’s composition’.¹²⁷ David Baxandall detailed the intrinsic ‘mystery and strangeness and importance’ of Nicholson’s ‘poetic mood’, suggesting that it is the tension between his ‘structural sense’ and his ‘poetic response’ that ‘seems to provide the key to his whole career’: ‘The one side of his nature has given even his more representational work a structural strength and abstract architectural quality; the other side has made sure that even his most abstract works hold something of the poetry of things seen’.¹²⁸ Charles Estienne, in his catalogue review for the 1948 exhibition *Jeune Peinture en Grande Bretagne* at the Parisian Galerie René Drouin, likened Nicholson to John Donne and Andrew Marvell, as opposed to observing any painterly kinship with Mondrian, and implored that the viewer ‘learn to love that same “mysterious spark of truth” in the graphic poems of Ben Nicholson’.¹²⁹ Similarly, David Lewis speaks of Nicholson’s ‘sharp-edged areas of colour’ and ‘vigour of resistance’, of line whose ‘clear form [...] contains a sensuous, sympathetic and deep poetry of landscape’, while Herta Wescher suggests that ‘each picture, each relief’ is a ‘poetic conception’, enclosed within inflexible parameters of the most subtle

¹²⁶ Nicholson, ‘Notes on Abstract Art’, p. 26.

¹²⁷ John Newenham Summerson, ‘Review of *Paintings, Reliefs, Drawings* by Ben Nicholson’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 2451 (22 January 1949), 54. The painting is plate no. 180 in *Ben Nicholson: Paintings, Reliefs, Drawings*, ‘still life (poisonous green)’ (1947), Collection John C. W. Dix, U.S.A.

¹²⁸ David Baxandall, ‘Nicholson’s Work’, in *Ben Nicholson*, ed. by Jasia Reichardt (London: Methuen, 1962), pp. 33–41 (p. 35).

¹²⁹ Charles Estienne, ‘Peinture et Culture Anglaises’, *Jeune Peinture en Grand Bretagne* (Paris: Galerie René Drouin, 1948).

variation which stand in defiance to ‘one of the most current problems of art today’, the spectacular nature of ‘mural decoration’.¹³⁰

These remarks build a picture of an artist committed to furthering the intellectual appreciation of abstract painting. However, no painter, claimed Read, ‘could be less ideological’, in the sense of ‘using his craft to illustrate a thesis’, adopting a tentative and explorative mode of working.¹³¹ Both Read and Nicholson recognised that the primary confusion so often courted by abstraction was prompted by the common misapprehension between two very different things, realism and reality. Nicholson defined abstract art as an ‘active force in our lives’, as opposed to an exploit of avant-gardist affront or the elucidation of recondite artistic theory. Abstraction is a philosophy that seeks to create an ‘equivalent’ of life, rather than a faithful, anticipated ‘imitation of life’:

One of the main differences between a representational and an abstract painting is that the former can transport you to Greece by a representation of blue skies and seas, olive trees and marble columns, but in order that you may take part in this you will have to concentrate on the painting, whereas the abstract version by its free use of form and colour will be able to give you the actual quality of Greece itself, and this will become part of the light and space and life in the room – there is no need to concentrate, *it becomes part of living*.¹³²

Elucidating the subtle shift in expectation when faced with ‘equivalent’ as opposed to ‘imitation’, that is with ‘abstract’ as opposed to ‘representational’, Nicholson motions that a ‘greater consciousness’ is not rooted in a more intellectually rigorous and informed concentration, but in a ‘language...comprehensible to anyone who doesn't set up barriers’.¹³³ Read’s ‘Vocal Avowals’ demand the same kind of engagement from the reader, arguably seeking to establish a language at once familiar but positioned in adventitious correspondence. These were ideas that emerged in connection with the work of the American philosopher Susanne Langer and which found their clearest expression in essays written ‘towards an aesthetic philosophy’ in *The Forms of Things Unknown* (1960). Do the ‘Vocal Avowals’ convey something of this late moment in Read’s aesthetic and philosophical enquiry?

¹³⁰ David Lewis, ‘Ver y Estimar’ (1953) (repr. in Herbert Read, ‘Press Notices’, *Ben Nicholson*, Volume 2, n.p.).

¹³¹ Read, ‘Introduction’, in *Ben Nicholson: Paintings, Reliefs, Drawings*, p. 17.

¹³² Nicholson, ‘Notes on Abstract Art’, p. 25, italics Nicholson’s own.

¹³³ Nicholson, ‘Notes on Abstract Art’, p. 25.

6. Art as a Symbolic Language: Herbert Read, Susanne Langer and 'non-vocal signs'

'What is a poem?' This elementary question headlines the concluding note of Read's *Collected Poems* (1966), in which all of the 'Vocal Avowals' are reproduced in the preceding section.¹³⁴ Read here addresses the pressing distinction he was called upon to make by Susanne Langer at the end of a graduate seminar on poetry given at Princeton University.¹³⁵ 'But what is a poem?' she would insist, 'You have told us what poetry is, and so have many other critics of the past and present, but no one will tell me what a poem is'.¹³⁶ Read explains that though he felt harried by the repetition of such a 'pedantic' question, it in fact began to form the central point from which he would embark upon both his 'theoretical discussion of poetry' as well as his 'own practice as a poet'.¹³⁷ It was, he realised, a question that had underpinned his creative and critical thinking, and one that was rehearsed in his every composition of poetry and prose. Read's resulting exposition of the nature of a poem is therefore striated, marked by different lines of elucidation from that of other works of art, such as sculpture or music, each instance requiring their own series of tentative 'what's'. In questioning 'what' a poem is, the object within the schema, Read is pulled into unravelling those elements that comprise that 'perfection of silent growth', making the same definitive demands of 'rhythm', 'metre' and 'content'.¹³⁸ What at first appears to be a necessary discernment between the 'material of an art' and 'the "work" into which that material is wrought', becomes a deliberation between 'material' sense and cognitive sense:

The words in a poem (it might be more exact to speak of the syllables in a poem) are vocal signs that convey an intangible essence (the 'pattern' of a feeling), an essence that vanishes the moment we approach it with our analytical intelligence¹³⁹

In the mysterious dual dependency between rhythmical intensity and intensity of 'feeling', in which a dereliction of one is a negation of the other, Read advocates a shifting field of 'vocal signs', in which syntax is subordinated to that of image. These 'signs' – each 'sealed' and 'immortalised' in 'a

¹³⁴ Read, *Collected Poems*, pp. 271-274.

¹³⁵ Read, *Collected Poems*, p. 271.

¹³⁶ Read, *Collected Poems*, p. 271.

¹³⁷ Read, *Collected Poems*, p. 271.

¹³⁸ Read, *Collected Poems*, p. 271.

¹³⁹ Read, *Collected Poems*, p. 273.

crystal cage’ – as ‘images’ hung between the rafters of syntax – form moments of movements in thought, feeling, and time, Poundian ‘complexes’ held captive in the instant of contemplation, ‘completing its symbolic references within the ambit of its sound-effect’. Sound – conveyed by means of ‘syllables’ – here governs the experience of a poem, that ‘intangible essence’, to a more nuanced degree than that of our ‘analytical’ apprehension of language. Read finally answers his presiding ‘what’ with the assertion that a poem is an unbroken unit of both sound and rhythm, which deems ‘a verifiable meaning, an intellectual or moral or social communication’ as ultimately anterior to a poem’s ‘poetic value’:

A poem is not a statement, but a manifestation, a manifestation of *being*. It may be that some poems are enhanced by a meaning, but I have never been able to discover what difference the inclusion of a verifiable meaning made to any poem that spontaneously suggests itself to the mind as archetypal, such as one of Shakespeare’s songs. Many great poets take occasion, in writing a poem, to be philosophical or social critics, or entertainer, and they have great ability in these ambiguous roles; but Ariel’s song rises mockingly above their cares and is ‘no mortal business, nor no sound that the earth owes’. Poetry, we might say, is concerned with the truth of what is, not what is truth. Heidegger says that ‘poetry is the saga of the unconcealment of what is.’¹⁴⁰

Utterance here becomes intuitive in its application. In his ‘Vocal Avowals’, as with his unapologetically frank ‘What is a Poem?’, Read is openly attesting to a new kind of vision in his sense of what a poem can be and can do, opening the possible manifestations of the poem object. To avow is openly to confess, but also, as a matter of tone, to justify the purpose of the confession. This purity of assertion is given emphasis by the bodily nature of an avowal: it is often an utterance in plea of admonition, and therefore one that emanates directly, as in his opening comments, from ‘reverberations’ centralised in the throat, in the plain hope of encouraging empathy. Sound is privileged over sense to stress the existence of those aspects inaccessible to language, which have their own forms of conception and their own structural invention. As Read claimed in 1960: ‘Language is now an instrument of rational discourse; but that was not its original purpose. It was evolved from obscure and incoherent beginnings, and was certainly at first an attempt to express

¹⁴⁰ Read, *Collected Poems*, p. 274.

feelings or to name things, to make a fixed and constant association between vocal sound and a visual or somatic sensation'.¹⁴¹

In spite of their incongruity when assembled alongside Read's highly praised metaphysical poetry, his sombre wartime meditations and his later scenic elegies, these poems were by no means experiments to be discounted, nor were they the merely the last effects of a nostalgic symbolist return. There is an emphasis placed upon the 'Vocal Avowals' in his *Collected Poems*, as they were the only poems to be printed out of sequence from the overarching chronological ordering of the other collections or sequences, even though many of the 'Avowals' were written six years prior to his 'New Poems' of 1965. It is as if Read is highlighting the fact that his poetic 'ambit' reaches its apotheosis with this often overlooked inventive sequence, and this is connected to his striking assertion that they form an "abstract" poetry.¹⁴² Read's evolving 'language of non-vocal signs', through his vocalisations on behalf of abstract art and his vital and incessant experiment in the realm between poetry and painting, was intended to stir the 'drift' of modern culture in Britain.¹⁴³ For Read, the 'poetic idea' that was emerging in contemporary aesthetics, exemplified by Nicholson's tentative compositions, had achieved its most compelling expression in light of new psychoanalytic discussion.

As one of the 'pioneers [...] of relating psychoanalysis to literature and the other arts', the effect of the new psychology on Read's mature critical and creative work has been richly documented.¹⁴⁴ Read wrote extensively on the impact of both Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung on his aesthetics, providing neatly summarised commentaries, editing large volumes of collected works and often appropriating their theories to inform his own aesthetic objectives, reflections upon the creative experience and conceptions of the poetic consciousness.¹⁴⁵ The influence of Susanne Langer on Read's aesthetic discourse, however, is less well critically attended. Her

¹⁴¹ Read, *The Forms of Things Unknown*, p. 109.

¹⁴² Read, letter to Ben Nicholson, dated 28 August 1960, TGA 8717/1/2 3737, p. 1.

¹⁴³ Read, *The Forms of Things Unknown*, p. 46.

¹⁴⁴ John R. Doheny, 'Herbert Read as Literary Critic', in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, pp. 46-69 (p. 54); see also David Thistlewood, *Herbert Read Formlessness and Form*, pp. 53-75. For critical reflections see John R. Doheny, 'Herbert Read's Use of Sigmund Freud', in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, pp. 70-82; Jason Harding, 'Herbert Read and the Psychological Method in Criticism', in *Rereading Read*, pp. 180-187; David Cohen, 'Herbert Read and psychoanalysis', in *Art Criticism Since 1900*, ed. by Malcolm Gee (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 164-180.

¹⁴⁵ See Herbert Read, *Icon and Idea: The Function of Art in the Development of Human Consciousness* (London: Faber, 1955).

consideration of the symbol and the ‘constructive human response’ to symbolism in her acclaimed collection of essays *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942) contributed to Read’s shift in emphasis from Freudian strategies of subjectivity and stimulation to Jungian strategies of commonality and perception, what the critic David Thistlewood describes as ‘the supplanting of ideas about a *dependency* of art upon nature with ideas about an interpenetration – even an *identity* – of art and nature’.¹⁴⁶ Reviewing the second edition of *Philosophy in a New Key*, Read confessed that although he had received a copy upon its first publication in 1942, he had little more than glanced at its contents and left it unread until 1949.¹⁴⁷ Reacquaintance with her book prompted his remarkable review on the BBC’s Third Programme, in which he described it as a luminary work of great import: ‘I [...] gradually realised that it was something I had been waiting for for many years – one of those synoptic works which, by bringing together separate areas of knowledge, suddenly reveal the pattern of reality, and give a new meaning to all one’s piecemeal explorations’.¹⁴⁸ He concluded his evaluation with laudatory aplomb: ‘I know of no book in the field of aesthetics which in our time has had such a profound effect’.¹⁴⁹

What is perhaps of greatest pertinence to this discussion is Langer’s articulation of two separate ‘systems of symbolism’ inherent to communicated meaning:

Mrs Langer, in common with certain philosophers such as Cassirer and Whitehead, maintains that the field of semantics (the science of meaning) is wider than language: that there are systems of symbolism, subject to their own logic, that constitute another mode of thought. In other words, there is both *discursive* thought (thought that begins and ends with language) and also *non-discursive* thought (thought that is expressed in non-linguistic forms). Visual forms, for example – lines, colours, proportions etc. – “are just as capable of *articulation*, ie. of complex combination, as words. But the laws that govern this sort of articulation are altogether different from the laws of syntax that govern language”... And generally we may say that poetry, myth, ritual, the plastic arts and music, provide forms which in a purely sensory way constitute a *non-discursive symbolism*, “peculiarly suited to the expression of ideas that defy linguistic ‘projection’”. But this non-discursive symbolism remains within the realm of rationality [...] “it never breaks faith with logic in the strictest sense”.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Thistlewood, ‘Herbert Read’s Organic Aesthetic: [II] 1950-1968’, *Herbert Read Reassessed*, p. 233.

¹⁴⁷ David Thistlewood, *Herbert Read: Formlessness and Form: An Introduction to His Aesthetics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 150.

¹⁴⁸ *The Third Programme*, BBC1, 13 March 1951, 8.30pm.

¹⁴⁹ Read first reviewed *Philosophy in a New Key* in ‘The Language of Symbols’, *World Review*, 31 (September 1951), 33-36. Langer’s work received a mixed reception: Donald Davie pondered her ‘written speech’ in *Articulate Energy: An Enquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), p. 17.

¹⁵⁰ Herbert Read, *Tenth Muse: Essays in Criticism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), pp. 239-250 (p. 242-3).

Langer's bifurcation of the aesthetic experience into 'discursive' and 'non-discursive' forms of expression corresponds directly with Read's 'vocal' and 'non-vocal' signs, with both models accounting for literary and extra-literary systems of meaning-making. As language has a scientific grammar, so too do 'feelings have definite forms', and, as Langer makes clear, both have become increasingly articulate over the course of human evolution: 'A mind that works primarily with meanings must have organs that supply it primarily with forms'.¹⁵¹ The ability to 'perceive forms rather than a flux of light impressions' is derived from a stock of familiar forms embedded deep within the unconscious, which for Langer 'is the primitive root of all abstraction'.¹⁵² Read was most convinced by this aspect of Jung's teachings, of an inherited collective set of meanings, values and images which he referred to as archetypes, and this devotion developed in tandem with regular contributions made to Jung's annual conferences, the Eranos Tagung, at Ascona, Switzerland.¹⁵³ As previously discussed, Read considers Nicholson the chief representative of this advanced symbolic language in art, in his ability to intuit forms that will resonate with viewers:

These works will have a kind of cousinship with the phenomena of nature, but, being moulded not by sun and soil and all the elements which determine the specific forms of natural organisms, but rather by the sense of the artist reacting to a plastic material, they will have an original appearance reflecting nothing but the reality experienced by the individual. If such individuals lived in cells apart, without any communication or mutual influence, their works would be practically incomprehensible to other people. But, living in societies which mould the individual to a cultural pattern, the chances are that each artist's work will enter into a certain community of feeling, and imagination.¹⁵⁴

For Langer, more recent types of non-representational and constructive art had become too extreme in their manipulation of forms for symbolic purposes: 'To carry abstraction as far as possible, and achieve pure form in only the barest conceptual medium, is a logician's business, not a painter or a poet's'.¹⁵⁵ Abstraction, however, by Read's estimation, is not a process of progressive withdrawal from the world of perceivable forms. As he contends, the 'feeling' in abstract works of

¹⁵¹ Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 90. Quoted in Read, *Tenth Muse*, p. 243.

¹⁵² Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, p. 89. Quoted in Read, *Tenth Muse*, p. 243.

¹⁵³ David Goodaway, 'Introduction', in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, pp. 1-12 (p. 4). See Read, *The Forms of Things Unknown*, pp. 11-12. Typescripts of Read's lectures given in 1957 and 1959-1962 at the annual Eranos Tagung in McP HR box 1, fols 1-6, and box 7, fol. 16, lot 55.

¹⁵⁴ Read, *A Coat of Many Colours*, p. 81.

¹⁵⁵ Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, quoted in Read, *Tenth Muse*, p. 249.

art which advance their own arrangement of forms 'is not in any sense referential: it is contained within the work of art, it is self-subsistent'.¹⁵⁶

Read accepts this as the cardinal virtue of abstraction, a more tentative mode of expression through which the 'formative functions of the mind' and those commonly disclosed 'psychological facts' about the human mind may resonate.¹⁵⁷ The 'Vocal Avowals', as Read's 'abstract' poetry, must therefore be read in light of these concurrent pronouncements. Abstract art presented Read with a sense of what poetry could hope to achieve. A poem, like Read's conception of abstract art, is cast as an unfolding entity, one of proliferating unities of space, form, sound and 'sentience', developing into a holistic integrity during the experience of the work itself. 'A renewed interest in symbolism is one of the characteristics of our time', Read states in *The Form of Things Unknown*, and the activity of the critic, and therefore of the reader, was to countenance the changing expectations of engagement with all works of cultural production. As his most developed statement on the influence of Langer's ideas upon his own, the essay 'Art as a Symbolic Language' divides the aesthetic experience into 'two competing systems of communication, one based on *sound* and the other on *sight*'.¹⁵⁸ Although Read places greater emphasis upon the importance of visual comprehension in modern culture, arguing that 'the system based on sight has been underrated and sadly neglected by modern society', it is only the 'full development of both systems' that will educate the perceptual experience to a 'satisfactory' level.¹⁵⁹ To what extent does *Worte sagen aus* demonstrate this internal dilemma?

¹⁵⁶ Read, *Tenth Muse*, p. 249.

¹⁵⁷ Read, *The Forms of Things Unknown*, p. 11.

¹⁵⁸ Read, *The Forms of Things Unknown*, p. 34.

¹⁵⁹ Read, *The Forms of Things Unknown*, p. 34.



Fig. 7. Cover of Herbert Read's *worte sagen aus / vocal avowals*, trans. by Eva van Hoboken (St. Gallen: Tschudy, 1962) with Ben Nicholson's 'sunlon September 60' (1960), relief, Collection Felicitas Vogler.

7. The Restriction of the Word Continues to be Upheld: *worte sagen aus* and abstract mimicry

The 'Vocal Avowals' are most explicitly guided by their emphatic use of sound. In 'fur matrix', we are faced with a compact series of words arranged in short lines, which extend no longer than six syllables. These words have little semantic or paratactic relation, other than their aural affinities. The first stanza deploys a densely wrought mesh of sibilance, assonance and alliterative integrity, as if encircling an utterance as yet out of reach:

lob west weld needle
seed slight blue suck
settle far consecrate
white angle wistful

The slippages between sound, appearance and meaning in language are foregrounded in this bilingual edition. The 26 poems included in the volume *worte sagen aus* are all accompanied by a parallel German translation completed by Eva van Hoboken, and vary greatly in expression, theme

and form, each offering a series of impressions on a given scene, sense, subject or state. Some of these poems, characterised by Read in 'What is a Poem?' as 'manifestation[s] of being', are easier to discern: 'cradle song' is feasibly the hushed burlblings of an adoring parent, 'god dead' is the 'wormeaten whine' of an apocalyptic 'goddam yellow' future, and 'aubade' is familiar in its emergence from 'the womb of night' to the 'early light' of morning. Some offer single subjects, objects, masses or creatures as their guiding logic, such as 'asp', 'bower bird', 'flight', 'the well of life', or 'hulk'. Although these concise conceptual scenes may appear ascetic in their semantic and grammatical privations, set against the modernist neutrality of the 'helvetic-grotesk typeface', they are always concerned with an aspect of the humane, often raised in a triad of incantatory sound, implied physicality and mythical allusion.¹⁶⁰ Others, however, are far more deliberately indistinct, guided only by the discordant collocations that serve as their titles – 'mason bee', 'fur matrix', 'sound look' – and their sonorous exhortations towards a new perception of linguistic meaning. It was two years before Read and Nicholson saw their collaborative effort printed. In a number of epistolary exchanges Read acted as intermediary between Nicholson and the publishers, prompting Nicholson to supply what was required to a skittish Hilty and van Hoboken.¹⁶¹ In a festive letter to Nicholson on 21 December 1962, Read detailed his delight at receiving his copy 'only two days' before: 'I nearly fotgot [*ji*] to mention worte sagen aus which arrived only two days ago. Rather good, don't you think, as a book?'¹⁶² Read confesses he hopes that Nicholson will 'feel that the poems and the drawings match', as he believes they do, again markedly underscoring his desire for the purest reciprocity of text and image.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Read, *worte sagen aus*, pp. 38-39.

¹⁶¹ Herbert Read, letters to Ben Nicholson, dated 28 October 1960 – 21 December 1962, TGA 8717/1/2/3737-3754.

¹⁶² Herbert Read, letter to Ben Nicholson, dated 21 December 1962, TGA 8717/1/2/ 3754, pp. 1-3 (p. 1).

¹⁶³ Read, letter to Nicholson, dated 21 December 1962, TGA 8717/1/2 3754, p. 3.



Fig. 8. Ben Nicholson, '*menalon brown march 62*' (1962), etching, 180 × 177 mm, Collection Felicitas Vogler.

The *vocal avowals* may be forcefully direct, in their excision of syntactical convention, but they are framed by contrition in their searching nature. Read here is a bricoleur: propositional meaning is to be earned, as it is only through an attention to each of the individual elements that one may appreciate the whole. With comparable purpose, Nicholson's fluidly etched lines levitate above a fibrously impressed surface, sharp and evenly applied across this indistinct pictorial field. Blemished with ink spatters and erratic pressures, these squares are not perfected planes but exploratory fields. The roughness of the ink recalls the speculative process of printmaking, as if each of the prints are but one of the many effects of the printing press, repeatedly peeled away from the dextrously etched plate (Figs 8-11). They were known as '*bilder*' in *worte sagen aus*, the German word for 'picture', which must have delighted Read and Nicholson in its aural proximity to the English 'build' or construction. The prints Nicholson chose to supply, however, were of a reticence far more in keeping with the delicately conceived line work produced in his later years by

the placid Lake Maggiore, Switzerland. In the same way in which the poems abide by a shared spatial quality and a common alliterative vocality, so Nicholson's compositions are conversant in their binding irregularly blocked border, allusively outlined forms and coarsely printed surface. The reproductions of the four pictures each fill a glossy paper page inserted to face the English versions of the four poems: 'august 58 (rafael)' was placed to the right of the poem 'bower bird', 'march 62 (menalon brown)' with 'fur matrix', 'march 62 (bullfrog)' with 'cranach' and 'march 62 (with pale blue)' was placed opposite 'flight'.¹⁶⁴ In spite of the select colours alluded to in the titles, the delicately conceived prints are reproduced in a grainy monochrome.

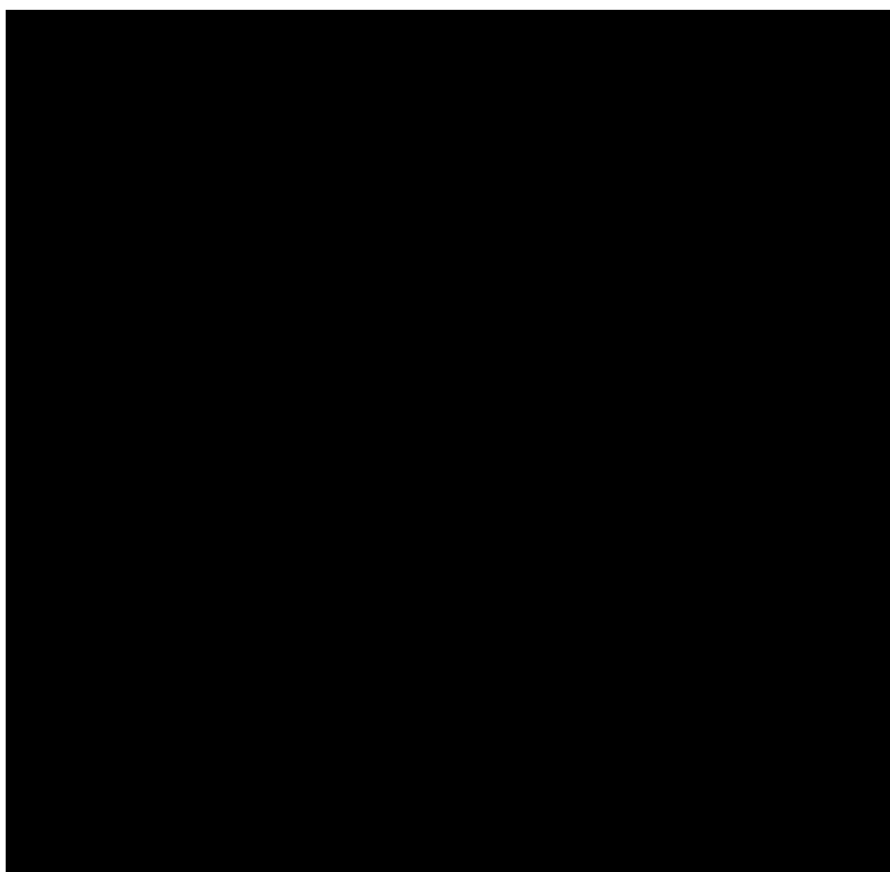


Fig. 9. Ben Nicholson, '*bullfrog march 62*' (1962), etching, 180 × 177 mm, Collection Felicitas Vogler.

¹⁶⁴ There is nothing indicated in the correspondence between Read and Nicholson to suggest that they specified which poems were to be placed beside the pictures, so it is to be assumed that selection lay with the editors.

It swiftly becomes apparent that this collection is an unattributed selection of Read's earlier work, woven between his more recent versions of the *vocal avowals*. The poems 'The White Isle of Leuce', 'Cranach' and 'Early Astir' all appeared in Read's *Collected Poems 1913-1925* (published in 1926), and they are here reproduced almost 40 years later, divorced from their inter-war context with only minor grammatical alterations.¹⁶⁵ For example, in its 1962 version, 'the white isle of leuce' adopts lower case lettering and ellipses as opposed to the capitalisation, full-stops and semi-colon of the 1926 original:

the oars beat off achilles cannot see (7)

The oars beat off; Achilles cannot see (7)

The use of the semi-colon presents a conundrum, presuming a more freighted, indistinct relationship between Achilles and the encroaching sea mists. Where the negative space of the ellipsis in the later printing enacts the unknown vista of the 'dim shore's line', in which the reader too observes a moment of Achilles' sudden *nul*, the earlier use of the semi-colon supplies a reason for Achilles' loss of sight. The ellipsis is itself the blank stare, whereas the earlier version hesitates over the horizon. As the oars beat against the waves and the prows of the boats dip away, the shore recedes, 'Achilles cannot see'. Above, it is uncertain whether Achilles' loss of perception is due to the launching of the vessels, or whether there may be some other tenebrous force at work: the rising 'white sea-birds' (3), the ominous 'black sentinels / of the silent wood' (5-6) or the 'secrets' that crowd that 'sacred isle' (12-13). Read chose to insert these distances into the poem, with three other ellipses intruding upon the moments at which the boats are moving ever further from land:

leave helen to her lover draw away (1)

before the sea is dark frighten with your oars (2)

of battle and love the rowers hear and rest (11)

¹⁶⁵ An earlier version of 'The White Isle of Leuce' was included in John Heath-Stubb's *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Verse* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), p. 278, bypassing this more contemporary rendering of the poem. 'aubade', 'flight', 'melville', 'giovanni di paolo', 'the innocent eye', 'hulk' and as previously mentioned 'tenement', all come from Read's *Poems 1914-1934* (1935). His elegiac 'a song for the spanish anarchists' comes from *Thirty Five Poems* (1940). 'a gift for scardanelli', 'the well of life' and 'kalamis and sonsandra' are taken from a more recent collection, *Moon's Farm and Poems Mostly Elegiac* (1955).

These discrepancies are suggestive of Read's motivation to modify his poetic voice to a late modernist mode, accentuating in a number of obliterative swipes his need to exploit most overtly what visual abstraction could offer to poetry. In Winn's survey of Read's poetic career, the earlier poem 'reads like a graph of the heartbeat of romanticism', rejoicing in 'sex, revelry, beauty and battle', and yet this later version is flatter in form and rhythm, no longer subject to the same swells of sentiment of a grammatically orchestrated rhythm.¹⁶⁶ Although the content of the poem itself is not 'abstract', as the narrative is clearly discernible as the epic of Troy and the labours of Achilles' men. The relationships between component parts of the narrative, the subject and the setting, have been obscured by way of their spatial construction. There is a sense that the later version of 'the white isle of leuce' is attempting to communicate something beyond the scene it relates, or to create a distance between itself and the story it recounts. It becomes a dramatisation of its own internal dilemma, drawing attention to itself by vacating its own sense of a conventional, sequential narrative with these evacuated pauses. In introducing negative space, Read achieves that which he attempts to outline in his 1960 essay 'Art as a Symbolic Language': 'sight' as a 'system of communication', equal in emphasis to that other poetic system, 'sound'.¹⁶⁷ These spaces connect with Read's concluding sentiments in that essay, in his intention to employ 'shock tactics' in order to 'correct an exclusively linguistic mode of thought'.¹⁶⁸ Disrupting the linear flow of language, these spaces enforce the isolation of each word and stress the individuality of sound and aspect.

¹⁶⁶ Winn, 'The Poetry of Herbert Read', in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, p. 27.

¹⁶⁷ Read, *The Forms of Things Unknown*, p. 34.

¹⁶⁸ Read, *The Forms of Things Unknown*, p. 46.



Fig. 10. Ben Nicholson, 'with pale blue march 62' (1962), etching, 180 × 177 mm, Collection Felicitas Vogler.

Of the few critical appraisals of *worte sagen aus*, there is a divergence of opinion regarding the training of their aspect and the meaning behind their abstraction. In the years following their variant publication, the poems flummoxed critical opinion, or rather near silenced it, with the little printed criticism to pass comment separately appointing this new artistic endeavour as of such conflicting complexions as 'surrealism', 'romanticism', 'abstract expressionism' and 'concrete in Britain'.¹⁶⁹ A consensus is only apparent in the acknowledgement of a likeness to visual depiction, whether the quality of that likeness is considered to be successful or not. In the first public critique, the Belgian 'Revue Internationale d'Art Moderne' *Quadrum* published a two-line critical mention of *worte sagen aus* in its 'livres' section towards the back pages of the journal. Read is here cast as an

¹⁶⁹ 'surrealism' is taken from H. W. Häusermann, 'Herbert Read's Surrealist Poetry', *English Studies*, 45.1-6 (23 December 2010), 265-70 (p. 265); 'romanticism' is in Winn, 'The Poetry of Herbert Read', in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, p. 26; 'abstract expressionism' is in King, *The Last Modern*, p. 291; 'concrete in Britain' in Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Chronology', in *Between Poetry and Painting*, ed. by Jasia Reichardt (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1965), n.p.

‘inventor of poetic images and a master of written speech’, tidily summarising Read’s desired conflation of sight and sound:

Gedichte, english und deutsch, est le sous-titre de ce plaisant volume qui a paru dans la série des Quadrat-Bücher.

Il présente H. Read comme l’inventeur d’images poétiques et un maître de la parole écrite.¹⁷⁰

Intriguingly, the few critical commentaries liken the poems to movements within the visual arts or as pertaining to Read’s visual sensitivity. H. W. Häusermann discusses the poems in terms of their ‘purely surrealist’ aspect.¹⁷¹ Read’s poetry of a ‘surrealist kind’ recalls his earlier ‘metaphysical’ or ‘Imagist’ inspiration, conforming respectively to ‘strong emotions and sense impressions’ or to a ‘doctrine of objectivity...which accords with Read’s naturally restrained temperament’.¹⁷² The poems of the ‘third kind’ are noted by Häusermann to have entered Read’s poetic practice from ‘about 1935’, but are of a strain which continued long after the waning of the ‘neo-romantic movement’ that was British Surrealism, which he deems instrumental to Read’s self-imposed ‘literary exile’ following World War II. It is the ‘fourteen poems’ of *worte sagen aus* that are his ‘purely surrealist’ conceptions, however, as the ‘language is grammarless’ and as they are assumed to have been ‘composed in a state of momentary “trance”’.¹⁷³ Häusermann clearly here has in mind Breton’s practice of ‘pure psychic automatism’, which lay at the heart of the surrealist creationary act. No structure or structuring by the conscious mind is assumed, nor an attempt to reduce poetry to its baldest concepts, but a purely rendered expression of the irrational impulses, an outpouring of inner sentiment and sense impressions.

¹⁷⁰ J. P. Hodin, ‘Livres: Worte sagen aus’, *Quadrum*, 16 (1964), 169. Two further reviews appeared from Swiss-German sources: The St. Gallen Swiss-German newspaper *St Galler Tagblatt* featured a review on 28 May 1963 and the Swiss-German newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* printed a review by H. W. Häusermann on 25 August 1963.

¹⁷¹ Häusermann, ‘Herbert Read’s Surrealist Poetry’, 265.

¹⁷² Häusermann, ‘Herbert Read’s Surrealist Poetry’, 265.

¹⁷³ Häusermann, ‘Herbert Read’s Surrealist Poetry’, 265.

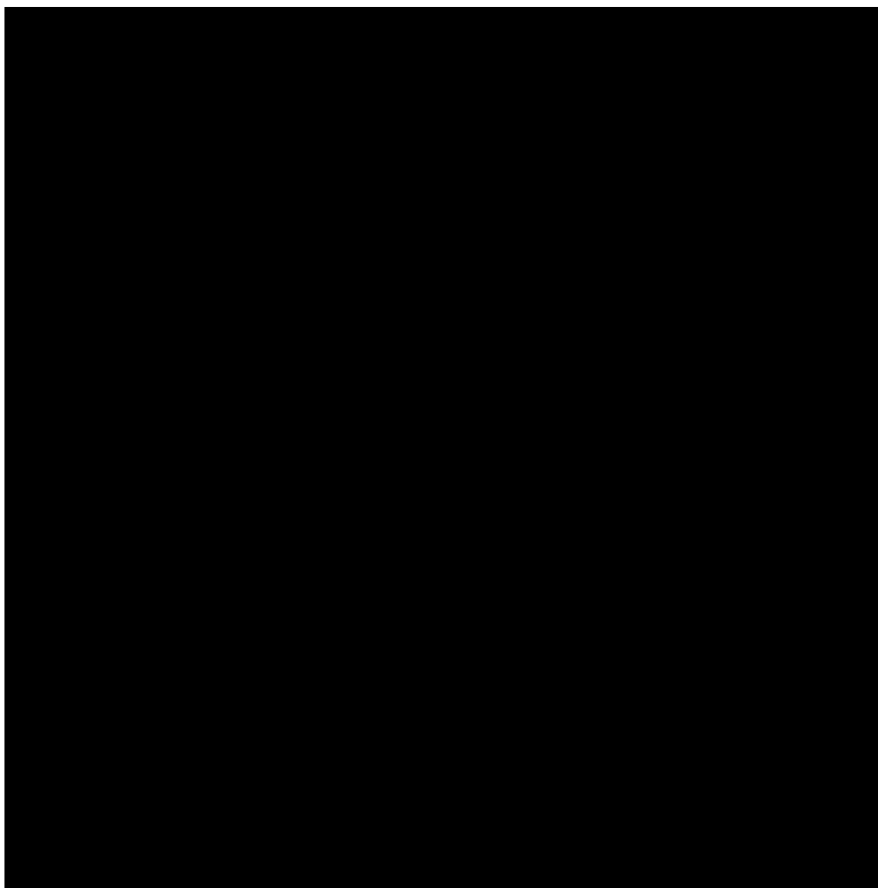


Fig. 11. Ben Nicholson, '*rafael august 58*' (1958), etching, 180 × 177 mm, Collection Felicitas Vogler.

By way of concluding his formal appreciation of these poems, Häusermann offers a 'few practical rules' to aid in their reading:

The motif of a poem is always given by the first line, the rest grows organically from it. The sequence of words follows no grammatical order. Thus an adjective does not qualify the noun it precedes in the usual attributive relationship. Where nouns, adjectives and verbs are not related grammatically, each word produces its own cluster of associations. These clusters of ideas or images are ordered in the reader's mind to form the total experience of the poem. There are certain recurrent symbols which help in the process of ordering, such as yellow or orange colours signifying fertility, black signifying death, water signifying life, and the obvious sexual symbols. Words with Christian associations usually denote a negative, life-denying quality. The prime factor, however, in ordering the verbal raw material of which the poems are composed is the musical control which carries the initial inspiration onwards and perhaps stimulates in both poet and reader the process of association. A close study of Read's versification and of the phonetic texture of his lines proves his possession of what Coleridge considered the essential gift of a poet, the sense of musical delight.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ Häusermann, 'Herbert Read's Surrealist Poetry', 270.

Although Häusermann's attentive remarks provide a degree of insight into the nature of the poems – particularly in his instructive 'clusters of ideas or images' that one should expect to 'form the total experience of the poem' – there is little here that expedites the experience of reading the poems themselves. Many of his approximate claims could be made of any of Read's poems, with the same ease of application. The symbolic use of colour is endemic to Read's felt projections of a scene: the prevalence of 'black' and 'red' throughout *Naked Warriors* (1919) is indicative of the ashen despair and 'cankered' desolation of war, 'golden', 'green' and 'white' palliate the 'ragged ridge of things' in Read's metaphysical *Mutations of the Phoenix* (1923), 'scarlet banners', 'feathery snow' and 'glowing light' intensify the politics of Read's elegiac poem 'The Death of Kropotkin'. One may surmise from Häusermann's sense that Read's use of language is 'raw' is the result of a lack of visible cohesion and a dearth of syntactical associations, which also led Häusermann to allude to its dreamlike incarnations, creating a structure that only becomes apparent in the voicing of the poems. Ralph J. Mills found Read's 'recent verbal experiments' so off-putting in their extremity of expression that they were the 'only pieces' in Read's entire poetic oeuvre for which he had no interest, and C. B. Cox, in a feature for *The Spectator* on the painterly nature of recently published poetry by Anne Halley, Robert Graves, Randall Jarrell, Read, Louis Simpson and Charles Tomlinson, dismissed the *vocal avowals* as mere 'games with words'.¹⁷⁵ Read's biographer James King is similarly hostile, qualifying the poems as 'abstract expressionist' and 'minimalist' in a derisory account of their composition in 1959.¹⁷⁶ As 'uneasy efforts to incorporate abstract expressionism into verbal form', these poems were desperate attempts to 'find his bearings' in a poetic terrain he no longer understood and to 'get himself back on the track of the then prevalent modernisms'.¹⁷⁷ King suggests that this is accomplished, albeit weakly, through the 'few touches of colour and the violence of its verbs', as 'honourable failures' that do not succeed in surmounting their awkward textual constraints. King is not even swayed by the musicality of the verse. Equating Read's youthful experiments with Vorticist visual and poetic expression, King suggests that a similar derivative exchange was here taking place in an ill-advised response to 'the vigour of artists like

¹⁷⁵ Ralph J. Mills, 'Herbert Read as Poet: *Collected Poems* by Herbert Read', *Poetry*, 110.1 (April 1967), 45-47 (p. 46); C. B. Cox, 'The Painter's Eye' *The Spectator*, 7195 (20 May 1966), 22-23 (p. 23).

¹⁷⁶ King, *The Last Modern*, pp. 290, 304.

¹⁷⁷ King, *The Last Modern*, pp. 290-91.

Rothko and De Kooning'.¹⁷⁸ However, by the 1960s, Read's eye was as closely trained upon a continental fashioning of the movement, art informel, as it was upon American abstract expressionism.¹⁷⁹ His final revised version of the 'Vocal Avowals' in 1966 made this influence evident through one dedication in particular.

8. Ekphrasis and the 'Vocal Avowals': the revisions of 1966

The final time the 'Vocal Avowals' appeared, in a discrete concluding section of Read's *Collected Poems* (1966), they were subtitled 'Experiments' and prefaced with a comment from the *Vie de Mallarmé* by Henri Mondor, boldly inscribed in the original French:

Est-ce que exact, *demande Degas à Mallarmé*, que dans l'un de vos sonnets, les meilleurs de vos exegetes voient, les un de crépuscule, d'autres une aurore, les autres l'absolu? Quand ils ont sollicité du Maître le mot de l'énigme, ne leur avez-vous pas répondu: c'est ma commode! – ¹⁸⁰

This playful appropriation of the fallibility of the reader, when faced with the wilful absurdity of the writer, is offered by Read as a cautionary tale in the encounter with his 'Experiments'. The extent to which these poems are made admissible in Read's oeuvre by their headline nature as 'Experiments' is questionable. Read again introduces both the poet (Mallarmé) and the painter (Degas) in his epigraph, aligning the ensuing verses to the historic discourse that exists between poetry and painting, and the analogical relationship between the two encapsulated in the phrase *ut pictura poesis*.¹⁸¹ Language is again posited as the more fallible of the two, the more abused, the more subject to folly. Although the poems contained in this selection are less explicitly linked to or

¹⁷⁸ King, *The Last Modern*, p. 291.

¹⁷⁹ The movements are differentiated in *A Concise History of Modern Painting* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1959).

¹⁸⁰ Read, *Collected Poems*, p. 261. Author's translation: 'Is it correct, asked Degas of Mallarmé, that your best scholars see in one of your sonnets the following; one the twilight, the other the dawn, and another the absolute? When they begged for the key to the enigma laid down by their Master, did you not answer them, it is my prerogative!'

¹⁸¹ 'as is painting, so is poetry': the history of the phrase can be found in Alex Preminger, ed., *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 288.

corroborated by the visual arts than those first presented in *Worte sagen aus*, there is here a marked point of difference from their manifestations in *Encounter*. Due to the furtive moments of connection made to contemporary artists and to those immediately recognisable themes within art history, the poems acknowledge their submersion within wider cultural practice.

The opening poem in the 1966 selection is ‘basic black’, a short potent poem that had previously appeared in 1962.¹⁸² In this printing, Read has added a dedication ‘(to alberto burri)’, the Italian abstract painter:

basic black

(to alberto burri)

cry crew cry memory florida
 masterly most crimson silt
 shy masculine myrtle endeavour
 sever christ cavalier host
 ghost gonads sob linger
 alleys lost singular wing
 veins of love never ever cease
 keep crestfallen thy cruise
 dastard sap till sessions eventual
 mortal leman entrance dry
 wild hollow winter bruises
 droop vocal illyrian avowals
 kiss merciful o homily thy kneel
 england vesicles of delight
 lost ever ever ever white pyx
 residues of lust ah wax lack¹⁸³

The poem first appears to resist easy comprehension, and is instead suggestive of the ways in which a reader may derive meaning from a poem that is comprised of the evacuated spaces between objects and states of being. In the lack of definite articles and the non-referentiality of the verbs, most of which are imperative but aimed at multiple objects, the quality of syntactical linkage is here implied but rarely made clear. The rich sonic texture demands vocalisation in the insistence of its alliterative and repetitive patterning. ‘basic black’ may be as compact as a Meredithian sonnet,

¹⁸² Read, *Worte sagen aus*, p. 14.

¹⁸³ Read, *Collected Poems*, p. 263.

marshalled into its short 16 lines and near equivalence of line length, yet it throws off any affiliation with recognisable poetic form in its lack of conventional rhyme scheme, contraction of grammatical structures and absence of mellifluous regularity in syllabic patterning. The patchiness of sound, in sudden alliterative shifts and a sibilant strain throughout which emphatically and finally distorts into the 'x's of 'pyx' and 'wax', is not labyrinthine in its delineation of possible outcomes, but mimics the patchiness of any proposed propositional meaning. Revealing the use of 'black' in its many applications, in all its resplendent shifting shades and forms, this complex allusive mesh of phrases, nouns and verbs is a counterpoint to the heading, as 'basic'. It is an attempt to bring into focus the semiotic richness of Alberto Burri's assemblages.

At the time of writing 'basic black', Read was putting together his comprehensive modern chronology, *A Concise History of Modern Painting* (1959), in which *Sacco IV* (1954) is one of the final paintings to be reproduced as illustration (Fig. 12).¹⁸⁴ Burri's assemblage had first been exhibited in England at the Artists International Association (A.I.A.) Gallery in London in 1957, at the 'Pictures without Paint' exhibition curated by painters Gillian Ayres and Adrian Heath. Burlap sacking, cotton, vinavil glue, silk and impasto paint on black cotton backing: faced with the charge of rejuvenating avant-garde practice by contending with the horrors of the war-torn present, it was in Rome and under the influence of the new French Art Informel school that Alberto Burri began to produce many multiple reiterations of his *Sacchi*. Read wrote perceptively of Burri in 1960:

every patch in the sacking, every gaping wound-like hole, the charred edges and the wounded cicatrices, reveal the raw sensibility of an artist outraged by the hypocrisy of a society that presumes to speak of beauty, tradition, humanism, justice and other fine virtues, and is at the same time willing to contemplate the mass destruction of the human race.¹⁸⁵

As one scans Burri's thickly composed surfaces, in which viscous globes of red paint and plastic protrude from the dark void beneath, in which holes are ripped, torched and slashed into the burlap 'skin' lain across the board, one notes not only the radical use of found and disfigured material, not simply the ways in which this material behaves in the coercion of elements (observable brush marks, daubed paint, reproducible size of canvas) as formative of modern painting, but also senses

¹⁸⁴ Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting*, p. 378.

¹⁸⁵ Herbert Read, 'Alberto Burri', *The Observer*, 3 October 1960, p. 20.

that a new kind of observation is required. It is an eye keen to decipher the existential implications of the degraded materials; the rough patches, sagging needlework and unravelling twine are symbolic of a society, and the artist as product of that society, in dissimulation.



Fig. 12. Alberto Burri, 'Sacco IV' (1954), mixed media, 114cm x 76cm, Musée d'Art moderne et contemporain, Toulouse, Photo (C) RMN-Grand Palais / Michèle Bellot.

A similar acuity of scansion is required of 'basic black'. As we track the woven lines in the sacking across Burri's pictorial plane, so too do we observe a similarly 'raw sensibility' in Read's frictive use of language and sound. Pitfalls are placed at points at which sonic emphasis suddenly diverges from an established or assumed patterning, or converges in alliterative emphases: 'keep crestfallen thy cruise'.¹⁸⁶ There's a raggedness to the line endings, primarily induced through a thrumming of stresses placed on either the penultimate or final syllable of a line, as a means beyond that of their jagged visual affectation. Read's 'basic black' could be a translation of Burri's term *Nero*, a word which was to title many of his thickly painted black compositions of this period. It is problematic, however, to conceive of Read's poem as irrevocably linked to the corroded *Sacchi*, as if it is solely in ekphrastic debt to that of Burri's precariously assembled and unravelling boards, in

¹⁸⁶ In the earlier 1962 printing, the line had one further insistence upon the harder 'k' sound with the repetition of 'keep': 'keep keep crestfallen thy cruise'; Read, *worte sagen aus*, p. 14.

which the reading is facilitated by an established familiarity with the nature of relief work or assemblage in contemporary art, as much as it is informed by the rich sonic texture of the poem. A number of these poems contain explicit references to named contemporary artists, others allude to a wider sense of current artistic practice and to those immediately recognisable themes within art history, while some, such as 'asp', adopt a significant spatial arrangement derived from the earlier experiments of Mallarmé and Guillaume Apollinaire. What begins to emerge at this time in Read's aesthetic discourse is a poet that is attracted to the mental processes that enable abstract figuration, as opposed to what he ambitiously conceived upon their first publication as an imitation of abstract painting in a verbal form. The ways in which poems visibly and thematically evince their relationship with the visual arts proffers two key considerations: to what extent is Read's new poetic language informed by his involvement with the fine arts, and to what extent is it modified by his desire to express new modes of individual experience through language?



Fig. 13. 'with apologies to the original!', Herbert Read, drawing of an unattributed Ben Nicholson relief, letter to Ben Nicholson, n.d. c.1963, TGA 8717/1/2, 3646-3798.

9. 'I just need a fiction like you to work out ideas in front of – no?': Towards a New Mode of Expression¹⁸⁷

Read's commitment to a new form of contemporary display in Britain found its greatest impetus in the years following the Second World War, as one of the founding members of a new centre for the living arts. Read's prognoses on the influence of art and design upon society, and the theory and reception of the arts in education, had gathered traction in the years preceding the war with *Art and Society* (1937), in which he stressed that the greatest art of the past emerged from communal societies and occasions. This was followed in 1943 with his seminal *Education Through Art*, which placed greater emphasis upon the productivity encouraged by collective sites of mutual endeavour.¹⁸⁸ Instantly an 'international classic', Read here sets down his fundamental thesis: 'art should be the basis of education [...] The aim of education is the creation of artists – of people efficient in the various modes of expression'.¹⁸⁹ A new 'Institute of Contemporary Arts' was proposed as a way of addressing this pedagogical gap, and as the minutes of the earliest meetings between the founding committee highlight, Read was most concerned with the 'inter-arts' element of the proposal.¹⁹⁰ Recommending an interdisciplinary 'laboratory' rather than a 'museum', 'centre' or 'society', the new space would be a meeting point between 'painting and sculpture, of architecture and music, of theatre and film' which would encourage the meeting and mutual inspiration of performance, technology and the plastic arts.¹⁹¹

The exhibition scene in London throughout the years immediately following the war was complex, pressured by the lack of adequate funding for art exhibitions, the 'chancy business' and curatorial diplomacy required in the scant public and private loans of artworks, the additional restrictions placed on loans from abroad (which was to last until 1954), as well as the shortage of appropriate exhibition spaces and the efficacy of cross-cultural and international exchange, all of

¹⁸⁷ Dom Sylvester Houédard, letter to Herbert Read, dated 19 March 1964, BLL MS 20c box 6B, pp. 1-2 (p. 2).

¹⁸⁸ John S. Keel, 'Herbert Read on Education Through Art', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 3.4 (1969), 47-58 (p. 47).

¹⁸⁹ Herbert Read, *Education Through Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1943), p. 11.

¹⁹⁰ Minutes of Meeting, 'Institute of Contemporary Arts', 22 July 1947, TGA 955.1.1.1, 60, pp. 1-3 (p. 1).

¹⁹¹ Minutes of Meeting, 'Museum of Modern Art Scheme', 30 January 1946, TGA 955.1.1.1, pp.1-6 (p. 2).

which hindered the staging of satisfactory exhibitions.¹⁹² Announced in a letter to *The Times* printed on 26 July 1947, Read determined that the ‘aimless and sporadic character of artistic activities in our capital’ had given rise to the consumer driven pedagogy of the ‘B.B.C and various educational bodies’. Therefore, Read proposed a return to the ‘producer’: ‘What is needed is some centre where artists of all kinds can meet with a cooperative intention, and where their activities can be presented to a public ready to encourage art in those preliminary stages of experiment which are so vital for its development’.¹⁹³ Most importantly it would stake out a ‘common ground for a progressive movement in the arts’, bringing together ‘artists of all kinds’ to engage in ‘definite projects’. It therefore not only encouraged collaboration and a shared vision, but also a commitment to the ‘new’, to ‘experiment’ and to the fundamental process of creation. This new museum would be an extension of Read’s line of inquiry and become a place in which his social precepts may be enacted, with the potential as a site in which all ‘various modes of expression’ may find confluence: ‘We would be concerned not with the achievements of art, but with the stimulation of production. It would bring together all types of artists – poets, painters, film producers – to stimulate each other’.¹⁹⁴

The period following the Second World War is notable for the number of writings produced by Read that concentrated upon the interplay between the arts, particularly art and literature: ‘The Poetry and Prose of Painting’, ‘The Nature of Poetry: Organic and Abstract Form’, ‘Art as a Symbolic Language’, ‘The Problem of the Zeitgeist’, essays on the paintings of D. H. Lawrence, the poetry of Le Corbusier, the poetry and sculpture of Jean (Hans) Arp, the poems and aphorisms of artist Jan Le Witt. He also provided the introductions to a number of books that sought to illuminate Eastern practices in pictographic language: petitioning for the bearing of calligraphic marks on modern art in *Chinese Calligraphy* (1954) by Chiang Lee, differentiating the ‘Zen spirit in art’ of ‘One in All and All in One’ from Western abstraction in his introduction for

¹⁹² Andrew Stephenson, ‘Painting and Sculpture of a Decade: ’54 – ’64 Revisited’, in *British Art in the Cultural Field, 1939-69*, ed. by Lisa Tickner and David Peters Corbett (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 223-243 (p. 224).

¹⁹³ Herbert Read, ‘Contemporary Arts’, *The Times* (26 June 1947), p. 5. Additional replica letters were sent to *The Listener*, *Tribune*, *Architectural Journal* and *Architects’ and Builders’ News*.

¹⁹⁴ Minutes of Meeting, ‘Museum of Modern Art Scheme’, dated 30 January 1946, TGA 955.1.1.1, pp.1-6 (p. 2).

Frederic Spiegelberg's *Zen, Rocks, and Waters* (1962), and the posthumously printed commentary on the evocative ink drawings of the leading Zen thinker and abbot Sengai, in *Sengai, the Zen Master* (1971) by Daisetz T. Suzuki.¹⁹⁵ A 'whole generation', claimed A.D. Nuttall, was taught to repress its natural engagement with mimetic painting.¹⁹⁶ Guided by a distaste for the 'old English habit of anecdotage in paint', Read sought to nurture a heightened awareness of contemporary eyes and attitudes towards an invigorated 'critical attention' with the 'aesthetic entity' itself.¹⁹⁷ The 'Vocal Avowals' were Read's opportunity to engage with the full aesthetic implications of his creative work.

The most perceptible point of convergence in the 'sympathetic relationship' between the poetry and painting of Read and Nicholson is in this mutual feeling for the 'pure' intuitive experience of the art object: where Nicholson vouches for the painting as becoming a 'part of living', so Read maintains a poem as a 'manifestation of being'. Both conceive of a 'superficial explanation' or 'superficial appeal' lingering behind abstract art, in the temptation to 'retreat into a world of beauty, expressed in rhythmical lines and harmonious colours, far from the madding crowd of visual impressions that assault our sensibilities', but determine the correction of that inclination to be within the founding of a 'greater consciousness'.¹⁹⁸ Read surmises that the 'modern movement has discovered the essential dialectical character of art: the unity that is achieved by resolving contradictions', as had been outlined by Piet Mondrian in his musical analogy for modern art as of 'opposed forces', in which no one longer dances to the music, but against the music.¹⁹⁹ Nicholson acknowledges that this may appear to enforce the charge of decadence against abstract art, of the 'withdrawal of the artist from reality (into an "ivory tower")', though he casts this heightened artistic awareness as 'powerful, unlimited and universal, accessible to every

¹⁹⁵ Chiang Lee, *Chinese Calligraphy: An Introduction to its Aesthetic and Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954); Herbert Read, 'Introduction' in Frederic Spiegelberg, *Zen, Rocks, and Waters* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1962), pp. 7-16; Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Sengai, the Zen Master*, ed. by Eva van Hoboken (London: Faber & Faber, 1971).

¹⁹⁶ A.D. Nuttall, *A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 83.

¹⁹⁷ Read, *Tenth Muse*, p. 13.

¹⁹⁸ Read's 'superficial explanation' is taken from 'Social Significance of Abstract Art', in *A Letter to a Young Painter* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1962), (repr. as 'The Nature of Abstract Art', in *Selected Writings in Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), pp. 283-93 (p. 238)); Nicholson's 'superficial appeal' is taken from 'Notes on Abstract Art', p. 25.

¹⁹⁹ Read, 'The Nature of Abstract Art', p. 239.

individual in that it is 'felt subconsciously'.²⁰⁰ The power to create such contemplative 'space' heralds the breach made by art into 'common every-day life', and Nicholson cites the evidence of this in 'its common spirit with and influence on many things like contemporary architecture, aeroplanes, cars, refrigerators, typography, publicity, electric torches, lipstick holders, etc.'. ²⁰¹ To approach it 'intellectually', as opposed to within common experience, is to diminish the effervescent life-point of the painting, alive in the dancing unity of its planes, forms and colours'.²⁰²

This absolutist attitude towards the character of abstraction was the most problematic aspect of Read's aesthetic philosophy, particularly for the London-based Independent Group of artists and writers, such as Lawrence Alloway, Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi.²⁰³ Read made no specific claims about the character of his poetic 'experiments', only suggesting that they are 'abstract', cultivating his own brand of abstraction of a peculiar, reflexive candour. As highlighted in his *Encounter* epigraph, 'Notes for a Preface', the poems themselves are self-regarding: abiding by their own observant manifesto and heedful of their own 'reverberations'. His language calls attention to its own inadequacy as that which is not merely the image of the thing, in its distance from common meaning, but the sound of the image of the thing, in its perfected tonality. Therefore, 'verifiable meaning' is anterior to, and at several removes from, the subject or object itself, ever refracted through versions of experiences of given realities. Impelled by his shifting philosophical ideas concerning the 'proper tools of perception', as outlined in the two sequentially printed collections of essays *The Tenth Muse* (1957) and *The Forms of Things Unknown* (1960), Read's poems enact his aesthetic pursuit towards a 'new reality'. Revolutionary as they may be when observed within the confines of Read's own lyrical pursuits, the 'Vocal Avowals' remain as literary exercises that uphold the formal imprint of a 'poem'. What is remarkable about the poems is that they repeatedly return to Read's question, 'What is a Poem?', opening poetry up from within the literary establishment to all its sensorial aspects. It was a question that prompted different answers and results, observed throughout the revisions made to this shifting sequence that occupied the

²⁰⁰ Nicholson, 'Notes on Abstract Art', p. 23.

²⁰¹ Nicholson, 'Notes on Abstract Art', p. 23.

²⁰² Nicholson, 'Notes on Abstract Art', p. 26.

²⁰³ Richard Hamilton commented that if 'there was one binding spirit amongst the people at the Independent Group, it was a distaste for Herbert Read's attitudes', in *Fathers of Pop*, dir. by Reyner Banham and Julian Cooper (Miranda Films, 1979).

final decade of Read's life. They emerged only a few years before poets such as Ian Hamilton Finlay, Dom Sylvester Houédard, Kenelm Cox, Bob Cobbing and Edward Morgan were to create their visual and verbal concretions, and to cite the 'vocal avowals' as forebear.²⁰⁴ Offered as a conclusion to Read's lyric evolution, this sequence of poems must be considered the result of a life's rumination on the work of both art and letters.

²⁰⁴ Houédard, 'Chronology', *Between Poetry and Painting*, n.p.

Chapter Two

A New Cohesive Element: Abstract Art, the Abolition of Syntax and Ian Hamilton Finlay

“The artist has this disadvantage:
he has no equivalent of the word
“etc.””
(Ian Hamilton Finlay)¹

1. Between Poetry and Painting: A Concrete Revolution

In the later half of 1963, Dom Sylvester Houédard struck up a sporadic correspondence with Herbert Read.² A Benedictine monk within the community at Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire, Houédard, or ‘dsh’ as he was known, had swiftly become one of the leading theorists of concrete poetry and one of the most exceptional practitioners of typewriter art – producing intricate typewritten documents described by Edwin Morgan as ‘typestracts’.³ Founding the concrete poetry collective Gloup & Woup with fellow poets John Furnival and Kenelm Cox, Houédard was at the ‘edgemost edges of those rarefied scenes’, occupying a realm between visual poetry, sound poetry, fine art, experimental performance and improvised music.⁴ In the earliest letter addressed to Houédard contained within Read’s personal papers, dated 13 October 1963, Read is warm and receptive to the possibilities offered by the ‘new poetry’, replying to a missive that had clearly introduced the French journal *les lettres* and those who

¹ Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Table Talk of Ian Hamilton Finlay* (Mission BC: Barbarian Press, 1985), p. 5.

² Letters between Read and Houédard can be found in the following archival collections: BLL BC MS 20c; Victoria, British Columbia, McPherson Library (McP), Sir Herbert Edward Read fonds, CA UVICARCH SC100; Manchester, John Rylands Library, Dom Sylvester Houédard Papers.

³ ‘Typestracts’ fused the words ‘type’ and ‘abstract’; Houédard refers to the label in ‘Statement’, *Between Poetry and Painting*, ed. by Jasia Reichardt (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1965), pp. 51-55 (p. 53).

⁴ Charles Verey, ‘Dom Sylvester’s “Wider Ecumenism”: Considered Words, Explosive Meaning’, in *Notes from the Cosmic Typewriter: The Life and Work of Dom Sylvester Houédard*, ed. by Nicola Simpson (London: Occasional Papers, 2012), pp. 25-30 (p. 25).

comprised its corroborative ‘movement’.⁵ With Read’s agreement, Houédard organised the dispatch of *les lettres* no. 29 (1962) to Stonegrave, the number of the magazine in which Garnier’s movement *Spatialisme* ‘was launched’.⁶ Some weeks later, Read claimed he had ‘been reading it and the other documents you sent with great interest’, but remained unconvinced by the means of poetic ‘display’:

I sometimes feel that the theory is better than the practice, but no doubt the poèmes à dire would sound much better if read in french. I cannot see words in their individuality and interrelation without puzzling about their meaning. I am supposed to be excited by the architecture of the words, but ‘excited’ is a strong word. However, I’m sure there’s something in it: I wait for that something to be revealed.⁷

Garnier’s ‘poèmes à dire’ and ‘poèmes à voir’, interred within the multiple separate centrefolds of the magazine, are ‘poems to say’ and ‘poems to see’, dramatizing both the space of the page and the act of reading. The former are composed of evolving repetitions and rhymes of familiar nouns, ‘water’, ‘summer’, ‘road’, in which meaning is to be accrued from the insistence of evocative sound patterning, such as the sibilance of ‘Les Eaux’; whereas the latter enact a more radical remove from the conventions of printed verse, diffusing words into their constituent syllables, morphemes or letters to form acrostics, static fields or splintered columns across double-page spreads. The ‘poèmes à voir’ highlight their own visual emphases: words in the poem ‘Violence’ (Fig. 14) are atomised into their constituent letters to spell ‘Atome’, and ‘Composition’ (Fig. 15) is artfully composed of the lexicon of colour distributed at select points across the page. Read’s uncertainty is leveled at the priority given to the ‘architecture’ of language over that of literary expressiveness.⁸ Within Read’s late ‘abstract poetry’ the stanza as

⁵ With thanks to Abbot Francis Baird for providing access to this correspondence. Herbert Read, letter to Dom Sylvester Houédard, dated 13 October 1963, Prinknash Abbey (PA), Gloucestershire, The papers of Dom Sylvester Houédard, MS 13101963, pp. 1-2 (p. 1).

⁶ *Les Lettres* no. 29 is cited as the starting point of the movement by Mary Ellen Solt, ‘A World Look at Concrete Poetry’, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, pp. 6-66 (p. 32). Although a ‘Manifeste’ is included in no. 29, Garnier’s ‘spatialism’ was not officially named until his ‘plan pilote fondant le Spatialisme’, *les lettres: poésie nouvelle*, 31 (Paris: Editions André Silvaire, 1963), 1-5.

⁷ Herbert Read, letter to Dom Sylvester Houédard, dated 9 November 1963, PA MS, p. 1.

⁸ In spite of his initial reservations, Read later became one of the signatories of the ‘Position 1 du mouvement international’ in *les lettres: poésie nouvelle*, 32 (Paris: Editions André Silvaire, 1964), 3-4. The other U.K. based signatories were Ian Hamilton Finlay, John Furnival, Anselm Hollo, Dom Sylvester Houédard and Edwin Morgan.

compositional device remains intact, whereas Garnier construed an epistemological dilemma at the scale of the word itself, considering each individual lexical unit as an ‘abstract painting’:

Chaque mot est une peinture abstraite.
Une surface. Un volume.
Surface sur la page. Volume dans la voix.⁹

Each word is ‘an abstract painting’ in the sense of its withdrawal from a coherent system of meaning, an ‘object’ to be perceived rather than read, and made anew in each vocal, spatial or visual occurrence. Garnier sees words as objects, composed of a surface aspect around which a great many undeveloped meanings proliferate. A ‘spiral of projections’, every word presents its own complex of sounds, letters, images, etymology(ies), and definitions to the mind of the reader, opening out many possible readings and vocalisations. Garnier repeatedly uses the word ‘scintillate’, as both verb and adjective, to describe the nature of this new interpretative endeavour.¹⁰ Charged with an illuminated energy, freed from the prescriptive ‘langues-robots’ of commercial and political discourses, words are spectacularised within Garnier’s literary universe.¹¹ Attentive to man’s sense of himself as a cosmic being in a burgeoning space age, Garnier asks whether the poet can continue to uphold the orthodoxy of syntax: ‘Once we lived safely beneath our stratum of air. Now we are waves spouting in the cosmos. How can we expect our words to remain wrapped up in the atmosphere of the sentence?’¹²

⁹ Pierre Garnier, ‘Manifeste pour une poésie nouvelle, visuelle et phonique’, *les lettres*, 29 (Paris: Editions André Silvaire, 1963), 1-8 (p. 4). Extracts trans. by Stephen Bann for ‘Pierre Garnier’, *Image Kinetic Art: Concrete Poetry*, 2 (1964), 11.

¹⁰ Garnier, ‘Manifeste pour une poésie nouvelle, visuelle et phonique’, 4.

¹¹ See Garnier, ‘Position 1 du mouvement international’, 1-5.

¹² Garnier, quoted in Solt, ‘France’, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, p. 32.



Fig. 14. Pierre Garnier, 'Violence', *les lettres*, 29 (Paris: Editions André Silvaire, 1963), i-xv (p. xiii).

In the wake of Dadaist and Lettrist experimentation, Garnier produced almost all of his theoretical exposition of Spatialism over a two-year period from late 1962-1964, across five editions of the journal. Collaborating with his wife, the poet Ilse Garnier, he worked to create an expanded sense of the agency of language, the agency of sound, the agency of the page, and the agency of self:

Si le poème a changé
C'est qui j'ai changé
C'est que tous nous avons changé
C'est que l'univers a changé¹³

The work of poetry becomes the art of wider action, from recitation to constellation, from phrase to structure, from song to the centre of energy.¹⁴ Several distinct groups and authors, long isolated from one another but conscious of a common 'life which is both functional and cosmic' – what Garnier defines as the metamorphosis made possible at the point of surpassing

¹³ Garnier, 'Position I du Mouvement International', 1: 'If the poem has changed | It is that I have changed | It is that we all have changed | It is that the universe has changed'. All translations from *les lettres* are author's own.

¹⁴ Garnier, 'Position I du Mouvement International', 1.

the general ‘existential fear’ – were concurrently engaged in ‘research into the sense of a poetry that could be contained under the general title of Spatial’.¹⁵ Dictated primarily by ‘theories of time, of structure, of energy’, its point of origin or individual authorship is no longer vital. As a literary mode increasingly attentive to the material properties of language, this ‘new poetry’ turned to abstraction, an artistic mode similarly attentive to the qualities of its medium, to provide a useful critical apparatus by which it might be understood.

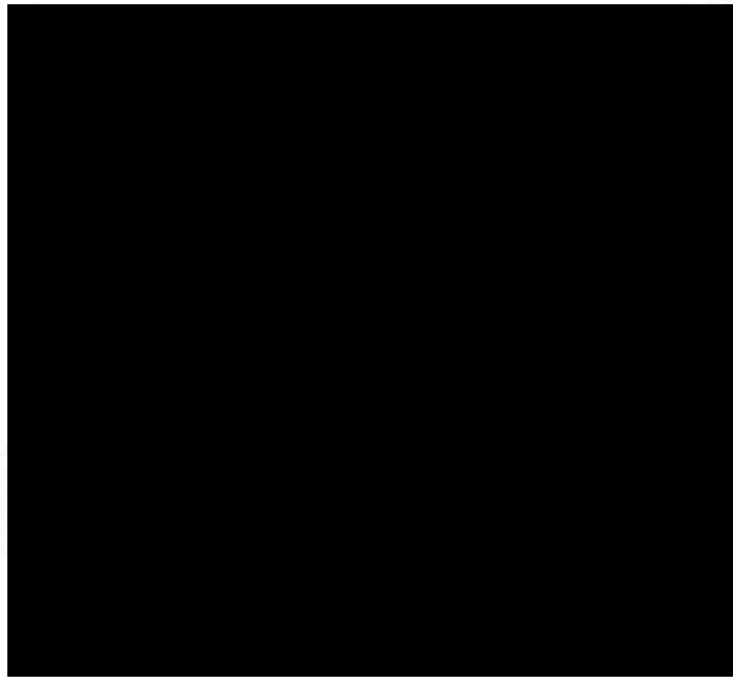


Fig. 15. Pierre Garnier, ‘Composition’, *les lettres*, 29 (Paris: Editions André Silvaire, 1963), i-xv (p. xi).

Consensus had gathered around the name ‘concrete’ in reference to a literary practice that acknowledged the non-representational faculties of language, alluding to the structural directives

¹⁵ Garnier, ‘Position I du Mouvement International’, 1.

proposed by Concrete Art in 1930.¹⁶ Garnier's 'plan pilote', published in a following anthology number of *les lettres* entitled 'Poésie Nouvelle', was a revised edition of the 'pilot plan for concrete poetry' produced by the Brazilian founders of concrete poetry in 1958.¹⁷ The poem – whether kinetic, optic or phonetic – was to take its place as a functional object of spiritual contemplation in the environment, achieving a universalising objective close to the aim of concrete art: 'production of the esthetic object for spiritual use'.¹⁸ In the first published article in Britain to make explicit reference to concrete poetry, Houédard placed central focus on 'the relation of new typography & new poetry' and the 'place of this in new kinetic/spatial dimensions of art today'.¹⁹ Written in the ebullient, jazz style typical of his prose, replete with hyphenated phrases, neologisms and a spirited associative flow, the article is committed to situating this new medium within 'the origin of all graphics' – 'cave paintings pictographs ideograms alphabets heiroglyphs' – while also weighing up the contemporaneous influences of action painting, jazz, kinetic sculpture, happenings, sound poetry and shorter commercial texts on literature. He argues that grammatical and syntactical structures are no longer suited to advanced processes of thought and communication, replaced by typographical arrangements that force readers to supply the 'missing links': 'concrete fractures linguistics, atomises words into incoherence, constricting language to jewel-like semantic areas where poet & reader meet in maximum communication with minimum words'.²⁰ Quoting Ian Hamilton Finlay, around whom the focus of the article turns, Houédard values Finlay's sense that a 'non-syntax noun poetry [...] demands a new cohesive element (syntax being the old cohesive element)'.²¹

¹⁶ For a discussion of Concrete Art and the influence of its practitioners on concrete poetry, see Mike Weaver, 'Concrete Poetry', *Lugano Review*, 1.5-6 (1966), 100-125. 'Concrete Art' was introduced by Theo van Doesburg in 'The Basis of Concrete Art', *Art Concret*, 1 (1930), 1.

¹⁷ Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari, 'Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry', *Noigandres* 4 (São Paulo, 1958), n.p.; Garnier, 'plan pilote fondant le Spatialisme', *les lettres: poésie nouvelle*, 31, 1-5.

¹⁸ Max Bill, quoted in Eugen Gomringer, 'From Line to Constellation', trans. by Mike Weaver, *Journal of Hispanic Arts*, 1.3-4 (Winter-Spring 1968), 67.

¹⁹ Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Concrete Poetry and Ian Hamilton Finlay', *Typographica*, 8 (1963), 47-62 (p. 47).

²⁰ Houédard, 'Concrete Poetry and Ian Hamilton Finlay', 49.

²¹ Ian Hamilton Finlay, quoted in Houédard, 'Concrete Poetry and Ian Hamilton Finlay', 60.

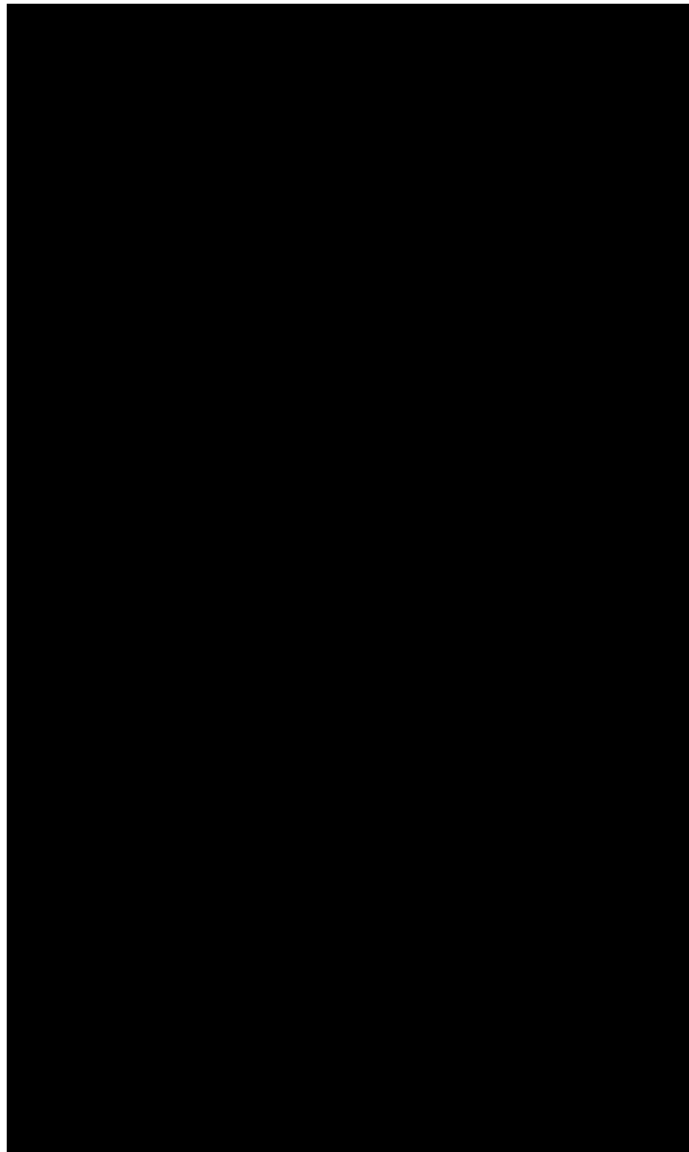


Fig. 16. Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'Typestract dsh261163', letter to Ian Hamilton Finlay, dated 26 November 1963, Sage College Special Collections, Ian Hamilton Finlay Correspondence 1962-1969, box 2, fol. 28.

This chapter will consider the extent to which this 'new cohesive element' took as its source the models offered by abstract art and the ways in which this permitted the extension of literary forms beyond the confines of the page, with particular focus on the poem constructions and writings of Ian Hamilton Finlay. Evident from their longstanding correspondence, Finlay and Houédard were arguably the most sensitive of the British practitioners to the prospects offered by abstraction, adopting the critical vocabularies of constructivism, cubism, expressionism, fauvism, and suprematism to define the subtle tonal variations across the

experimental reaches of the movement.²² Conceiving of concrete poetry as operating on a scale between ‘heart’, ‘usurpment-symbolist-outburst-belowness’, and ‘mind’, ‘formal-careshaped-constructivist-serialised’, both Houédard and Finlay recognised the full spectrum of abstract practice across a more intuitive expressionist approach and a cooler, more geometric command of language.²³ By 1965, with the advent of the landmark international exhibition of concrete poetry at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, ‘Between Poetry and Painting’, Finlay’s poem-prints and Houédard’s ‘typestracts’ (Fig. 16) occupied central positions in the wider developing critical discourse of concrete poetry.²⁴ However, where Houédard’s ‘abstract art on a typewriter’, dazzling sheets composed of overlaid characters, lines and marks, continued to experiment with the printed surface, Finlay drew upon the conventions of abstraction to build away from the page and picture plane.²⁵

2. MmM: The Murmurings of Earlier Modernisms in Ian Hamilton Finlay

In 1962 Ian Hamilton Finlay received from the Brazilian poet Augusto de Campos the 1958 ‘Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry’, at the request of Edwin Morgan. Upon reading through the central tenets of the manifesto – the most emphatic being that ‘graphic space acts as a structural agent’ – he ‘recognised his own association with Concrete poetry’.²⁶ Critically understood as the ‘first UK-based collection to appear in response to Concrete Poetry’, Finlay’s *Rapel* (1963) is the

²² For discussion of the ‘fauve-suprematist’ split in Ian Hamilton Finlay see Houédard, ‘Concrete Poetry and Ian Hamilton Finlay’, 59-62. Discussing the article pre-publication, Houédard posits a ‘fauve/cubist’ divide in concrete poetry, letter to Ian Hamilton Finlay, dated 1 June 1963, Sage College Special Collections (SCSC), Ian Hamilton Finlay Correspondence 1962-1969 (IHFC), box 2, fol. 28.

²³ Dom Sylvester Houédard, letter to Finlay, dated 1 June 1963, SCSC IHFC box 2, fol. 28, pp. 1-2 (p. 1).

²⁴ See Jasia Reichardt, ‘Introduction’, *Between Poetry and Painting*, ed. by Jasia Reichardt (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1965), pp. 9-14 (p. 9). The idea for the exhibition was Houédard’s: Dom Sylvester Houédard, letter to Jasia Reichardt, n.d. c.1964, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (GRI) Jasia Reichardt Correspondence 1956-1987, MS 890143, box 4, fol. 49, p.1; John Furnival, letter to Reichardt, n.d. c.1964, GRI MS 890143 box 3, fol. 49, p. 1, also suggests that he will ‘...write to Mike Weaver about the Cambridge show going to ICA’.

²⁵ Bob Cobbing, letter to Dom Sylvester Houédard, dated 13 April 1960, Dom Sylvester Houédard Archive, The John Rylands Library. For further discussion of Houédard and fellow typewriter poets/artists, see Alan Riddell, *Typewriter Art* (London: London Magazine Editions, 1975); Barrie Tullett, *Typewriter Art: A Modern Anthology* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2014).

²⁶ Promotional card for *Ian Hamilton Finlay*, Axiom Gallery, London, August - September 1968 (no catalogue), GRI, Jean Brown Papers 1916-1995, JBP Series I, box 16, fol. 13.

result of that relayed introduction, a compilation of ten poems that he had been composing since late 1962.²⁷ The collection announces itself not as ‘concrete’, however, but with the subtitle ‘10 fauve and suprematist poems’, unsettling the nature of abstract visual representation in application to language and literature. Each of the ten poems, set on loose A4 sheets and arranged at random inside an ochre card wallet, are self-contained meditations on the directives of letter, line, shape and colour. Each poem sets itself a title as proposition – ‘a valentine’, ‘carousel’, ‘ballad’, ‘Juan Gris’ (Fig. 17), ‘the practice’, ‘formal poem’ ‘sos’, ‘Malevich’ – and then sets about formulating an answer within the confines of the page. Some are more playful than others: ‘carousel’ recreates the sing-song frippery of the fairground ride (Fig. 18), as ‘horsesandzebras’ undulates across the page, the ‘sos poem’ uses two vertical lines to expose the ‘ail’ at the heart of ‘sailor’, and the ‘XM poem’ seeks to imitate the thrumming of the mouth organ (Fig. 20).

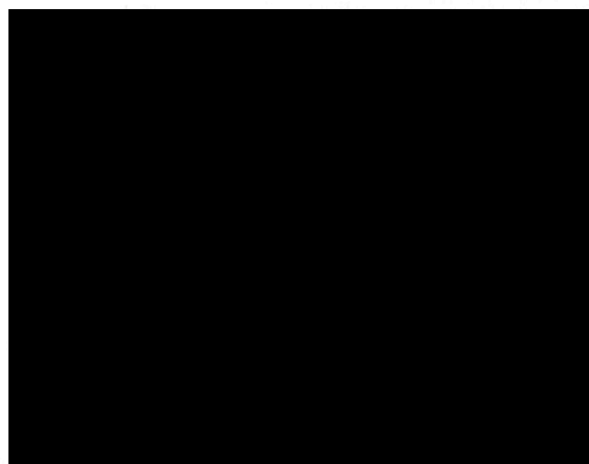


Fig. 17. Ian Hamilton Finlay, ‘To the painter Juan Gris’, *Rapel* (Edinburgh: Wild Hawthorn Press, 1963), n.p.

In a letter written on the 11 November 1963 to his friend Louis Zukovsky, Finlay explained that *rapel* is

²⁷ Greg Thomas, ‘Eyearun: Bob Cobbing and Concrete Poetry’, *The Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 4.2 (2012), 203-227 (p. 207).

an abstract word, a new word, with as many echoes as you like to see in it, of French, or whatever. [...] It is (as the little note would suggest here, in Scotland) the first two words of the ballad that goes, 'The pale moon was shining above the green mountain / the sun was declining above the blue sea / As I walked with my love by the pure crystal fountain...' etc. – a music-hall ballad which has been sung, at one time, by every drunken man on these islands...a very un-highbrow song. [...] And as for me, I like to think that the Cocteau word *Rapel* has such a humble origin. But then, I suppose, I have a strange sense of humour.²⁸

The 'echoes...of French' Finlay alludes to are to the word '*rappeler*', meaning to 'recall', 'remind' or to 'call someone back', and '*rappelons-le*' as an entreaty not to forget. Jean Cocteau's use of the word emerged with his first major work of criticism, *Le Rappel à l'Ordre* (1926), which heralded a 'return to order' within the European avant-garde following World War I, rejecting the radicalism of the years leading up to 1918 with a revival of classical proportion and realist convention in art. Finlay punctures these loftier locutions to phonetically liken 'rapel' to the Scots pronunciation of 'The pale...', reproducing the above lines in the prefatory page to mimic that of the cries of the music hall: 'Rapel moon was shining/above ra green mountings'. An 'abstract word' for its phonic recall of an unrelated phrase. These mirthful touches shift a reader's expectation of the seriousness and austere graphic arrangement of the publication, and the pronouncement that therein lies poetic experiments that will exemplify the aesthetic demands of two distinctive schools of abstraction: suprematism and fauvism.

²⁸ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Louis Zukovsky, dated 11 November 1963, quoted in Alec Finlay, 'Notes: Later Writings', *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Selections*, ed. by Alec Finlay (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 284-85. With his Wild Hawthorn Press Finlay published Zukovsky's collection *16 Once Published* (1962) alongside Lorine Neidecker's *My Friend Tree* (1961) and Gael Turnbull's *A Very Particular Hill* (1963).

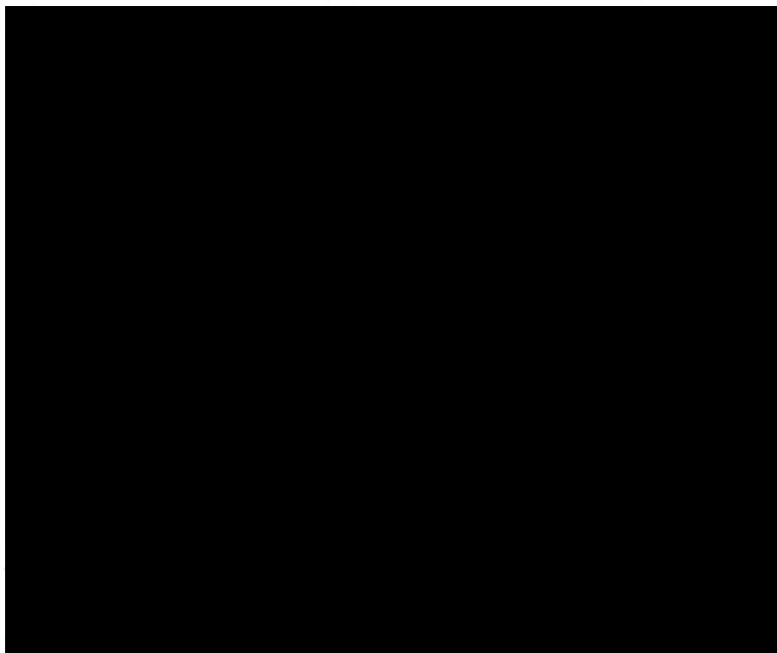


Fig. 18. Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'carousel', *Rapel* (Edinburgh: Wild Hawthorn Press, 1963), n.p.

With *Rapel*, Finlay forced those around him to question the categories by which a new poetry was to be judged, a poetry conscious of the visual arts. The prevailing attitude towards literary works that drew upon or emerged from the realm of contemporary art, he argued, was one of suspicion and contempt.²⁹ *Rapel* was reviewed by Anthony Thwaite for the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) as little more than a 'confection' printed 'on good quality paper', as a 'déjà vu larking with typography'.³⁰ Thwaite's comments came as part of a review in August 1964 of recent 'avant-garde' poetry collections. Titling the review 'O BO E OW', which is a reprinting of the eighth poem in Finlay's pamphlet, 'the practice', Thwaite only turns to Finlay's collection in the final short paragraph, concerning himself to a far greater extent with the collections *The Anatomy of Love and Other Poems* by John William Corrington and *A Very Particular Hill* by Gael Turnbull, published by Finlay's Wild Hawthorn Press. It can be surmised from Thwaite's refashioning of these four monosyllables, from their extralinear spatial orchestration in Finlay's poem to the linear syntactical arrangement of Thwaite's title, that he means to expose a supposed

²⁹ Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'Poetry in the Public Ear', *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS), 3319 (7 October 1965), 899.

³⁰ Anthony Thwaite, 'O BO E OW', TLS, 3258 (6 August 1964), 696.

inanity inherent to such forms of poetic expression. Rendered in capital letters and the authoritative serif typeface common to the newspaper headline, Finlay's poem takes on a bombastic quality quite apart from that of the unexacting lower-case simplicity of the original. For Thwaite, this poetry is a form of expression based only upon 'attraction', only upon the nature by which it announces itself to the eye. When he comes to repeat the poem in the body of his critique, it is again reprinted incorrectly, paying no attention to the indentation of 'bo':

o
bo
e
ow

For all of the attention awarded to this poem, the sole observation Thwaite makes is that it is the 'shortest' of the sequence. The dismissal of Finlay's poetic achievement reaches its final expression in Thwaite's parting line, in which he disagreeably imagines, 'No doubt Apollinaire is nodding in approbation somewhere'.³¹ Thwaite means to suggest that Finlay's work reappropriates the aesthetic experiments undertaken earlier in the twentieth-century – those most notably evidenced by Guillaume Apollinaire's innovative *Alcools* (1913) and the *Calligrammes* (1918), in which a poem's language corresponds with the form it adopts within the space – and then resituating them within his own poetry half a century later. Apollinaire's expressive forms were often fantastical: letters patter down the page in the horizontal verse lines of 'Il Pleut', emerge to form arcs as if spurts of water in 'La Colombe Poignardée et le Jet d'Eau', and adopt scrawled ink characters to emulate postcards sent from the trenches. Not all of Apollinaire's 'idéogrammes lyriques' adopted these same explorative shapes and visual strategies, but those that did asked the reader to abandon reading 'analytico-discursively', and to begin to think 'synthetico-ideographically' about words and images, shifting the emphasis from the temporal to the spatial.³² The wealth of implication in Finlay's poems, however, rests with the riddle of signification, as works that do not imitate but seek to escribe themselves within a moment of

³¹ Thwaite, 'O BO E OW', 696.

³² Guillaume Apollinaire, quoted in de Campos, de Campos, and Pignatari, 'Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry', *Noigandres*, n.p., trans. by de Campos, de Campos, and Pignatari in Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, pp. 70-72.

engagement. An instant that recognises a world replete with people, objects, language, feeling, nature – Finlay’s poems are a personal struggle with a world in which he believed ‘that people must gang up against the void’.³³ This is what separates him from that ‘glittering perfection’ of abstraction, as ‘the world is, after all, also to be made by man in his home’, writing poetry aware of, and engaged with, its own existence, distinguishing between ‘what man can construct and what he actually is’.³⁴ It was a miscalculation to presume that Finlay’s poems were little more than a ‘*déjà vu*’ mannerist exercise.

Finlay sent the collection to a number of correspondents, such as Charles Biederman, Eugen Gomringer, Dom Sylvester Houédard and Robert Lax, prompting energetic exchanges over the transposition of earlier modes of abstraction.³⁵ To what extent, then, may the *Rapel* poems be characterised as ‘suprematist’ or ‘fauve’? Suprematism was the Russian artist Kazimir Malevich’s term for a new system of art, coined in his 1915 booklet ‘From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism’, which accompanied his exhibition of non-objective paintings at ‘0,10: The Last Exhibition of Futurist Pictures’ in Petrograd. Derived from *supremus*, meaning ‘superior’ or ‘perfected’, Malevich’s intention was to liberate painting from the bonds of representation, creating an art which advanced ‘toward creation as an end in itself and toward domination over the forms of nature’, to place oneself at ‘the zero of form’.³⁶ It was at this exhibition, amidst the thirty-nine pictures he contributed, that Malevich unveiled his epochal ‘Quadrilateral’, the black square. Fauvism, predating Suprematism by a decade and originating in France, similarly aligned an intensity of expression with an abstract spirituality, but with a less uncompromising geometric formalism. The paintings of artists such as Henri Matisse, André Derain, and Maurice de Vlaminck were derided as ‘*Donatello au milieu des fauves*’ (‘Donatello among the wild beasts’) by the critic Louis Vauxcelles, for their bold, undisguised brushstrokes,

³³ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to J. F. Hendry, n.d. c.1956-7, quoted in Alec Finlay, ‘Introduction: Picking the Last Wild Flower’, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Selections*, pp. 1-64 (p. 16).

³⁴ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Pierre Garnier, dated 17 September 1963 (repr. ‘Letter from Finlay to Pierre Garnier’, *Image*, 1 (1964), 9-10).

³⁵ Unpublished correspondence held at Sage College Special Collections (SCSC), Ian Hamilton Finlay Correspondence 1962-1969: Biederman, letter to Finlay, dated 13 December 1963, box 1, fol. 17; Houédard, letter to Finlay, dated 13 July 1963, box 2, fol. 31; Gomringer, letter to Finlay, dated 3 October 1963, box. 2, fol. 10; Lax, letter to Finlay, dated 29 June 1965, box 3, fol. 8.

³⁶ Kasimir Malevich, ‘From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting’, trans. by Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin in *K. S. Malevich: Essays on Art 1915-1928*, 1, ed. by Troels Anderson (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968), pp. 19-41 (p. 24).

exhilarating depictions of the body, and riot of primary colour on show at the third Grand Palais exhibition of the Salon d'Automne, Paris, in 1905.³⁷ They defined a new pictorial space determined by the movement of colour planes, depth of feeling and attention to surface design. In both Fauvism and Suprematism, in spite of their obvious conflicting theoretical and historical viewpoints, it was the traditional modes of perception that were to be contested, in order to create new ways in which to situate the self within the modern world.

The *Rapel* poems are deft articulations on a given theme, 'exact' and tightly wrought word games in calculated colour. The 'formal poem', for example, embodies the activity by which a poem may defy categories of literary or poetic form, as it repeats itself in six minimally altered modulations of the same four letters 'd', 't', 'r' and 'e' (Fig. 19). Each of the six units or stanzaic areas, equally spaced into two columns of three across the page, are composed of five, six or seven letters. The narrative arc can be read through the word 'tree', which is printed in a vertical line throughout until the final stanza, in which the top 't' has been lopped to the right of 'ree', with the 'd' shunted to the bottom left. Words begin to branch off from the central constant 'tree': 'deer', 'de', 'der', 'reed', 'red'. Printed throughout in dark yellow ink, it is only at the final stanza that the colour of the central column of letters achieves a vivid green, as if the tree has finally matured in its graphic alignment to shoots and buds. With this concluding gesture Finlay attends to a more complex scenario, critiquing the notion that there is a direct correspondence between words and objects. Is formal arrangement or colour as arbitrary a representation of an object as the word to which it is attributed? It becomes an inquiry into the degrees by which a word may resemble its physical counterpart, the form resembling the content: is the word 'tree' any more an actual tree for appearing in the expected colour or branch-like shape of a tree? The poem performs a visual interrogation of the question that Finlay was known to repeatedly ask of himself as he began to write his poetry, plays and prose in the late 1950s: 'How can one write TREE and mean TREE?'.³⁸

³⁷ Louis Vauxcelles, 'Le Salon d'Automne', *Gil Blas* (Paris, 17 October 1905). For the introduction to the exhibition see Elie Faure, 'A Eugène Carrière', *Salon d'Automne: Catalogue de la 3e exposition* (Paris: Société du Salon d'Automne, 1905), pp. 11-18.

³⁸ Ian Hamilton Finlay, quoted in Edwin Morgan, 'Early Finlay', in *Wood Notes Wild: Essays on the poetry and art of Ian Hamilton Finlay*, ed. by Alec Finlay (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1995), pp. 16-25 (p. 22).

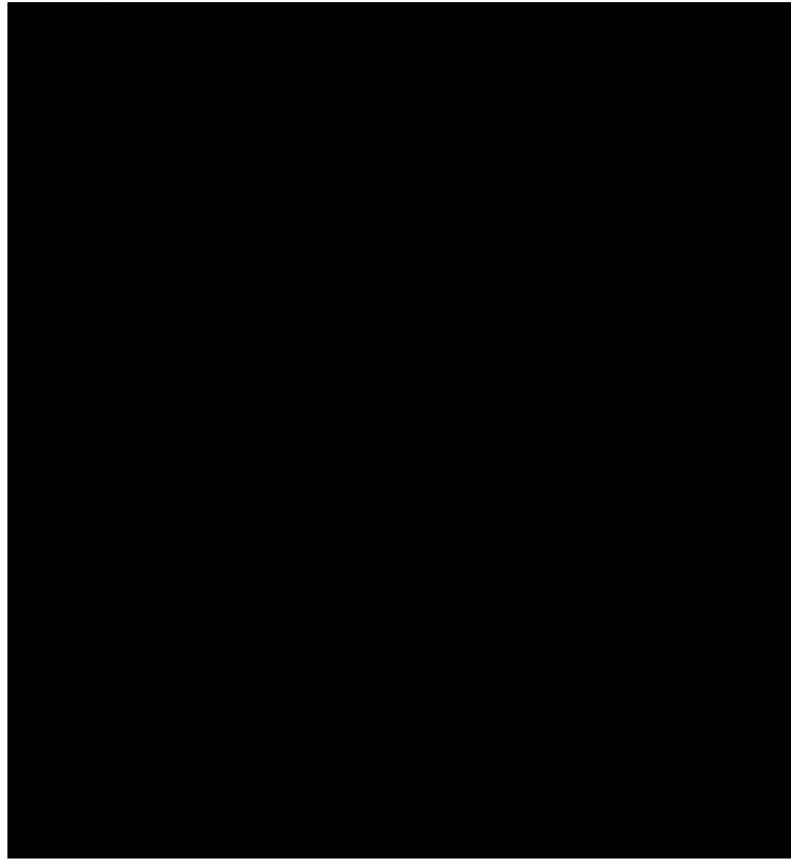


Fig. 19. Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'formal poem', *Rapel* (Edinburgh: Wild Hawthorn Press, 1963), n.p.

Many of the poems adopt a comparative idiom of dissimulation: in 'A Peach an Apple' the dispersal of nouns across the space remains a radical gesture in the diffusion of perspective, much like the multi-perspectival arrangement of Fauvist still life painting. The individual words become structural agents within their own universe, erecting a unit-by-unit framework by which the text may, in its spirited and referential way, be read. One other such poem, 'The 'XM poem'', included in Emmett Williams' *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* in 1967, uses colour, cadence, letters as evocative shapes, and varying font styles and sizes to convey the trickling visual patina of a stream, as the poem weaves its way down the length of the page (Fig. 20). A short commentary by Finlay explaining the expressive, gestural use of words and letters as symbols was offered beside the anthology's reproduction of the poem:

The 'XM poem' is less concrete than "fauve". A little burn (stream) flows with a sound which suggests tunes on a mouth organ. Its path is denoted by the x's and m's, the m's being the sound and the x's a windmill, as well as the conventional sign for kisses – of

light on water, perhaps – and signs of happiness. Different sizes and kinds of type suggest the altering nature of the water.³⁹

It is evident from this description that the imitative devices here described are the definitive characteristics of a ‘fauve’ poem. As with Fauvist painting, the attention to colour and surface design achieves a formal eloquence beyond a word or an object as it exists for a reader or viewer. In the manipulation of rhythm, repetition and the space of the page, as well as the evocative positioning of lettering and onomatopoeic stringing together of ‘MmM’, Finlay attends to the experiential quality of language – in its potential for elision and the transmittal of feeling – to expose the complex relationships at play between naming and aspect.

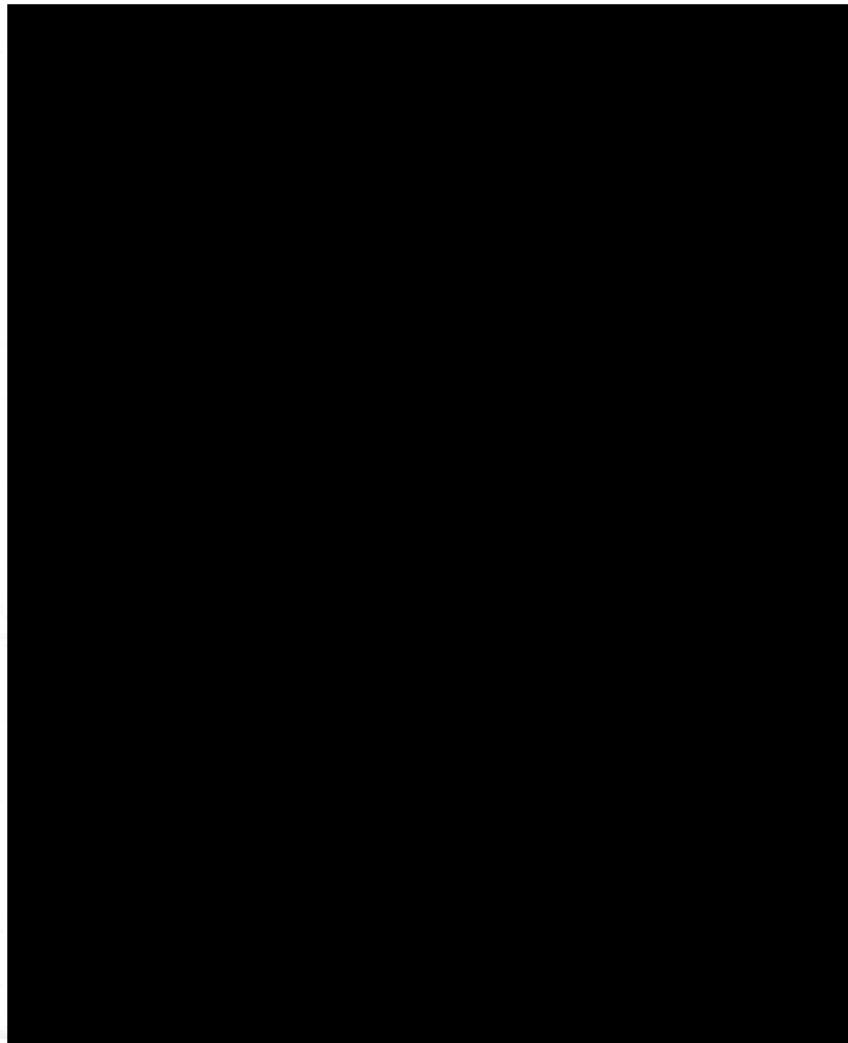


Fig. 20. Ian Hamilton Finlay, ‘XM Poem’, *Rapel* (Edinburgh: Wild Hawthorn Press, 1963), n.p.

³⁹ Ian Hamilton Finlay, quoted in Emmett Williams ed., *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967), n.p.

3. Squaring the Syntax: Ian Hamilton Finlay and Early Concrete Poetry

By the beginning of the 1960s, Finlay was subject to a growing sense that language was undergoing a process of reorientation. Concrete poetry is generally seen as having existed as a distinct movement for almost a decade before it officially arrived in Britain. There were isolated precedents for the kinds of semantic and diagrammatic experimentation taking place at this moment: in Italy Carlo Belloli had made and exhibited ‘mural text-poems’ as early as 1944, Dylan Thomas had created what Dom Sylvester Houédard called ‘lozenges and hatchets’ in 1948, and the Swedish poet Öyvind Fahlström, with his ‘kneaded’ grammatical forms, published ‘the first defence of the new post-war experimental poetry’ under the title ‘Manifesto for Concrete Poetry’ in 1953.⁴⁰ The mutual acknowledgement of the Northern European and South American conceptual practices, however, heralded the beginning of an ‘international’ movement.

Stephen Bann acknowledges the melding of European and South American influences in the rise of the movement in his 1967 *Concrete Poetry: an international anthology*. He determines that the international movement ‘owes its origin to a meeting which took place in Ulm in 1955’ between Eugen Gomringer and Décio Pignatari. Gomringer was then working as secretary to Max Bill at the Hochschule für Gestaltung, and Pignatari, the Brazilian teacher of industrial design and communication theory, was spending two years in Europe. Both were already central to their respective fields of experimental poetry and had separately considered the word ‘concrete’ in relation to their work: Pignatari had collaborated in Brazil with the poets Augusto and Haroldo de Campos in the founding of the ‘Noigandres’ group in 1952, while Gomringer had published his first collection of ‘constellations’ (*Konstellationen*) in 1953. This connection opened up a channel of transatlantic discourse between Gomringer and the Noigandres, and most significantly led to ‘an agreement that their work should henceforth be identified by one common title’.⁴¹

⁴⁰ See Mary Ellen Solt, ‘A World Look at Concrete Poetry’, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, pp. 6-66; and Dom Sylvester Houédard, ‘Chronology’, *Between Poetry and Painting*, pp. 1-14. Fahlström’s manifesto was published in *Bord-Dikter 1952-55* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1966).

⁴¹ Stephen Bann, ‘Introduction’, in *concrete poetry: an international anthology*, ed. by Stephen Bann (London: London Magazine Editions, 1967), pp. 7-27 (p. 7).

The year 1962 was of paramount significance to a number of key exponents of British concrete poetry, who were enlivened by the publication of a letter in the *TLS* on concrete poetry and computer verse from E. M. de Melo e Castro, a Brazilian textile engineer and experimental poet.⁴² Responding to an article published in the 4 May 1962 edition of the *TLS*, ‘Freeing the Mind VII: Poetry, Prose and the Machine’ by the ‘Special Correspondent’ John William Mills Willett, Melo e Castro voices his surprise at Willett’s neglect of ‘the increasingly important movement of *poesia concreta*’.⁴³ Willett had listed literary precedents for ‘condensed, non-linear arrangement’, evading mention of concrete poetry in favour of an exhaustive historic survey. He recounts the ‘two-dimensional order’ of ‘words and visual elements’ in advertisements and illustrated magazines, the ‘free verse of the poets, which is often akin to tabulation’, the “‘literary” message of [Paul] Klee’s black arrows’, the ‘verbal-cum-typographic experiments of the Futurists and Dadaists and odd individuals like Apollinaire’, the ‘symbols and letters in certain paintings’, the demanding precision and economy of expression in ‘instructional textbooks and military orders’, the ‘elliptical writing of such deliberate anti-stylists as Professor Empson and the late C. B. Fry’, the ‘famous manifesto-like blackboard diagrams’ of Le Corbusier.⁴⁴ Willett concluded by suggesting that the collation of these elements, and the harnessing of their implications, will reveal ‘the beginnings of a literary technique suited to the complexity of our age’.⁴⁵

In opposition, Castro locates the origins of the ‘non-linear’ movement as Brazilian, while suggesting that its influence had already spread throughout Europe to exist in Portugal. Castro defines *poesia concreta* as ‘a successful experiment in ideogrammatic or diagrammatic writing and poetic creation’ which is ‘slowly replacing the traditional descriptive method of communication by a visual, compact, ideogrammatic way of bringing about and conveying complex and subtle relations among ideas, images, words, things’.⁴⁶ This letter is critically accepted as the first instance in which British poets encountered a nominal concrete poetry, including by that of

⁴² E. M. de Melo e Castro, ‘Poetry Prose and the Machine’, *TLS*, 3143 (25 May 1962), 373.

⁴³ Melo e Castro, ‘Poetry Prose and the Machine’, 373.

⁴⁴ John William Mills Willett, ‘Freeing the Mind VII: Poetry, Prose and the Machine’, *TLS*, 3140 (4 May 1962), 310.

⁴⁵ Willett, ‘Freeing the Mind VII: Poetry, Prose and the Machine’, 310.

⁴⁶ Melo e Castro, ‘Poetry Prose and the Machine’, 373.

Edwin Morgan and Dom Sylvester Houédard.⁴⁷ Enthused by Castro's rousing sentiments, Morgan wrote to him on the very same day of the letter's publication, and Castro in turn replied on 3 June enclosing a copy of the Brazilian anthology *Poesia Concreta*.⁴⁸ Morgan alerted Finlay to his discovery, prompting Finlay's realisation that 'it was just what in my little naïve, home-made, Scottish way, I had been thinking about'.⁴⁹ This belief was again voiced in the frequently cited letter of 1963 to Pierre Garnier, the same year that *Rapel* was produced, an extract of which was first published in the November 1964 edition of the journal *Image*, and subsequently reprinted in the 1965 exhibition catalogue for landmark exhibition *Between Poetry and Painting* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts. Irresolute, Finlay's confessional tone speaks of a mind circling its own cognitive stages in an attempt to describe the 'new feeling':

I wonder if we are not all a little in the dark still as to the real significance of 'concrete'...For myself I cannot derive from the poems I have written any 'method' which can be applied to the writing of the next poem; it comes back, after each poem, to a level of 'being', to an almost physical intuition of the time, or of a form...to which I try, with huge uncertainty, to be 'true'. Just so, 'concrete' began for me with the extraordinary (since wholly unexpected) sense that the syntax I had been using, *the movement* of language in me, at a physical level, was no longer there – so it had to be replaced with something else, with a syntax and a movement that would be true of the new feeling (which existed in only the vaguest way, since I had, then, no form for it...). So that I see the theory as a very essential (because we are people, and people think, or should think, or should TRY to think) part of our life and art; and yet I also feel that it is a construction, very haphazard, uncertain, and by means as yet to be taken as definitive.⁵⁰

As a tentative definition of the literary practice under development in Britain and abroad, the change, for Finlay, was situated at the level of syntax. Stephen Bann, Finlay's 'preferred commentator', quotes the above passage in a catalogue essay of 1977 to draw out an important distinction.⁵¹ For Bann, these lines illustrate what concrete poetry represented for Finlay, as 'not so much a technique' but a 'grammar' of non-discursive syntax, as the intimation of a form which

⁴⁷ Thomas, 'Eyearun: Bob Cobbing and Concrete Poetry', 207.

⁴⁸ Thomas, 'Eyearun: Bob Cobbing and Concrete Poetry', 207.

⁴⁹ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Gael Turnbull, dated 7 September (c. 1964), in *A Model of Order: Selected Letters on Poetry and Making*, ed. by Thomas A. Clark (Glasgow: WAX366, 2009), pp. 29-30.

⁵⁰ Finlay, 'Letter from Finlay to Pierre Garnier', *Image*, 9-10.

⁵¹ Alec Finlay, 'Introduction', *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Selections*, p. 3.

fulfilled (at least from time to time) an ontological need'.⁵² Finlay's only hesitation was that the need for this new form of expression, one which would conceive of a 'syntax and a movement that would be true of the new feeling', had as yet superseded its realisation.

Finlay was aware that he was not the first to acknowledge the vital ontological imperative of language. His letter to Garnier also triangulates a number of forebears of early twentieth-century modernism in an attempt to situate the precise character of discovery to be fulfilled: Georges Vantongerloo, one of the founding members of the Dutch *De Stijl* movement, the Cubists, most clearly represented in *Rapel* by the poem 'To the painter Juan Gris', and the artist Kazimir Malevich. Finlay stipulated that 'the question of naming' his poems 'suprematist' or 'fauve' was to indicate their (and his) uneasy correspondence with reality – a reality which was arguably disrupted to an extreme degree in the visual politics and preoccupations of either movement.⁵³ He had again described the binary within which he saw himself situated as 'fauve' and 'suprematist' in a letter to fellow poet Dom Sylvester Houédard earlier that year, observing that: 'My own concrete poems are of two kinds – one corresponding to *fauve* painting (in feeling) and one to suprematism. They are not ambitious. I try to make them exact'.⁵⁴ It was the model offered by suprematism, as a painting of pure sensation and exactitude, that became the aesthetic objective Finlay held in the greatest – albeit qualified – esteem:

I approve of Malevich's statement, 'Man distinguished himself as a thinking being and removed himself from the perfection of God's creation. Having left the non-thinking state, he strives by means of his perfected objects, to be again embodied in the perfection of absolute, non-thinking life...' That is, this seems to me, to describe, approximately, my own need to make poems...though I don't know what is meant by 'God'. And it also raises the question that, though the objects might 'make it', possibly, into a state of perfection, the poet and painter will not.⁵⁵

⁵² Stephen Bann, 'Ian Hamilton Finlay: An Imaginary Portrait', in *Ian Hamilton Finlay* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1977), repr. in *Wood Notes Wild*, pp. 55-81 (p. 58). It is important to note, given Perloff's speculation in her recent essay 'The Deep Minimalism of Ian Hamilton Finlay', that Finlay 'clearly had some familiarity with Wittgenstein's teaching': Marjorie Perloff, 'The Deep Minimalism of Ian Hamilton Finlay' *The Battersea Review* (n.d. c. 2014) <<http://thebatterseareview.com/critical-prose/170-marjorie-perloff-on-finlay>> [accessed January 12 2015].

⁵³ Finlay, 'Letter from Finlay to Pierre Garnier', *Image*, 10.

⁵⁴ Finlay, quoted in Houédard, 'Concrete Poetry and Ian Hamilton Finlay', 60.

⁵⁵ Finlay, 'Letter from Finlay to Pierre Garnier', *Image*, 10.

Finlay's presentiment of concretism is relayed in this exhortation to Suprematism's founding father. If poems are 'perfected objects', then it is the chaos of the world and the uncertainty of creation that conspires them into being. Concrete, as Finlay provisionally, and notoriously, defines it in this letter, is a 'model, of order, even if set in a space which is full of doubt'.⁵⁶

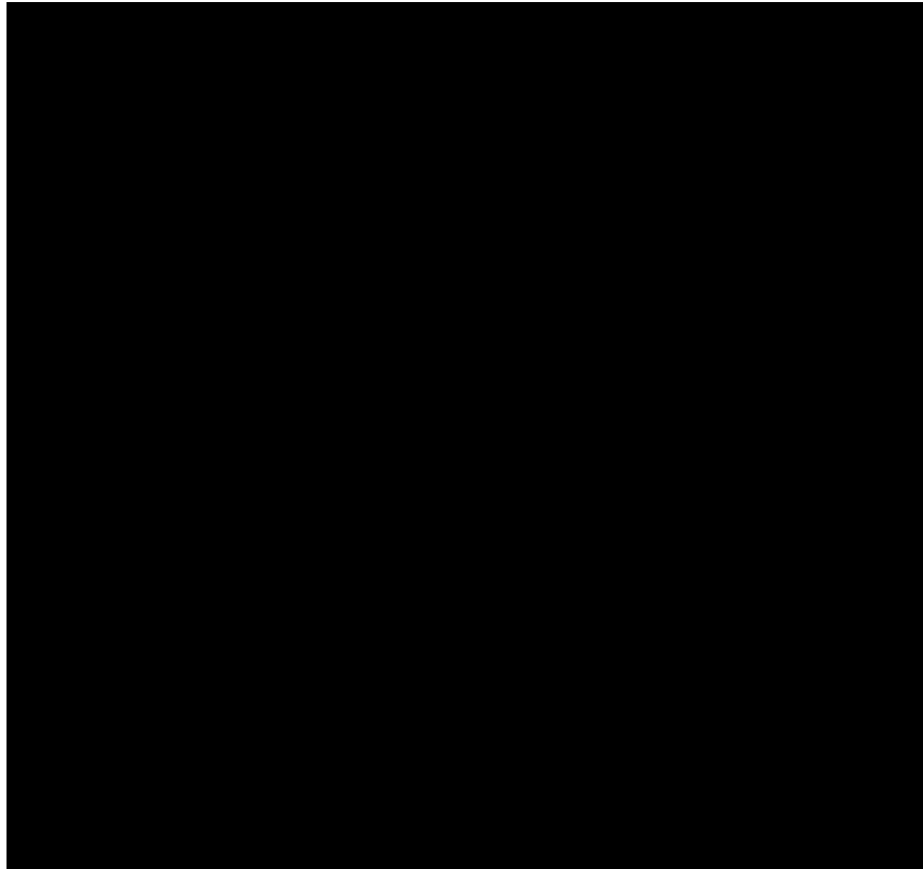


Fig. 21. Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'Homage to Malevich', *Rapel* (Edinburgh: Wild Hawthorn Press, 1963).

With this phrase as coda, the poem that best represents Finlay's contemplative riddle in the collection *Rapel* is his 'Homage to Malevich' (Fig. 21).⁵⁷ The poem is explicit in both its form, a black square, and in its content, the repetition of 'black' and 'block', as a dedicatory reimagining of Malevich's celebrated 'Quadrilateral' (1915), posthumously known as the 'Black Square'. The poem first appeared on the cover of the eighth issue of Finlay's journal *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse* (*P.O.T.H.*) in 1962 to 'honour' the Russian avant-garde (Fig. 22). Honouring 'ten Russian avant

⁵⁶ Finlay, 'Letter from Finlay to Pierre Garnier', *Image*, 10.

⁵⁷ With significant foresight, the poem was reproduced to underscore its importance by Pierre Garnier in 'Poésie Concrète: Panorama', *les lettres: poésie nouvelle*, 32 (Paris: Editions André Silvaire, 1964), 6-16 (p. 15).

gardists', from Natalia Goncharova to El Lissitzky, it also featured line drawings by Vladimir Mayakovsky and translations of Velimir Khlebnikov by Edwin Morgan. The 'homage' was reproduced above a freehand pen drawing of a geometric composition by Finlay's sometime collaborator, Peter Stitt. Both works sit above the title, 'Homage to Malevich', suggesting the two pieces were conceived to correspond with one another in a spirit of emulation. The element of mimicry is not entirely serious: Finlay's reiterative 'black block' is glib in its reductionist view of Malevich's 'creation of intuitive reason', while the sketchy outlines of Stitt's felt tip pen are quite remote from the committed nature of the suprematist line.

In so far as this diminutive version of the 'Homage' had been devised to present the face of Russian avant-gardism, the reprinting of the poem in Finlay's collection *Rapel* permits the construction to command a space of its own. This enigmatic word square is composed of two words almost identical in appearance, 'black' and 'block', save for the central vowel. Both tend towards the occlusion of space or matter, typeset in black against the white background, establishing a perimeter of letters between the space colonised by language and the uninhabited blank space. Across the width of the square the words are restated three times, the letters that comprise them lined up in fifteen columns, only Finlay omits the 'b' in the 'black'/'block' of the first column to leave the first line reading as 'lack' and 'lock'. This sets the orderliness of the 'Homage' on edge, disrupting the assumption of formal precision and semantic order. The 'b' column on the right-hand side, which at first glance seemed arbitrary, is now understood as a remnant or as a new starting point, similar to an enjambed line in a poem. The square ends with this its variable, assembling an indefinite final juncture – a serrated line of 'b's divorced from the strong vertical impression of the first column and the opening contrastive words 'lock' and 'lack'. Does 'lock' link with 'block', 'lack' with 'black'? Is the 'block' a synthesis of squares of Malevich's 'square'?

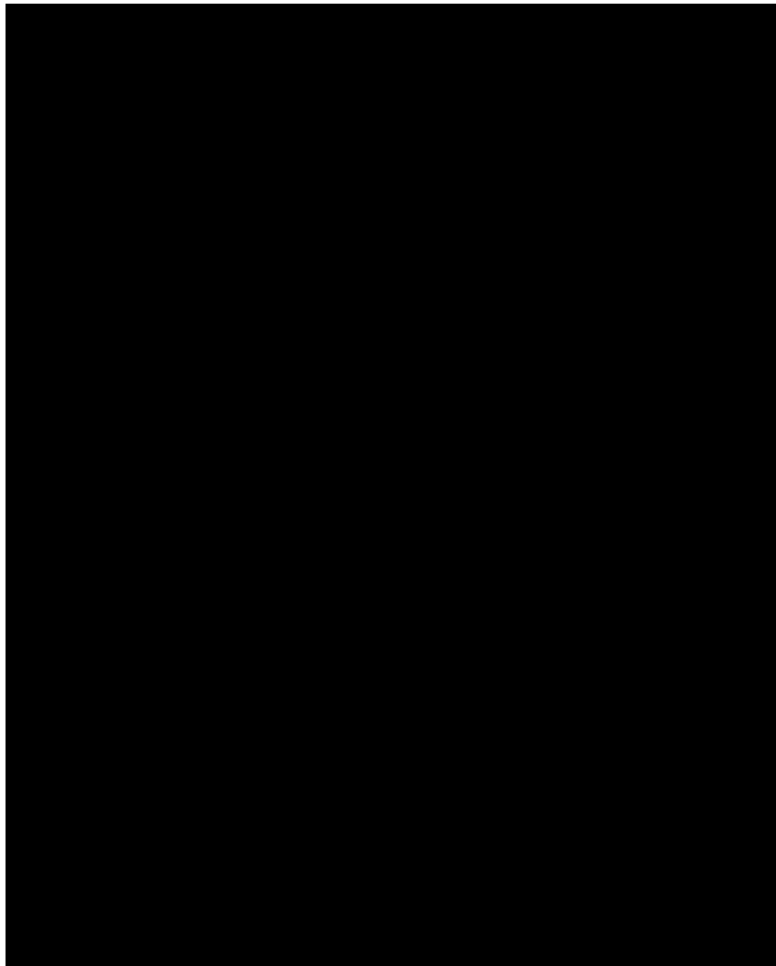


Fig. 22. Ian Hamilton Finlay, ed., *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.*, 8 (Edinburgh: Wild Hawthorn Press, 1962), p. 1.

In a probing analysis of 'Homage to Malevich', Susan Howe comments upon the ways in which Finlay's illusionistic use of letters competes with the integrity of the words themselves:

The vertical letters l, k, and b, positioned as they are, make vertical lines that pull the eye up and down, and that pulls the o, a and c letters apart (the o's and a's are the only ones that vary). The round short letters give a horizontal tug, which prevents the poem from being read up and down. The black (figure) and block (ground) balances with lock (stability) against lack (instability). Something open versus something closed...Do black and white open and close? Are they absence or presence? Sense or nonsense?⁵⁸

Howe's acute visual sense intuits the inconsistencies and uncertainties revealed in the reading of this poem, both in the way the poem is understood semantically and is perceived as a pictorial field. As an echo of Malevich's 'zero of form', the black block may appear to uphold the finely tuned strictures of the square, in the exactness and economy of its arrangement, but each letter is

⁵⁸ Susan Howe, 'The End of Art', *The Archives of American Art Journal*, 14.4 (1974), 2-7 (p. 7).

animated by its equivalence to the surrounding letters. The square is lined with 'doubt', finite in the lettering of the two words and hesitant in its spatial programme. Finlay interrupts an expectation of 'order', questioning the mystical possibility of the square in these parallel lines of language, and introducing enigmatic spatial relationships between and within words. The words are also assembled in thirteen rows down the height of the square, which could possibly be an allusion to the year that Malevich controversially and incorrectly dated his famous 'Quadrilateral': 1913.⁵⁹ Again, the poem falters at the equivocal edge.⁶⁰

Aside from its manifestation of doubt, Finlay's poem more pertinently embodies the generative economy of suprematism. In its capacity to relentlessly endorse its central conflict, the 'black / block', 'lack / lock' it dramatises its own absence and presence of meaning. Listed first in the catalogue for the 1915 exhibition, 0,10: The Last Exhibition of Futurist Pictures, and fixed aloft in the corner at a 45-degree angle from each of the walls, Malevich's *Quadrilateral* presided over all of the pictures in the room, occupying the space where an icon would commonly hang in the Russian home.⁶¹ For Malevich, the square became the 'absolute expression of modernity'.⁶² The square was offered as the starting point not the endpoint, with Malevich as the visionary geometer, from which all other shapes and lines issued:

The square is not a subconscious form. It is the creation of intuitive reason.
It is the face of the new art.
The square is a living, royal infant.
It is the first step of pure creation in art.⁶³

The formulaic certainty of its parameters heralded a new dawn, a vital confrontation between viewer and surface that would develop new formal relationships in painterly representation.

Writing in 1915 in the accompanying booklet to 0,10, Malevich describes his new position as

⁵⁹ Finlay's first acquaintance with the painting was through Camilla Gray's *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863-1922* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1962). In this book she claims Malevich 'began his Suprematist works in 1913', p. 128.

⁶⁰ See Aleksandra Shatskikh, *The Birth of the Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 43-47.

⁶¹ John Milner, *Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 127-128.

⁶² Kazimir Malevich, 'On New Systems in Art', in *K. S. Malevich: Essays on Art 1915-1923*, 1, pp. 19-41 (p. 24).

⁶³ Kazimir Malevich, 'From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting', in *K. S. Malevich: Essays on Art 1915-1923*, pp. 19-41 (p. 38).

forging a new kind of visual language ‘without any attribute of real life’, as ‘Painting was the aesthetic side of a thing, but never was original and an end in itself’.⁶⁴ The square became the protagonist in many of Malevich’s earliest suprematist paintings, used within a variable geometric series that drew upon the influences of mathematics and proportion, evinced by systems such as the Fibonacci series.⁶⁵ This position became what he perceived as the ‘main vantage point from which [to] examine all the creations of the world of all things’.⁶⁶ Malevich uses ‘strives’ alongside words such as ‘attain’, ‘advance’, ‘towards’, in order to throw off every reference to the tangible world and to provide the conditions for a pure pictorial art that would obey creative and painterly laws alone. This was an objective in motion, pronounced at the opening of the groundbreaking exhibition of *0:10*, and often, through the sharp clarity of Malevich’s geometric forms, in flight.

Finlay did not see Malevich’s *Quadrilateral* when it was exhibited for the first time in Britain in 1959, nor had the opportunity to view any of Malevich’s works in his lifetime.⁶⁷ Afflicted by acute agoraphobia, Finlay was confined to his respective homes in Edinburgh, Gledfield and Stonypath, where his only acquaintance with the works of the Russian Futurists, Constructivists and Suprematism was through Camilla Gray’s 1962 study, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863-1922*.⁶⁸ Where Malevich’s painting signalled the possibility of a work as ‘an end in itself’, Finlay’s poem avoided the suggestion that the same expression of exclusivity may be achieved on poetic terms. Where Malevich asks ‘What next?’, Finlay asks ‘What has changed?’ The magnitude of Malevich’s formal rigour for Finlay was made apparent in his return to the square and recognisable geometries throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Both the screen-printed poster ‘Homage to Malevich’ (1974), which casts a large red cross as a fighter jet, and the 1977 booklet *The Wild Hawthorn Art Test* satirise Malevich’s fascination with flight. ‘Which 20th Century

⁶⁴ Malevich, ‘On New Systems in Art’, p. 24.

⁶⁵ The Fibonacci series was first introduced to Western European mathematics in the 1202 book *Liber Abaci*. See Milner, *Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry*, pp. 127-128.

⁶⁶ Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematism: 34 risunka*, in *Kazimir Malevich: Sobranie, sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1 (Moscow: Gileia, 1995), pp. 185-207.

⁶⁷ The first exhibition was ‘Kazimir Malevich 1875-1935: an exhibition of paintings, drawings and studies’ at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, from October – November 1959. Organised in association with the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

⁶⁸ Stephen Bann, ‘Concrete Poetry: The aesthetic/historical penumbra’, paper given at the ‘Concrete Poetry – International Exchanges Symposium’, 14 February 2015, Centre of Latin American Studies, University of Cambridge.

artist sometimes depicted himself as the Best Aeroplane?', the *Art Test* asks, with the answer given as a collection of independently suspended rectangular forms. The poem became Finlay's own *tabula rasa* for modern poetry, as Malevich's 'Black Square' was for modern painting, in their effort to recalibrate the aesthetic or literary encounter. In Finlay's instance, however, it was not the primacy of a visual rather than a narrative syntax, but the creation of a syntax attentive to both visual and narrative meaning. Finlay develops the frontal surface, the projectile geometry of the square, into a surface keenly observant of its every interpellation of meaning, between constituent letter, word and space. These were ideas of formal restatement that Finlay set in motion with his 'Cross' (1967), reappropriating the 'black block' into a fivefold repetition to form a cross for Bann's 1967 anthology of concrete poetry. In a letter of November that year to Stephen Bann, Finlay detailed that it was always his intention to achieve something quite different from Malevich's square, but to perform the same aesthetic proposition that would adhere to its 'literary' dimension:

As far as my Malevich poem goes, the cross, or Cross, refers to M[alevich]'s picture, which comes a wee bit after the (simple) square, in the series. I particularly told the setter that the whole must be constructed of squares, as M's cross is clearly a sort of extension of the original (basic) square – I also stressed that the letters must not imitate his cross, by being extended in a line, as that wouldn't be true to their literary character.⁶⁹

By remaining 'true to their literary character', Finlay here stipulates their value as signifiers within a wider structure, distinct from Malevich's holistic vision for the *Quadrilateral*. Finlay's letters must appear constant within the conventions of language, first and foremost as elements of a poem as opposed to a visual composition, each letter as one of a single element within a wider structure of significance. This contention is apparent in 'black block': the primary point of departure from the planar solidity of Malevich's square is in Finlay's decision to use the word 'block', as opposed to 'square' or 'quadrilateral'. It may be contested that the optical proximity of 'block' to 'black' prompted the selection, however, the shift into the three-dimensions prompted by 'block' signals Finlay's growing approach towards the poem as a self-evident construction in

⁶⁹ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Stephen Bann, dated November 1967, in *Midway: Letters from Ian Hamilton Finlay to Stephen Bann 1964-69*, ed. by Stephen Bann (London: Wilmington Square Books, 2014), pp. 288-291 (p. 289).

the world. His 'Homage' displays his concern for poems that work to cross multiple axes, material, mental, visual.

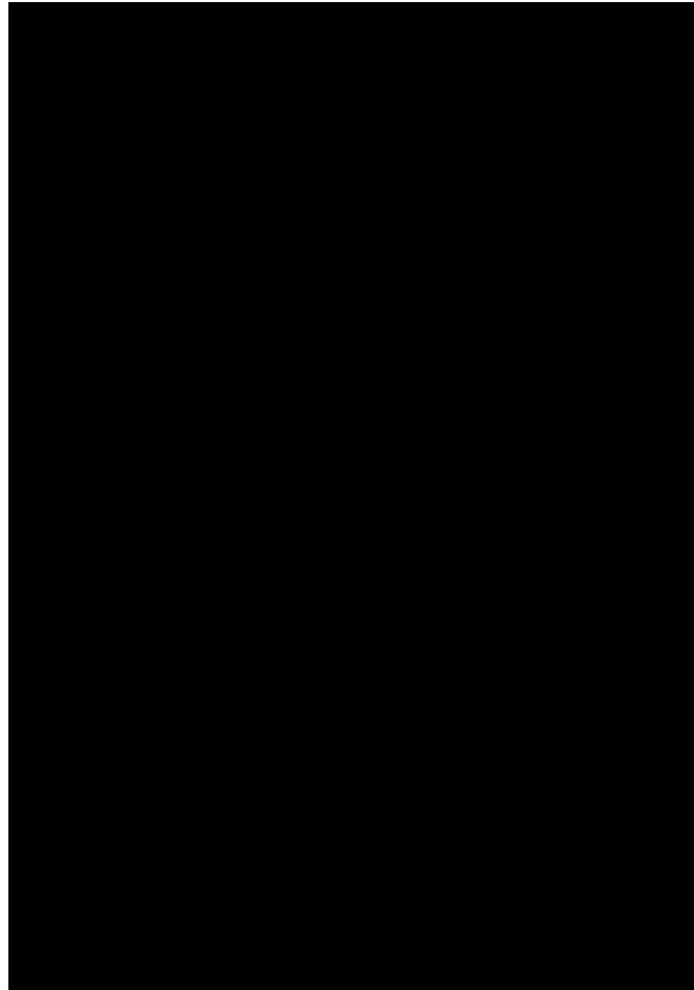


Fig. 23. Richard Hamilton, 'The Changing Guard', *Times Literary Supplement*, 3258 (6 August 1964), 1.

4. Direction, Movement and Optics in Concrete Poetry

'Today it seems as if the logjam of accepted attitudes may at last be breaking', John William Mills Willett declared in the first of two special editions of the *Times Literary Supplement* entitled 'The Changing Guard'.⁷⁰ The two numbers had been planned to 'give a reasonably, up-to-date picture of the avant-garde, as it sways hopefully between romantic myth and the rather humbler and more prosaic status of the future'.⁷¹ As one of Western culture's 'greatest myths', the avant-garde

⁷⁰ John William Mills Willett, 'The Changing Guard', *TLS*, 3258 (6 August 1964), 675.

⁷¹ Willett, 'The Changing Guard', 675.

– given variously here as ‘Avant-garde’, ‘avante garde’, ‘avant guard’ – is defined as a ‘dynamic but ill-defined’ notion, hounded throughout its century of existence by a certain vagueness, pervading everything from its reception to its spelling. ‘We have come to a point’, Willett announces, ‘where the very concept of an avant-garde is beginning to be questioned, and to be questioned most keenly by those who most respect its achievements’.⁷² The approach of the first issue was to mirror that of Richard Hamilton’s cover artwork (Fig. 23), making graphically apparent Willett’s desire to ‘shuffle together’ the ‘original works and illustrations’ from both sides of the Atlantic. A collage of Edwin Morgan’s poem, composed of a sequence of anagrams that ends in its origin and its solution ‘TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT’, a series of photographs by Emmett Williams giving a public reading of Mauriac’s *The Sun of Man* in Paris, a light refraction diagram and poems by Graham Reynolds.⁷³ Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, Jackson Mac Low, Marshall McLuhan, William Burroughs and Robert Watts were some of the American contributors, printed alongside writings of Europeans such as John Arden, Maurice Girodias, Margaret Masterman, Charles Tomlinson and Paul Ableman.⁷⁴ Finlay contributed three poems to the poetry section, ‘Canal Stripe Series 3’, ‘To the painter Juan Gris’ and ‘Large Mural Poem’, which were all arranged amongst works by Michael Horovitz, Dom Sylvester Houédard, Edwin Morgan, John Sharkey and Eduardo Paolozzi, to name a few, in an eclectic assemblage across a double-page spread devised by Richard Hamilton.

Letters of derision were printed in subsequent issues, many of which were grounded in this encounter – between literature as literature and literature as art. One such letter doubted whether the issue’s materials were welcome to the act of “reading” at all, only further confirming for the author the importance of returning to the literary canon.⁷⁵ The main object of resistance was the emphasis placed by the issue upon ‘sense and nonsense’, with John Calder’s ‘efforts to vanquish philistinism’, Margaret Masterman’s computer simulated sentences and

⁷² Willett, ‘The Changing Guard’, 675.

⁷³ Andrew McCulloch, ‘A TLS inspired flurry of nonsense’, in ‘Poem of the Week’, *TLS* Blog (19 November 2013) < <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1342238.ece> > [accessed 12 January 2014].

⁷⁴ Jackson Mac Low’s poem ‘The Blue and Brown Books’ is printed in this edition of the *TLS*, alongside Finlay’s ‘Large Mural’ (acrobats). It is probable that this poem, on the ‘however explanation’ of language, provided that introduction.

⁷⁵ Anthony W. Harrison, ‘The Changing Guard’, *TLS*, 3259 (13 August 1964), 727.

Houédard's 'haphazard cut-ups' receiving the greatest indignation.⁷⁶ Masterman's 'playing with computers' was seen as revealing not only a 'desire *not to understand*' poetry and its essential selfhood, but also a lack of understanding of poetry altogether.⁷⁷ Masterman eloquently replied to these charges, however, with the claim that the authors of these letters 'make a philosophical mistake', confusing 'randomly produced sentences with nonsense sentences', and therefore emphasising function over manner of production. The argument she presents, she suggests, is 'not to abolish the creative process but to put it one stage further back, into the art of writing the program to write the poem, instead of into actually writing the poem'. These remarks about language production point towards the valuable and difficult question of what it is to write, and by extension, how we may contend with the ambivalence to propositional meaning presented by avant-garde literature.⁷⁸ The debate did not end there, however, with a second 'Changing Guard' edition entitled 'Any Advance?', published at the beginning of September shortly after Masterman's retort, and continuing the debate into the following year.⁷⁹

An 'assiduous reader' of the *TLS*, Finlay was to weigh in on the debate in a response to a letter by the writer Tom Scott (which had maintained that the issue exhibited a childlike lack of skill on the part of the poets), with an uncontained abhorrence for the general critical line:

THE CHANGING GUARD
Sir, - Tom Scott. Bla Bla. Sookie-
uppie. Yugh.
IAN HAMILTON FINLAY ⁸⁰

This response was further elucidated in the later 12 November 1964 edition of the *TLS*, in which Finlay disclosed the reason for his resounding 'Yugh' as based upon 'little care for culture',

⁷⁶ R. A. McQuillan and Martin Roberston, 'Letters to the Editor: The Changing Guard', *TLS*, 3260 (20 August 1964), 747.

⁷⁷ David Sladen, 'The Changing Guard', *TLS*, 3259 (13 August 1964), 727.

⁷⁸ Margaret Masterman, 'The Changing Guard', *TLS*, 3261 (27 August 1964), 765.

⁷⁹ John William Mills Willett, 'Any Advance?: The Changing Guard 2', *TLS*, 3262 (3 September 1964), 775. The cover was an eclectic collage by Jean Tinguely.

⁸⁰ Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'The Changing Guard', *TLS*, 3269 (22 October 1964), 959. Stephen Bann refers to the *TLS* as the 'most addictive' of all the publications Finlay regularly read, in *Midway*, p. 16.

critical laziness and general poor manners.⁸¹ It was his next letter to the editor, penned the following year, which offered a more considerable note of reprove to such attitudes:

I would also like to question the extraordinary suggestion in your leading article (Outside English) that experiment in literature and elsewhere will prove to be justified if it somehow turns out to be of use for 'highly complex processes and the enormous speed at which they now take place'. I question this with other questions: What is the use, and the justification, of the music of Satie and Webern, the painting of Mondrian and Albers? And, why do literary critics so often show a quite breathtaking casual contempt (I use the word deliberately) for that specific, non-material – but surely not useless – delight called *art*?⁸²

These questions had recently come into focus for Finlay, ruminating upon a new fascination with poems that were not only beyond the circumference of the organisational properties of language, but beyond the circumference of the page, or moreover of literature. This breaking of conventional forms of expression or communication took as paradigm the innovative compositional structures of 'Satie and Webern [...] Mondrian and Albers', that broke with an expectation of authoritative meaning, and erected new systems of communication.

⁸¹ Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'The Changing Guard', *TLS*, 3272 (12 November 1964), 1019.

⁸² Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'Poetry in the Public Ear', *TLS*, 3319 (7 October 1965), 899.

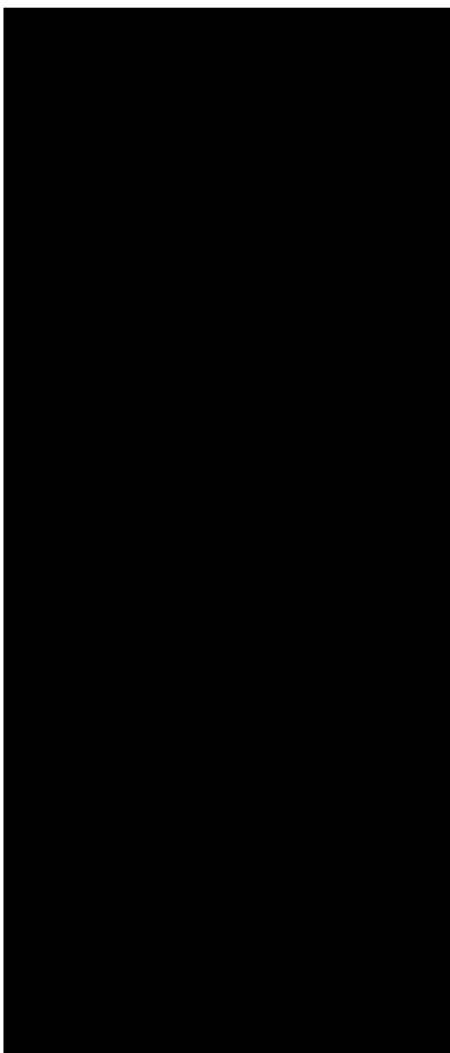


Fig. 24. Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'Large Mural Poem', *Times Literary Supplement*, 3258 (6 August 1964), 702.

Finlay had illustrated this point in the 'Changing Guard' issue of the *TLS* with his 'Large Mural Poem', which presented a field of literary operation as opposed to a paratactical structure (Fig. 24). Printed below Houédard's 'Typestract 170664', which similarly employed the alphabet in a more spatially demonstrative way, overlapping squares of typewritten letters, Finlay's large block letters form a rectangle in the centre of the page. This became better known as the poem 'acrobats' (1964), one of the first poems to address the new 'bilateral symmetry' that had begun to preoccupy Finlay's creative efforts.⁸³ Taken from the title of a poem by Edward Lucie-Smith, 'bilateral symmetry' was the method by which Finlay placed tension upon the separate activities

⁸³ Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'BILATERAL SYMMETRY', n.d. c.1964, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (GRI) Ian Hamilton Finlay papers 1948-1992, MS 890144 (2), box 5, fol. 2, pp. 1-2.

within the perception of a literary object.⁸⁴ In a similar way to ‘Homage to Malevich’, ‘Acrobats’ animates the continually crossing axes between ‘reading and seeing...seeing and reading’, and the effort of adjustment between these two activities of perception.⁸⁵ Elongating the Suprematist word-square, this vertical rectangle poem is a precise constellation of letters, formed of symmetrical lines along both the vertical and horizontal axes, with each horizontal line formed of identical letters. However, the eye is drawn from the linear arrangement to focus on the diagonals, to read the repeated word ‘acrobats’, which is descending and ascending, to the left and to the right, along the diagonal lines. Each descending ‘acrobats’ meets an ascending ‘acrobats’ to share the ‘s’ at their meeting point, like the overlapping of limbs. There are few instances of the completed word, only four, with many of the repetitions of the word shorn at increments/decrements by the invisible border at the edges of the poem. Unlike the ‘Homage’, which could only be read from left to right, in spite of the consequence of the visual patterning of letters, ‘acrobats’ can be read in multiple directions and from multiple points of access. The earliest manuscript for this poem, typewritten on a sheet of tracing paper, is listed under the designation ‘Poem’, which suggests that this animated composition could be a foundational moment in Finlay’s conception of literary work.⁸⁶ The poem itself was redefined as the conscious visualisation of perceptual effort.

In typed notes that accompanied this early draft of the poem, Finlay emphasises the importance of ‘direction’, as opposed to ‘pattern’, in the linkage of words:

----- the line isn’t **direction**

a a a a a random letters aren’t
direction

-----> an arrow **is direction**

and this one which reads from left to right is
direction too

⁸⁴ ‘Bilateral Symmetry’ was a one-word poem by Edward Lucie-Smith sent to Finlay c.1964, GRI MS 890144 (2), box 5, fol. 2, p. 1.

⁸⁵ Finlay, ‘BILATERAL SYMMETRY’, GRI MS 890144 (2), box 5, fol. 2, p. 1.

⁸⁶ Ian Hamilton Finlay, ‘Poem’, n.d. c.1964, GRI MS 890144 (1), box 5, fol. 1, p. 1.

Letters linked in meaningful sequence to form words offer direction, and the conventions of syntax are seen as adopting the same unequivocal course as the arrow. By ‘direction’, Finlay means the purpose of their arrangement. ‘We normally read from left to right’, he continues, ‘and across, but we **can** read from left to right, downwards, from right to left, upwards etc. etc. The eye (the mind) by reflex, will link letters into words, discovering direction’.⁸⁷ In Finlay’s terms, the lexical ‘pattern’ – almost certainly informed by his familiarity with the ‘typestracts’ of Houédard – insists upon a use of language and punctuation to create a visually construed atmosphere as opposed to the cultivation of any one literary ‘direction’. Through the refraction of lexical direction in ‘acrobats’, the ““all over” visual pattern’ does not remain scattered, like Houédard’s flickering punctuation marks, but assembles itself into discrete formulations at points dictated by the perceiving eye.⁸⁸ The nature of movement in ‘acrobats’ is determined by the spacing between letters and the relative size of the typeface, which is very carefully balanced so as not to prove too diffuse, extending the diagonal line away through the word. Therefore, ‘the individual letters are behaving like the “real” acrobats in the circus troupe who are both separate units and parts of various – changing – patterns – constructions and towers’.⁸⁹ The ‘bilateral symmetry’ reintroduces itself at this point. While a poem such as ‘acrobats’ bifurcates ‘reading and seeing’, Finlay also draws out the metaphorical implications of a language that both conveys and embodies its meaning. Rather than describing the activity of the acrobats, it is paralleled by the activity of the poem. The letters leap together and draw apart as we follow the separate lines of meaning, criss-crossing in different formulations with every reading. In subsequent years Finlay experimented with the introduction of colour, layout and material, to place pressure on the precise quality of the optical effect.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Finlay, ‘BILATERAL SYMMETRY’, p. 1. A revised version of these explanatory notes was published in Williams, *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, n.p.

⁸⁸ In a sardonic letter, Finlay observes that Houédard’s poems ‘wobble all over the page: that it always a sign of complexity and deep thoughts’; Finlay, letter to Stephen Bann, dated June 1965, *Midway*, p. 54.

⁸⁹ Finlay, ‘BILATERAL SYMMETRY’, p. 1.

⁹⁰ ‘Acrobats’, was published as a ‘poster-poem’ screenprint in 1966 by the Tarasque Press, Nottingham, in bright blue with orange lettering. It was also reprinted by the Wild Hawthorn Press in 1966 in an inverted form; a black screenprint with white lettering.

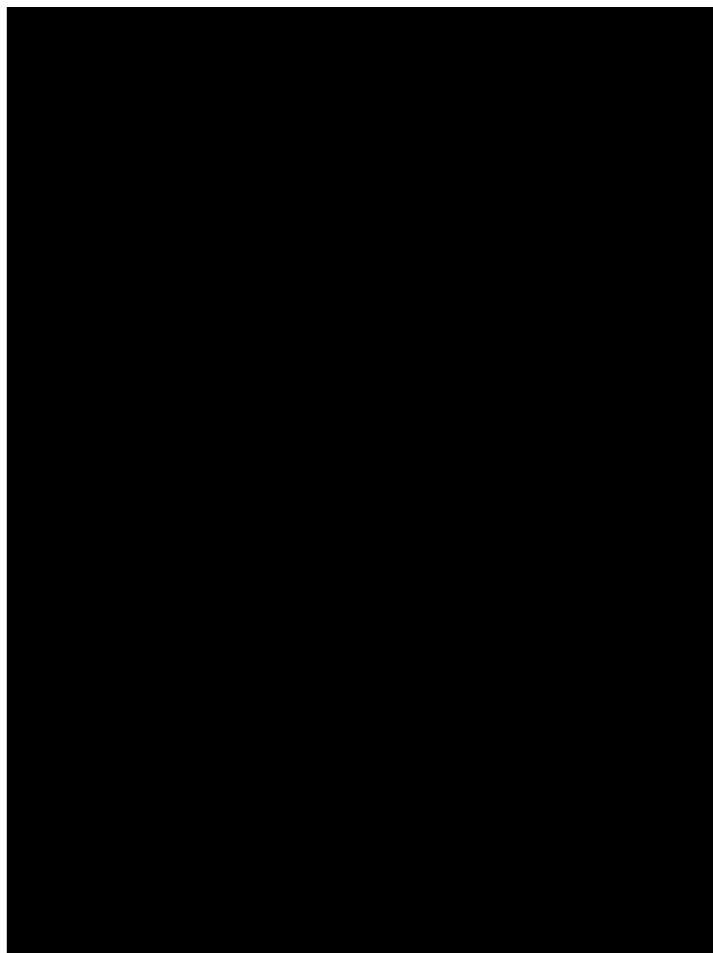


Fig. 25. Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'acrobats', *Lugano Review*, 1 (1965), 62.

The question of what constituted movement, 'direction', 'linkage' – essentially kineticism – in poetry, was a prescient one. By the time 'acrobats' was published in the first edition of *The Lugano Review* (1965) as one of 'Three Optical Poems' (Fig. 25), the idea of poetic movement as a new mechanics of perception had entered wider discussion, illustrated by articles in publications as diverse as *Granta*, *The London Magazine*, *MONAD* and *Typographica*.⁹¹ The collective premise of these many diverse writings was that the 'kinetic' pertained to both actual movement (action/dynamism), as well as to virtual movement (the sensation of movement as experienced by the viewer). It had been adopted from the recent technical leaps made in fine art, which were

⁹¹ Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'Three Optical Poems', *Lugano Review* 1.1 (1965), 61-64. The poem was first published with eleven others in *Wormwood Review*, 2.14 (1964). For surrounding discussion see Reg Gadney, 'Kinetic Art', *Granta*, 30 (1963), 24-26; the first issue of *Monad*, Summer 1964, covered the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (London: Chelsea School of Art, 1964); Reg Gadney, 'Kinetic Art', *The London Magazine*, 4.5 (August 1964), 37; two special numbers of journals emerged a little later with the 'concrete and kinetic issue' of *Isis* (16 February 1966) and a special kinetic art issue of *Studio International*, 173.886 (February 1967).

perhaps described most successfully by the French art historian Frank Popper, in his comprehensive essay 'Kinetic Art – Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow'. There, he explained his use of the term as encompassing 'works ranging from abstract illusionist pictures whose repetitive patterns are designed principally to create illusory movement to the most complex, electronic three-dimensional constructions, which are dominated by mechanical movement'.⁹² Between 1953 and 1963, Victor Musgrave curated an eclectic programme at his London based Gallery One, showing the first British survey of optical and kinetic art in 1958.⁹³ Houédard, in his first article for the *TLS*, 'paradada', described the 'poet-artist hookup in kinetics' as resistant to conventional representative forms: 'creativity now – not art-poem as creationis imitation (to copy outside-inside worlds / nature / impressions of nature / soul-psyche-subconscious) – but artist-poet as imitator creatoris...poems not copies of but additions to'.⁹⁴ As one of the foremost advocates for concrete, he concluded, in his characteristically exuberant prose, that '4-D poetry logically closes 1st cent modern art from 1863 napolean III *salon des refusés* - & logically postwittgenstein treats language as *matter*...poems to be looked *at* not *thru*'.⁹⁵

This claim was supported by events such as the '1st INTERNATIONAL KINKON' exhibition of concrete poetry and kinetic art, organised by the newly founded International Kinetic Poetry Foundation (IKPF), at St Catharine's College, Cambridge University at the end of 1964. It was a space that collapsed the disciplines, in which poems were hung as works of art.⁹⁶ 'Kinkon' was a word invented by Houédard, fusing 'kinetic' and 'konkrete' under the aegis of one term, and featured in or titled a number of publications.⁹⁷ As well as displaying the work of poets including Finlay, Houédard and Ernst Jandl, the St. Catharine's exhibition also hosted a 'Kinetic Forum' on 28 November 1964 at the Architecture School of the university, featuring 'phonetic

⁹² Frank Popper, 'Kinetic Art – Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow', *Four Essays on Kinetic Art: Stephen Bann, Reg Gaudy, Frank Popper and Philip Steadman* (London: Motion Books, 1966), pp. 5-15 (p. 5).

⁹³ Carmen Juliá, 'You saw it here first: Gallery One, New Vision Centre, Signals and Indica at Tate Britain', *Tate etc.*, 24 (Spring 2012), 15.

⁹⁴ Dom Sylvester Houédard, 'paradada', *TLS*, 3258 (6 August 1964), 696.

⁹⁵ Houédard, 'paradada', 696.

⁹⁶ The First International Exhibition of Concrete, Phonetic and Kinetic Poetry was held at St Catharine's College, Cambridge from 28 November – 5 December 1964. The fund was founded by Mike Weaver in Cambridge in 1964.

⁹⁷ Dom Sylvester Houédard, *Op and Kinkon Poems/and Some Non-Kinkon* (London: Writers Forum, 1965).

poems, kinetic films, slides and discussion'.⁹⁸ In advance of the exhibition, the journal *Image* posed this question to its readers, altering its title to *Image: Kinetic Art: Concrete Poetry* to highlight its subject: the 'convergence of two modern traditions, one linguistic and the other artistic'.⁹⁹ As Philip Steadman stated in his Editorial, the issue was weighted towards the visual, 'largely devoted to Kinetic art', defined as art 'incorporating *real* movement as opposed to the painted or static *illusion* of movement'.¹⁰⁰ It featured introductory reviews of kinetic art by Frank Popper and the Cambridge scholar Reg Gadney, reprinted an extract of Finlay's letter of 17 September 1963 to Pierre Garnier, and offered documentary profiles of the contemporary artists Martha Boto, Nino Calos, J-M. Cruxent, Andree Dantu, Knud Hvidberg, Frank Malina, Nicholas Schöffner, William Soya, and Gregorio Vardanega. Mike Weaver contributed an article to this issue which was one of the earliest to consider the cross-pollination between the developing art form and concrete poetry, 'Concrete and Kinetic: the Poem as Functional Object'.¹⁰¹ Weaver draws a line from Eugen Gomringer, Max Bill, Moholy-Nagy and Hans Arp to posit that although concrete is an 'essentially graphic medium', the 'boundaries' of the concrete poem take on a kinetic aspect in the relationship to time. While time exists within literature as a constant 'flow', a narrative stream, the poetry that most excites Weaver is that which encourages the intervention of the reader across the many separate 'articulations' of language, prompting what he describes as a 'psycho-physical' response.¹⁰² The range of movement in the kinetic poem, he maintains, is 'only limited by human perception of space and time': the reader is required to become active participant and, in so doing, create an individual prescription for the extent of the movement and dynamism of the poem.¹⁰³ Weaver uses Finlay's *Canal Stripe Series* to illustrate this point, as a poem that exploits the simple device of 'the time it takes to turn a page'.¹⁰⁴

However, in the following edition of *Image*, Bann was inclined to disagree with this partial reading of the series' animation. Building upon Weaver's emphasis upon duration, Bann

⁹⁸ Philip Steadman, 'Editorial', *Image, Kinetic Art: Concrete Poetry*, 2 (1964), 16.

⁹⁹ Steadman, 'Editorial', 16.

¹⁰⁰ Steadman, 'Editorial', 16.

¹⁰¹ Mike Weaver, 'Concrete and Kinetic: the Poem as Functional Object', *Image, Kinetic Art: Concrete Poetry*, 2 (1964), 14-15.

¹⁰² Weaver, 'Concrete and Kinetic: the Poem as Functional Object', 14.

¹⁰³ Weaver, 'Concrete and Kinetic: the Poem as Functional Object', 14. Weaver considers Finlay's *Canal Stripe Series* and *Rapel* as 'the purest and best concrete in Britain'.

¹⁰⁴ Weaver, 'Concrete and Kinetic: the Poem as Functional Object', 14.

agrees that that the kinetic booklets stage the actual movement from page-to-page, but argues that this induces a virtual movement of language: 'From being a purely practical operation, the turning of the page becomes the means of opening up a new landscape of words, intimately related to what has gone before and what is to follow'.¹⁰⁵ Accumulative in their dynamism, Bann suggests that the effect noted within the kinetic booklets is illustrated most effectively by 'Cythera', which in the varying translucency of its paper allows for the words and phrases to appear through the surface of each page, and to intrude upon supposedly separate junctures of the narrative.¹⁰⁶ Finlay's own proclivity for 'machine/kinetic' had evolved by the end of 1964, leading to the conviction that 'virtual movement is much more interesting and much less limited in possibilities'.¹⁰⁷ He was an avid reader of tracts and statements by kinetic artists and scholars of op art, including Israeli-born kinetic artist Yaacov Agam, Frank Popper, who visited Stonypath in 1965, the founders of the Signals Gallery David Medalla and Paul Keeler, described by Finlay as 'the Morecombe and Wise of British (as it were) kinetic', and the French graphic artist and founding father of Op, Victor Vasarely.¹⁰⁸ It was another arbiter of the square, however, that was to again reposition Finlay's sense of the poem as a site capable of transformative contemplation.

¹⁰⁵ Stephen Bann, 'Kinetic Art and Poetry', *Image* 2/6 (Winter/Spring 1966), 4-9 (p. 9).

¹⁰⁶ Bann, 'Kinetic Art and Poetry', 9. The same effect is noted in *Canal Stripe Series* 3 (1964).

¹⁰⁷ 'Though I do like the idea of things moved by the wind, sea or moon'; Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Stephen Bann, dated 25 November 1964, *Midway*, p. 34.

¹⁰⁸ Bann introduced Finlay to the writings of Vasarely in 1964, sending translated extracts from "Notes and Reflections", published by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris, for distribution to students'; Bann, *Midway*, p. 29. Popper visited Finlay on 20 March 1965: date noted in Finlay, letter to Bann, dated 21 March 1965, *Midway*, p. 46.

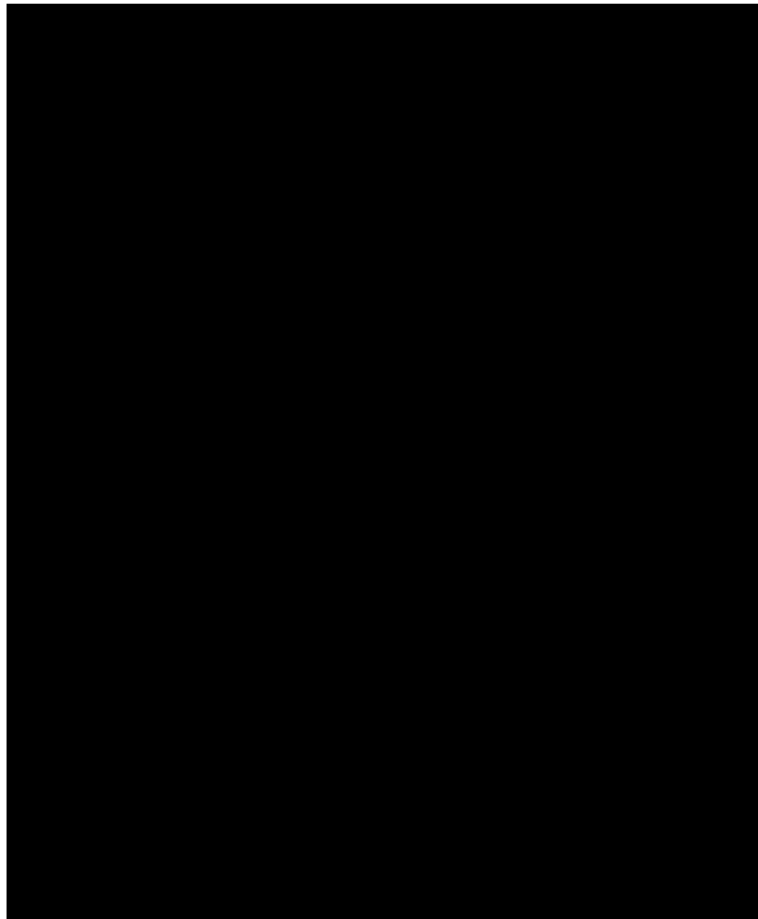


Fig. 26. Josef Albers, 'To Monte Alban', *Graphic Tectonics* (1942), zinc plate lithograph on paper, edition of 30, 368 x 292 mm, © The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn and DACS, London 2016.

5. An Ambivalent Geometry: The Influence of Josef Albers

On 7 September 1964, Finlay wrote a letter in reply to his fellow Scot and Wild Hawthorn poet,

Gael Turnbull, who had sent through an 'apt' and 'exact' account of concrete, and to whom

Finlay had sent his most recent work, *Canal Stripe Series 4*:

'I am truly delighted you like Canal 4. (I hope to send you 3 soon.) This kind of poem I see as being like those drawings of Albers, where they turn themselves inside-out as you watch – i.e. they can be seen as words, or word-things, and then again as distances behind the words, and then again as just words...a double life.'¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Gael Turnbull, dated 7 September c.1964, *A Model of Order*, pp. 29-30.

The *Canal Stripe Series* (1964), described by Finlay as one of his 'kinetic booklet' works, placed an emphasis upon the actions involved in reading.¹¹⁰ The minimalism of the poems in these two booklets (numbered 3 and 4), limited to a phrase per double-spread, quickens the pace of the turning of pages, stressing the centrality of this repetitive action in the activity of reading.¹¹¹ The rhythm by which the pages turn corresponds to the unfurling of narrative, depending upon the reader's rate of progress, which in turn focuses attention upon the individual experience. This generates a delay, by which the reader is forced to recognise the separation between action and perception, between the intervention of the body and the intercession of the mind. In this way, Finlay encourages the reader to acknowledge the familiarity of reading, and so to break with the habituation of literary interpretation. *Canal Stripe Series 4*, which reads 'little fields/long horizons/little fields long/for horizons/horizons long/for little fields', is an exercise in syntactical involution.¹¹² The large-scale lettering tracks the lower reaches of the long horizontal pages, with each of the fourteen words printed in the same murky grey blue. Evoking the waters of the canal, the steady blue flow of the words follow a straight line from page to page, while the perspective expressed in the poem fluctuates between near and far. The poem is elegantly described by Edwin Morgan as an oscillation between 'the homely and the infinite'.¹¹³

One reviewer denied that the conceit of the *canal stripe series* made it a 'kinetic' poem, failing to see 'why they are more so than any other writing where you have to move from one page to the next'.¹¹⁴ John William Mills Willett, a supporter of concrete literature, having previously published Finlay's *Canal Stripe Series 3* among other concrete poems in the *TLS* in 1962, is here dismissive of 4, as the 'briefest book ever published'.¹¹⁵ The overall effect of Finlay's recent work, Willett contends, is that of a 'butterfly caught in an adding machine', a metaphor intended to reduce Finlay's command of lyrical composition to one of whimsical

¹¹⁰ Finlay, letter to Stephen Bann, dated October 1965, *Midway*, p. 69.

¹¹¹ There was also a *Canal Stripe Series 5*, which Finlay refers to in a letter to Stephen Bann as remaining 'in the drawer' due to his lack of finances; Finlay, letter to Stephen Bann, dated late Jan/early Feb 1965, *Midway*, p. 57.

¹¹² Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Canal Stripe Series 4* (Edinburgh: Wild Hawthorn Press, 1964).

¹¹³ Morgan, 'Early Finlay', in *Wood Notes Wild*, p. 22.

¹¹⁴ John William Mills Willett, 'Scots Guard', *TLS*, 3276 (10 December 1964), 1128.

¹¹⁵ Willett, 'Scots Guard', 1128.

sequencing.¹¹⁶ What Willett fails to note, however, and what makes this poem distinct, is that it sets up a chiastic structure, an irresolvable equation between the concrete ‘fields’ and the abstract ‘horizon’, in which clauses turn in on themselves. The two instances of the word ‘for’ are printed at a much smaller font size than the rest of the lettering, rendering the preposition a turning screw in the dramatic revolution of perspective. The ‘horizons’ and ‘fields’ are positioned so as to face each other on facing pages, and to be pressed into one another as the reader thumbs through the book, achieving the desired conflation with the simple turning of the page. Although the movement through the booklet follows one consistent line ‘from one page to the next’, the parallel structure set up within the poem denies a linearity of meaning, turning ‘inside out’, back in on itself. The ‘direction’ becomes, as in the work of the German artist and educator Josef Albers, multi-aspectual, calling attention to the interstice between what Finlay notes above as words as ‘just words’ and the assembled ‘distances behind words’, between words as signs – nouns, verbs and prepositions, and words as symbols – the steady flow of the canal and the stretching away of the horizon. In order to establish the ‘double life’ to which he refers in the above letter to Turnbull, heightening the consciousness of the ‘bilateral symmetry’ of word and image in ‘acrobats’, Finlay took great encouragement from the constructive designs of Josef Albers.

This was not the first time that Finlay had likened his new appreciation for the kinetic in his poetry to the work of Albers. Earlier in the year he had written to the American poet Ronald Johnson in a fit of enthusiasm:

‘...please – please – tell me what you know of Albers. What books of his are available? I have one in German which a girl read me bits of on Sunday, and it is awfully good – I mean, his pictures are, and the things said about them FIT exactly what I feel about poetry now...Do you think he would illustrate a book of mine? I know he is famous and old, but I have poems which are – well, in all modesty – pretty – well, I mean, they would go very well with his drawings, and it would seem fitting later on, when I am dead, etc etc. Do either of you know him? Can you introduce me? Please tell me ALL you know about his theories etc and what books in English there are. Oh I feel very enthusiastic. I bet he would be nuts about my poems on glass if they were done and he could see them. Because some of them use words in just the way he uses perspective, only I made the poems move in lines by – I mean, I made the visual lines by using the

¹¹⁶ Willett, ‘Scots Guard’, 1128.

fact that the eye connects letters into words – you follow? – so you can control HOW the eye will move across the poem (if you do it that way)'.¹¹⁷

Johnson was affiliated with the Black Mountain College through his friend, the poet Jonathan Williams, who attended the college from 1951 and came under the tutelage of Charles Olson.¹¹⁸ Finlay, knowing that Albers had been head of the painting programme at Black Mountain College from 1933-1949, wrote in the hope that Johnson or Williams would be able to provide him with the necessary information. Although it is unclear to which book Finlay refers, it is likely that it was the 1961 volume *Josef Albers : trotz der Geraden : eine Analyse seiner graphischen Konstruktionen* by François Bucher, which contained reproductions of his monochrome lithographic collections *Graphic Tectonics*, *Transformations of a Scheme* and *Structural Constellations*.¹¹⁹ The zinc plate lithographs from *Graphic Tectonics*, based exclusively on straight lines and structural components, were drafted and completed while at Black Mountain between 1941-1942, as part of an attempt to realise 'an illusionary modulation of volume and space which results in plastic movement'.¹²⁰ Albers wrote a 'Synopsis' of the series in the year after they were printed, reflecting that 'as the term "tectonic" implies, the abstract compositions shown here are constructed, being built with elements that are produced by mechanical means and arranged in an emphasized mechanical order'.¹²¹ By 'mechanical' Albers means a consistency of approach and a lack of evidence of authorship, through use of a ruler, drafting pen and the precision of the lithographic process. Each of these geometrical designs, delineated with horizontal and vertical lines of identical thickness and commensurate spacing, appear to chart multiple planes from which elements project forward or recede into the background. Lithographs such as 'To Monte Alban' (Fig. 26) and 'Seclusion', reproduced in Bucher's study, demonstrate the complexity of these optical effects, whereby the striations of lines build to create figures of continual reversal.

¹¹⁷ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Ronald Johnson, dated 29 June c.1964, in *A Model of Order*, pp. 27-28.

¹¹⁸ Ross Hair, *Ronald Johnson's Modernist Collage Poetry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 8.

¹¹⁹ François Bucher, *Josef Albers : trotz der Geraden : eine Analyse seiner graphischen Konstruktionen* (Bern: Benteli-Verlag, 1961). This was the most recent book-length study of Albers' work, and the only critical appreciation at the time of his graphic compositions. It is unlikely that this book would have been Albers' own vastly more popular publications *Homage to the Square*, published by Ives Sillman in 1962, or *Interaction of Color*, published by Yale University Press in 1963, as neither were published at this time in German editions.

¹²⁰ Josef Albers, 'Synopsis' (1942), repr. in Bucher, *Josef Albers : trotz der Geraden*, p. 10.

¹²¹ Albers, 'Synopsis', in Bucher, *Josef Albers : trotz der Geraden*, p. 10.

In 'To Monte Alban', a title that references the stratified terraces of the pre-Colombian archaeological site in Oaxaca, Mexico, the white squares could be openings at the end of passageways as they could equally be platforms atop pyramidal structures.¹²² Albers' fascination with pre-Hispanic art was informed by more than a dozen trips to Latin America following emigration to the United States in 1933, with exceptional focus on photographing and documenting archaeological sites in Mexico, such as Mitla, Monte Albán, Tenayuca, Teotihuacán, and Uxmal.¹²³ Drawing inspiration from the murals, terraces, plazas, archways and intricately carved surfaces of these ancient settlements, Albers compels the eyes to follow the deceptively simple paths created by the lines into an assumption of depth, only to be forced into retracing them. The illusionistic potential unique to the two-dimensional surface is the grounding of Albers work, but it is the human dimension that provides the greatest stimulus to his methodology; a position he explains as existing in 'the discrepancy between physical fact and psychic effect'.¹²⁴ Albers created work intent upon the 'opening of eyes', in a way so as to be both experiential and didactic.¹²⁵

¹²² See Cyril Barrett, *Op Art* (London: Studio Vista, 1970), pp. 112-115.

¹²³ See César Paternosto, *The Stone and the Thread: Andean Roots of Abstract Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), pp. 205-211.

¹²⁴ Josef Albers, *Josef Albers: Homage to the Square* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1964), n.p.

¹²⁵ See Brenda Danilowitz and Frederick A. Horowitz, *Josef Albers: To Open Eyes* (London: Phaidon, 2009).

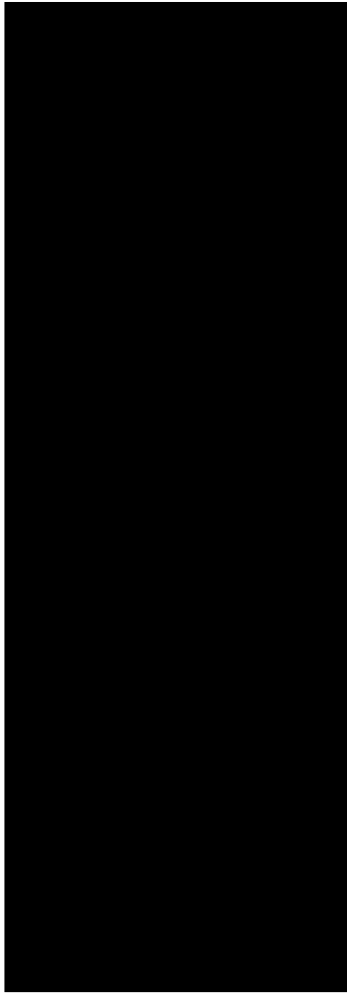


Fig. 27. Dom Sylvester Houédard,
‘Typestract 130663’, letter to Ian
Hamilton Finlay, dated 13 June 1963,
SCSC IHFC box 2, fol. 28.

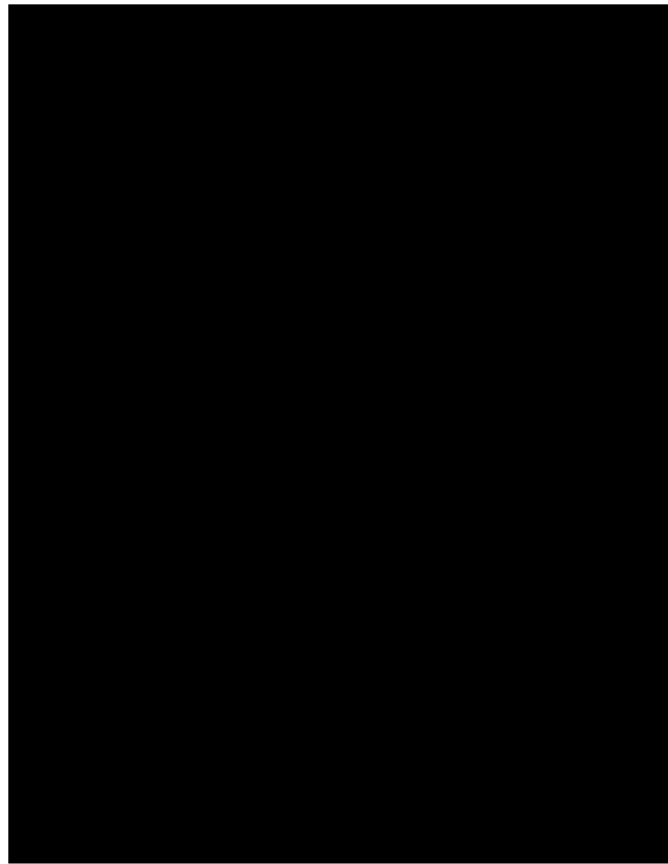


Fig. 28. Dom Sylvester Houédard,
‘Type Script’, *IKON*, 1.3 (1966).

A number of other concrete poets, such as Ronaldo Azeredo, Paula Claire, Heinz Gappmayr, Jiří Valoch and foremost among them Houédard, also responded to the generative potential of Albers’ squares (Fig. 27). The iconic structures of abstract art provided concrete poetry with a select vocabulary of forms as illustrated on the front cover of the third issue of *IKON* magazine (Fig. 28). Both Finlay and Albers devised an illusory space of shifting perspectives that is nevertheless coordinated by a directive syntax. Albers’ emphasis upon ‘exact proportions’, ‘directness’ and the relativities of ‘construction’, has clear affinities with Finlay’s semantic economy and mechanics of perception.¹²⁶ Albers described the content of his work as the ‘visual formulation of our reaction to life’, with its aim as the ‘revelation and evocation of

¹²⁶ An interesting comparison could be drawn with Stefan Themerson’s ‘semantic poetry’; see *On Semantic Poetry* (London: Gaberbocchus Press, 1975).

vision'.¹²⁷ Certain of Finlay's poems of the period adopted 'purely optical' strategies, such as 'fir/far' from *Tea-leaves and Fishes* (1966) and 'tendresse' from *Telegrams from my Windmill* (1964), the former a concise poem of widening and contracting visual parameters and the latter a rectangle poem that alternates the words 'tendresse' and 'tender dress' to scintillating effect.¹²⁸ Finlay felt 'an absolute need to turn from the rhythmic to the static' which had hitherto been addressed by his compulsion for 'making little toys – things of no account in themselves'.¹²⁹ Many of these toys – wooden objects carved into fish or boats or trinkets – featured in a 1962 exhibition at the home of the Scottish publisher John Calder.¹³⁰ However, by 'static', Finlay did not mean lacking in movement. This problem of 'how to put words together – essentially a problem of syntax' was what Finlay later reflected upon as the 'development of earlier concrete poetry - from the poem as an object on the page to the poem as an object properly realised in sandblasted glass, stone or indeed concrete'.¹³¹ As the logical plastic extension of his visually engaged or typographically constructed poems, Finlay's first 'standing poem', *Pear/ Appear*, devised in 1963, performed one of the earliest exercises in poetry as spatial confrontation (Fig. 29). It is both a static object and a kinetic poem, inducing the reader to move around the structure to read the words that are divided across each of the four faces of the vertically striped cuboid: 'PEAR / ppear / APPEAR | sappear / isappear / DISAPPEAR | isappear / sappear / APPEAR | ppear / PEAR'.¹³² Colour is also used as a means of visual organization: each word is divided into its own section by uniformly drawn green lines, the capitalized words are printed in dark yellow and the lower-case words are written in dark blue. The parallelism of the sentence is made all the more conspicuous by the fluctuation in height of the sentence, with the first clause of interposition 'PEAR' to 'DISAPPEAR' set a few centimetres from the top of the card, and the second clause, 'isappear' to the break in the card, set just above the midpoint. This small aperture at one of the corners runs the vertical length of the cuboid, introducing a narrow strip

¹²⁷ Albers, *Josef Albers: Homage to the Square*, n.p.

¹²⁸ See Bann, 'Kinetic Art and Poetry', 4-9.

¹²⁹ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to David Brown, dated March 1976, quoted in Yves Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer* (Edinburgh: Reaktion Books, 1985), p. 10.

¹³⁰ Finlay, quoted in Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay*, p. 10.

¹³¹ Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'Autobiographical Sketch', in *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Selections*, pp. xix-xxi (p. xxi).

¹³² *Standing Poem I Pear/ Appear* (Edinburgh: Wild Hawthorn Press, 1963). This poem featured in the 1965 I.C.A. show *Between Poetry and Painting* (1965), along with the spirited 'poem-print' 'Le Circus' (1964).

through which a hollow interior of blank faces can be seen. Finlay introduces this additional spatial dimension, another vantage, peering into a physical space created by the poem itself. The word 'ear' is embedded within all of these words, emphasizing the divide between what is heard and what is seen. Finlay plays upon the optical proximity and aural dissimilarity of 'pear' and 'ppear', to indicate the visual and aural relationship to 'peer'. As the words wax or wane, sight is refracted across the cuboid by the dividing lines and the reader is made aware of the variant qualities of vision – glimpsing, looking, peering and perceiving.

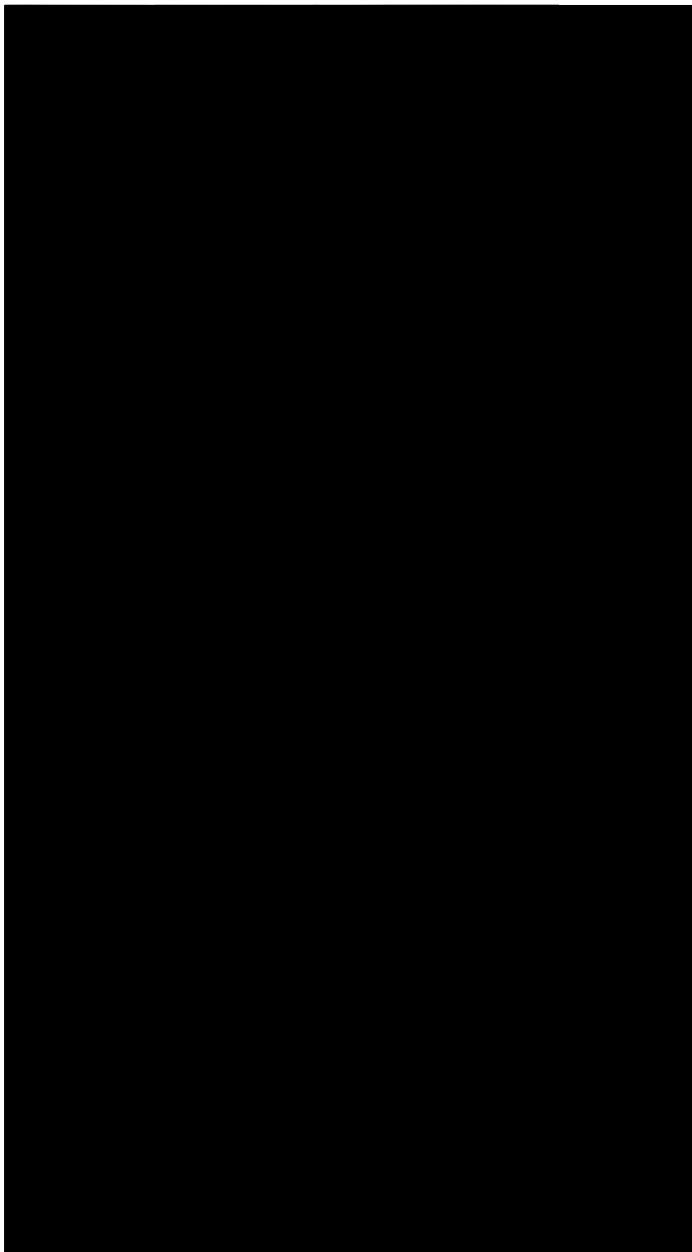


Fig. 29. Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Standing Poem I Pear/ Appear* (Edinburgh: Wild Hawthorn Press, 1963).

A similar idea was intimated by an unrealised ‘Caro’ poem project, referencing the weightless steel sculptures of Anthony Caro. In a letter discussing the one-word poems, he concludes by typing out a rough draft of a ‘kind of “Caro” poem’:

3
 cornered hat
 (one word at each corner of the paper), and going on with one word (centred)
 on each page, as follows:

pears	circle	zebras
straight	square	Diaghilev

It was conceived as a ‘sequence’ to fill a ‘nice enigmatic booklet’, presumably following in the format of his kinetic booklets.¹³³ Equally, Finlay envisages its inscription across a ‘wooden cube’, but seems flummoxed by the challenge of meeting Caro at three dimensions: ‘it needs to be more perfectly realised than I could manage’.¹³⁴

In the accompanying note to the *Graphic Tectonics*, reprinted in *Josef Albers : trotz der Geraden*, Albers conceived of the graphic relationships at work within his compositions with a comparable syntactical openness. Entitled ‘Syntax’, the paragraph focuses upon the design of ‘related junctions of horizontals and verticals’ to devise ‘multiple images’, ‘several interpretations’ and ‘movements...[that] interchange’.¹³⁵ Thus, Albers concluded, ‘we cannot remain in a single viewpoint, we need more for the sake of free vision’.¹³⁶ With this knowledge of Albers’ stance towards the orthodoxies of literary and artistic expression, it is worth returning to the tentative comments made by Finlay in 1963 in his letter to Pierre Garnier, in which he hoped to conceive of ‘a syntax and a movement that would be true of the new feeling’.¹³⁷ This syntax was by no means a new authority, any more closely attuned to contemporary habits of communication, but conveyed by the desire for a new manner of expression conscious of its provisionality. In Finlay’s words, such an attitude to verbal and visual phrasing could only be ‘a construction, very

¹³³ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Stephen Bann, dated 13 August 1966, *Midway*, pp. 146-7.

¹³⁴ Finlay, quoted in *Midway*, pp. 146-7.

¹³⁵ Josef Albers, ‘Syntax (1942)’, in Bucher, *Josef Albers : trotz der Geraden*, p. 11.

¹³⁶ Albers, ‘Syntax (1942)’, in Bucher, *Josef Albers : trotz der Geraden*, p. 11.

¹³⁷ Finlay, ‘Letter from Finlay to Pierre Garnier’, *Image*, 9-10.

haphazard, uncertain, and by means as yet to be taken as definitive'.¹³⁸ Finlay was stimulated by Albers not simply for 'the way he use[d] perspective', but also by the prismatic quality of his lines, and the potential these complex structures presented for analogous 'visual lines' in poetry. In the elaborate way these lines reveal multiple dimensions to the eye, so the spatial relationships within poetry reveal the many connections open to the eye in its recognition of language.¹³⁹ Although kinetic artists such as Victor Vasarely and Yaacov Agam had proven to be 'significant points of reference' for his poem constructions, it was the chiasmic structures in the work of Albers that presented new propositions for language.¹⁴⁰ Acutely attentive to the perceptual standpoint of the reader, Finlay was able to question the ability of poetry to 'control HOW the eye will move across the poem', and to build a syntax of redoubling directions that questioned the integrity of written language.¹⁴¹ It was in this respect that Finlay would assert, 'his [Albers'] pictures are, and the things said about them FIT exactly what I feel about poetry now'.¹⁴²

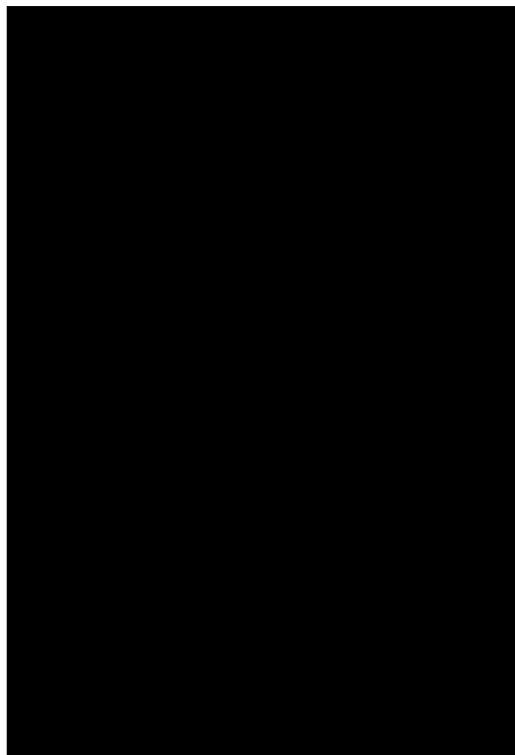


Fig. 30. Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'ajar', *Lugano Review*, 1 (1965), 63.

¹³⁸ Finlay, 'Letter from Finlay to Pierre Garnier', *Image*, 9-10.

¹³⁹ Finlay, letter to Ronald Johnson, dated 29 June c.1964, *A Model of Order*, pp. 27-28.

¹⁴⁰ Stephen Bann notes the influence of Agam and Vasarely in *Midway*, p. 48.

¹⁴¹ Finlay, letter to Ronald Johnson, dated 29 June c.1964, in *A Model of Order*, pp. 27-28.

¹⁴² Finlay, letter to Ronald Johnson, dated 29 June c.1964, *A Model of Order*, pp. 27-28.

For Finlay, this degree of plastic activity was to find expression in one of his 'Optical Poems', 'Ajar':

You know what I said about asking Albers if he would do drawings to go with some of my more formal poems – well, I wonder if Jonathan could ask him (Albers) if he would consider doing a wee leaflet thing with this poem, 'ajar'... You know he has these nice things that are sort of diagrams, of geometric lines; only when you look at them they undulate, and turn themselves slowly inside-out, and back... so in the end they are like seaweed in the waves, really... except that they are like nutshell axioms... Well, I wondered if he could do 2 drawings say, that would go with these to make a 4tych, I can't remember the word for it... like tryp... oh I can't even SPELL it... anyway a 4-panel leaflet-book that I could print by the Wild Hawthorn... with my 2 ajars and 2 of his ajar drawings... poem/drawing/poem/drawing or drawing/poem etc.¹⁴³

The poem 'ajar' (Fig. 30) plays a game with the perception of depth in a similar way to Albers' *volta-face* frameworks. Reliant on a precise arrangement of textual forms, the slanting of each rectilinear 'stanza' is evocative of a door held ajar. In its original draft version, three of these textual 'doors' alternate down the page at slanting angles to form a vertical column.¹⁴⁴ Each of the 'doors', or to use Finlay's term 'panels', are composed of repetitions of the word 'ajar', which dramatize the sharp intercession of the triangular negative spaces into the poem. Upon careful inspection, one notices that there is an additional factor in the construction of the poem, described by Finlay as a 'double-optical effect', as the word 'ajar' can be read one of two ways – following the 'tilt' of the angled words or along its reverse.¹⁴⁵ This version of the poem appeared in Stephen Bann's *concrete poetry: an international anthology* (1967), distinctive in the selection of Finlay's poetry as the only poem reproduced in the recognisable font of the typewriter.¹⁴⁶

At this point, it is appropriate to acknowledge the influence of the Swiss poet and acknowledged co-founder of the international concrete poetry movement, Eugen Gomringer, who had commandeered the principle of 'inversion' – here displayed to a certain extent in 'ajar' –

¹⁴³ Finlay, letter to Ronald Johnson, dated 29 June c.1964, in *A Model of Order*, pp. 28-29. Printed as one of the 'Three Optical Poems' in *Lugano Review* 1.1 (1965), 61-64.

¹⁴⁴ Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'ajar', n.d. c.1964, GRI MS 890144 (3), box 5, fol. 1.

¹⁴⁵ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Stephen Bann, dated 7 September 1965, *Midway*, p. 63.

¹⁴⁶ Finlay, 'ajar', in *concrete poetry: an international anthology*, p. 142.

in some of the earliest examples of European concrete poetry.¹⁴⁷ Gomringer's work was thought to have realised the 'closest possible rapport between poetry and constructive art'.¹⁴⁸ He claimed 'inversion' was his single most significant contribution to the development of concrete poetry, evidenced by such widely anthologized poems as 'ping/pong', 'silencio', and perhaps his most enigmatic poem, 'the black mystery', as it formed an 'invitation' to an 'element of play'.¹⁴⁹ Although Gomringer emerged from an artistic milieu, collaborating as early as 1944 with artists such as Max Bill, Richard Loehse and Dieter Rot, he also recognised what industrial design, graphics and commercial art presented as 'models for a new poetry just waiting to be taken up for meaningful use'.¹⁵⁰ In his 1954 manifesto, 'From Line to Constellation', Gomringer stressed the need for 'brevity and conciseness', as witnessed in the 'headlines, slogans, groups of sounds and letters' of daily life, to create an 'object to be both seen and used', an object with universal application in its simplicity of expression.¹⁵¹ Gomringer's provocations to the reader, in their witty use of spatial arrangement and typography as constitutive of meaning, created a new kind of poem object, a 'constellation' as it 'encloses a group of words as if it were drawing stars together to form a cluster'.¹⁵² His poems form visual conundrums that encourage 'play activity', an attitude that admits a new flexibility in reading. 'the black mystery' forms a frame to box in a central polygonal blank, slanted like building blocks. The 'mystery', the reader is told, 'is here', but it is uncertain; the space is formed of elliptical breaks between the words 'here...is' and 'is...here', challenging the reader's attempt to fix the precise point of this interaction. The parameters of the poem are circumscribed, but it is at the midway point of the syntactical inversion, however, that the gap appears.

¹⁴⁷ Eugen Gomringer, 'inversion und öffnung (1987)', in *Theorie der konkreten Poesie: Texte und Manifeste 1954-1997* (Wien: Edition Splitter, 1997), pp. 128-29.

¹⁴⁸ Weaver, 'Concrete Poetry', *Lugano Review*, 1.5-6 (1966), p. 109.

¹⁴⁹ Gomringer was first anthologised in a British publication in Stephen Bann's *concrete poetry: an international anthology*: 'silencio' on p. 31, 'ping pong' on p. 33 and 'black mystery' on p. 35.

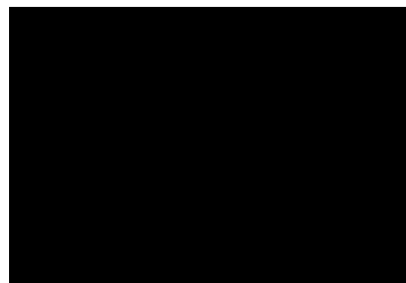
¹⁵⁰ Eugen Gomringer, 'From Line to Constellation', trans. Mike Weaver, *Journal of Hispanic Arts*, 1.3-4 (Winter-Spring 1968), 67.

¹⁵¹ Gomringer, 'From Line to Constellation', 67.

¹⁵² Gomringer, 'From Line to Constellation', 67.



Eugen Gomringer, 'the black mystery' (1952)



Eugen Gomringer, 'silencio' (1954)

The rectangle of 'silencio' is also structured around the emphatic use of negative space at its centre of the approximate size and dimensions of the word 'silencio', to represent in spatial terms the void of silence. In this instance, however, the empty rectangle is presented as the equivalent, if not an intensification of, the word itself, and offers an experiential dimension to the quality of silence within a poem. The inversion is between presence and absence. The development in emphasis in the short time between these two poems – from inversion as a literary device to inversion as the staging of a spatial system – highlights Gomringer's affinity for Albers' self-conjugation and 'way of seeing'.¹⁵³ In his elegant retrospective homage to Albers, published in 1968 under the title *Josef Albers: His work as contribution to visual articulation in the twentieth century*, Gomringer suggested that the *Graphic Tectonics* series demonstrated 'more precisely than ever that there is a world between physical fact and psychic effect'.¹⁵⁴

Finlay was never in correspondence with Albers, due to the unfortunate episode of a letter supposedly never delivered.¹⁵⁵ Therefore, the above potential collaboration was never realized, nor the existence of Finlay's poems on glass ever communicated. Finlay was forced to search for an alternative for the twelfth edition of *P.O.T.H.* and the questions posed by Albers' fretworks of angles and forms had to be addressed by the 'optical' work of another artist. Compiled in October 1964 and printed at the end of that year, Finlay's concrete number fused the poetry of Lewis Carroll, J. F. Hendry, Dom Sylvester Houédard, Ernst Jandl, Edwin Morgan,

¹⁵³ Eugen Gomringer, *Josef Albers: His work as contribution to visual articulation in the twentieth century* (New York: George Wittenborn Inc., 1968), p. 76.

¹⁵⁴ Gomringer, *Josef Albers: His work as contribution*, p. 76.

¹⁵⁵ Finlay had hoped a letter would be delivered by Mike Weaver, though the delivery apparently never took place: 'Nor, in spite of my repeated pleas, has he [Weaver] ever told me if he did pass on the letter I wrote to Albers, about a POTH... This has meant that I couldn't write to Albers again, and was very inconvenient – till I gave up the idea out of sheer fatigue'. Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Stephen Bann, dated 21 June 1967, *Midway*, p. 248.

Mary Ellen Solt, Paul de Vree, and Finlay himself, with the ‘optical designs from painting’ of the Welsh painter Jeffrey Steele (Fig. 31).¹⁵⁶ The poems are carefully set alongside, beneath, or, most remarkably, amidst Steele’s networks of line and shape. The letters and words of Mary Ellen Solt’s poem are dispersed among dots of variable diameter, Ernst Jandl’s phonetic poem of machine gun fire ‘*schützengraben*’ is placed between columns of intensifying dashes, and on the back cover, Lewis Carroll’s riddling ‘doublets’ are framed by grids of diamonds that bend and darken.¹⁵⁷ Finlay’s poem, ‘ajar’, was coupled with a concertina design of chequered squares by Steele. Printed neatly below the design in a slightly altered format, removed from the long column and printed as two adjacent inverted ‘panels’, the poem mirrors the layout of Steele’s dynamic fanned effect. Additional numbers of *P.O.T.H.* included the optical / constructive designs or theoretical writings of artists such as Bridget Riley and Ad Reinhardt (no. 18) and Charles Biederman (no. 22), as well as the abandoned number 26 designed by Victor Vasarely.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ The ‘poesia concreta’ of the Brazilian poets Augusto de Campos, Marcelo Moura and Pedro Xisto appeared on the back cover of *P.O.T.H.* no. 6, and no. 10 was entitled the ‘concrete number’ with the work of Augusto de Campos, Finlay, Eugen Gomringer, Anselm Hollo, Dom Sylvester Houédard, Robert Lax and Edwin Morgan.

¹⁵⁷ The ‘doublets’ were word puzzles originally written for the readers of *Vanity Fair*: ‘Two words are proposed, of the same length, and the Puzzle consists in linking these together by interposing other words, each of which shall differ from the next word *in one letter only*’; Lewis Carroll, ‘Preface’, *Doublets: A Word Puzzle* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1879), p. 4. Examples in *P.O.T.H.* 12 include ‘white to black’, ‘winter to summer’, ‘river to shore’ and ‘grub to moth’.

¹⁵⁸ Finlay had also hoped to publish a ‘poem-print’ with Vasarely; Finlay, letter to Bann, dated 1 March 1965, *Midway*, p. 42.

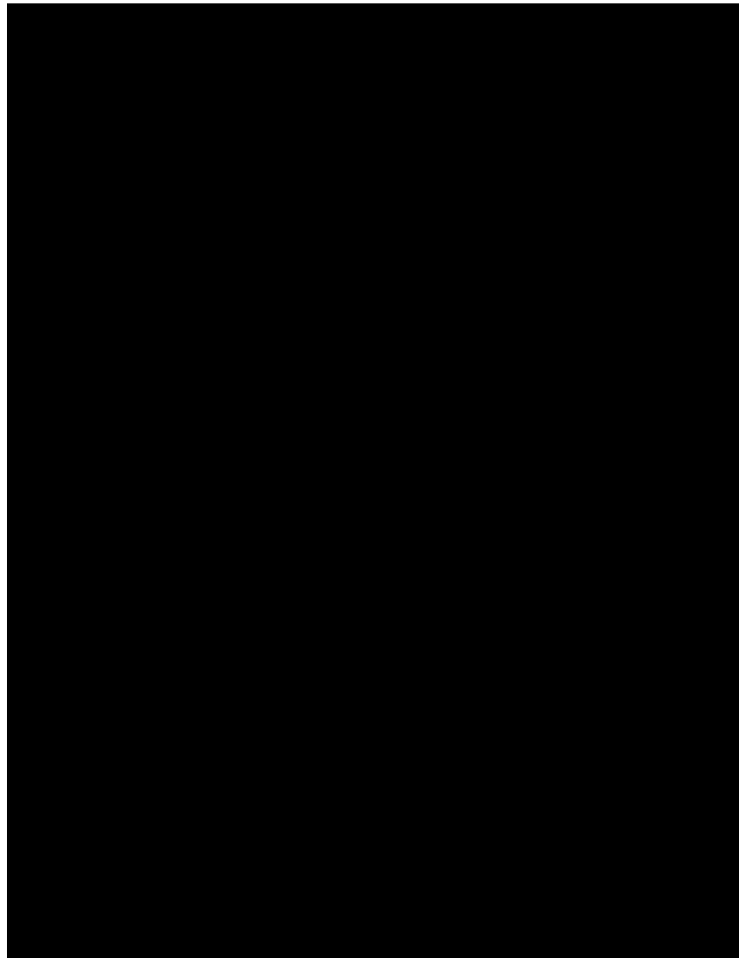


Fig. 31. Ian Hamilton Finlay and Jeffrey Steele, *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.*, 12, (Edinburgh: Wild Hawthorn Press, 1964), n.p.

However, Finlay's sensitivity to the 'nutshell axioms' of Albers' conversant forms did not diminish, in spite of this distance or these subsequent distractions. Finlay often saw echoes of Albers' compositions in his surrounding environment, he named one of his cats Albers and brewed a bitter and named it Albers Orange.¹⁵⁹ Albers is referenced in personal letters throughout the mid to late 1960s as one of the most vital progenitors of concrete poetry and as the modern authority on the square.¹⁶⁰ The work of Albers also received a wider British audience: Albers had his first solo exhibition in Britain from July – August 1961 at the Gimpel Fils Gallery in London, who also represented him in September 1965 with a transfer of his groundbreaking Zürich show *Josef Albers: Homage to the Square*.¹⁶¹ His lithographs and *Graphic Tectonics* series were

¹⁵⁹ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Patrick Taylor, dated 27 September 1965, GRI MS 890164 I Box 16, fol. 7, pp. 1-2 (p. 2).

¹⁶⁰ Cf. *Midway*, pp. 30, 101, 148, 248, 268.

¹⁶¹ Galerie Gimpel and Hanover, Zürich, *Josef Albers: Homage to the Square*, 23 June – 7 August 1965. The show at Gimpel Fils Gallery Ltd, London ran 1 September – 2 October 1965.

given a show in March of the same year at Editions Alecto, London.¹⁶² The relationship between Albers and concrete poetry also received critical attention, most prominently in the journal *Form*, which reproduced the lithograph 'Sanctuary' (1942) from the *Graphic Tectonics* series on the cover of a special 1967 issue (Fig. 32). Philip Steadman, along with his co-editors Mike Weaver and Stephen Bann, launched the first issue of *Form*, a 'quarterly magazine of the arts' in the summer of 1966, as the follow-up to Steadman's publication *Image* (1964). Steadman's economical Swiss-inspired design announced the magazine's 'austere' modernist agenda from the very first issue, employing a square format, deftly aligned narrow columns of text and the Helvetica typeface.¹⁶³ *Form* existed to assess contemporary works of literature and the arts alongside reassessments of earlier twentieth-century avant-garde movements, such as the Bauhaus, De Stijl, Dada, with the suggestion that the selected experimental precedents could act as a paradigm for a 1960s creative temperament. Setting out the 'aims' of the magazine in a short editorial note, Bann, Steadman, and Weaver intended *Form* to 'publish and provoke discussion of the relations of form to structure in the work of art, and of correspondences between the arts'. The editorial statement offered one further directive, which maintained the same critical line as *Image*: 'Emphasis is to be placed in particular on the fields of kinetic art and concrete poetry'.¹⁶⁴

As an explorative publication with an interdisciplinary and international outlook, it published the writings and works, some of which were translated for the first time, of artists and writers such as Roland Barthes, Theo van Doesburg, Kurt Schwitters, Gillo Dorfles, Gertrude Stein, Josef Albers, Robert Pinget, Victor Pasmore, William Carlos Williams and Finlay. A regular feature entitled 'Great Little Magazines' allowed the editors of *Form* to write about many of the 'little' modernist magazines that inspired them: *Mecano*, *Secession*, *G*, *De Stijl* and *Kulcher*. It was also clearly attuned to the recent developments in critical, theoretical and philosophical discourse, alighting most specifically on the burgeoning structuralist movement in France. Bann translated Roland Barthes' essay 'The Activity of Structuralism' for this first issue, which he later noted was

¹⁶² *Josef Albers: Graphic Tectonic and Other Lithographs* showed at Editions Alecto, London, from 9 March – 3 April 1965.

¹⁶³ Gwen Allen, 'A Compendium of Artists' Magazines', *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art*, ed. by Gwen Allen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), p. 261.

¹⁶⁴ Stephen Bann, Philip Steadman and Mike Weaver, 'Form No. 1, Summer 1966', *Form*, 1 (Summer 1966), 3.

‘possibly the first English translation of an essay by Roland Barthes’.¹⁶⁵ The fourth edition was published to coincide with the 1967 Brighton Festival Exhibition of Concrete Poetry, and this edition also featured the first of a section devoted to Black Mountain, with particular attention paid to Albers. Alongside the maps and guides to the festival, several articles about Albers considered the influence of his formal pedagogy and instructive optics, including a reflective autobiographical piece by Albers himself.¹⁶⁶ Accordingly, perhaps it will not be implausible to argue that by the end of the 1960s Finlay’s admiration for Albers’ minimalism, understood as the evolution of new visual expression subject to self-imposed limitations, gave rise to what Finlay was to characterise later in life as the ‘ULTIMATE’ in poetic expression: his one-word poems.¹⁶⁷ This chapter will conclude by suggesting that it was Finlay’s poems of ‘single words or seemingly minute effects’ that amplified his articulation of a graphic syntax.¹⁶⁸ How did Finlay’s early ‘abstract word compositions’ become constructed abstract situations?¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ Stephen Bann, quoted in Adrian Shaughnessy, ‘Modernism in 1960s British graphic design’, *U:D/R02 Space and Structure: Looking at Form, a quarterly magazine of the arts (1966-1969)* (London: Unit Editions, 2010), pp. 2-13 (p. 6). This essay had been included in Barthes’ collection of *Essais Critiques* (1964), and was first printed in Pierre Garnier’s *Les Lettres Nouvelles* in 1963.

¹⁶⁶ Lewis Shelley, ‘The Founding of the College’, *Form*, 4 (1967), 4-7; Josef Albers, ‘My courses at the Hochschule für Gestaltung at Ulm’, *Form*, 4 (1967), 8-10; Irving Finkelstein, ‘Albers’ “Graphic Tectonics”’, *Form*, 4 (1967), 10-14.

¹⁶⁷ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Jessie Sheeler, dated 27 February 1998, in *A Model of Order*, p. 54.

¹⁶⁸ Finlay, letter to Jessie Sheeler, dated 27 February 1998, in *A Model of Order*, p. 54.

¹⁶⁹ Dick Sheeler quoted in Alec Finlay, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Selections*, p. 272. ‘The definitions (presumably approved by IHF) are from Dick Sheeler’s unpublished essay ‘A Note on Concrete Poetry, January 1965’.’ Sheeler defines ‘fauve’ as poems of ‘sensed experience’, while suprematist poems were ‘abstract word compositions’.

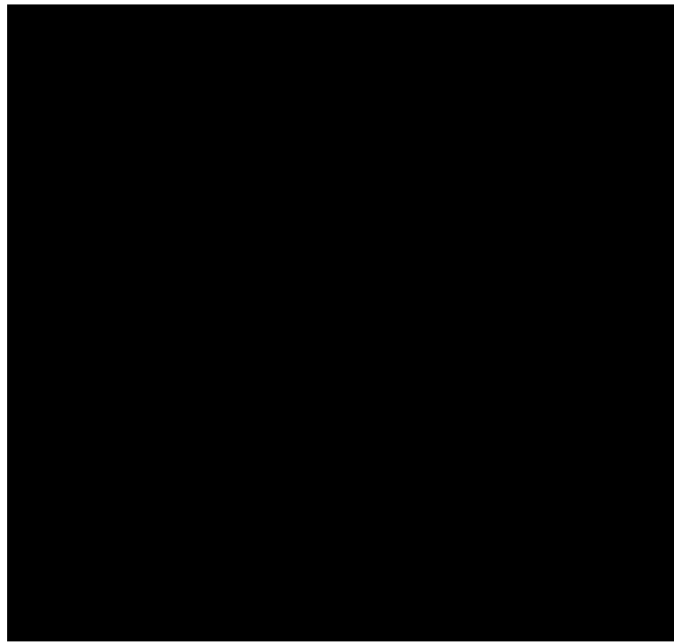


Fig. 32. Joseph Albers, 'Sanctuary', *Graphic Tectonics* (1942), zinc plate lithograph on paper, on cover of *Form*, 4 (1967).

6. Meeting at a Tango: The Mechanics of Perception and the 1-Word Poems

In her essay on Finlay's 'Wittgensteinian Word Play', Marjorie Perloff characterises Finlay as a 'confirmed believer in minimalism'. By this, she means that he subscribed to the notion that 'less equals more, provided the "less" is carefully chosen'.¹⁷⁰ Nowhere was this caveat more in evidence than in Finlay's advocacy of the one-word poems. 'I am a little fascinated now by the idea of one-word poems' he announced in 1966, to his fellow poet Kenelm Cox. As the magnification of his fixation on the problem of syntax, these poems became central to the cause of concrete poetry and to the problem of analogy.¹⁷¹ By 1967, Finlay had committed number twenty-five of *P.O.T.H.* to '1-Word Poems', which featured his own concise compositions alongside those of assembled international contributors. This was to be the final issue of *P.O.T.H.*, as Finlay's poor state of health resulted in its cessation. The abrupt end to the journal meant that a projected number designed by Victor Vasarely never reached publication: 'Vasarely has sent his *P.O.T.H.* He actually sent various, alternative lay-outs, but the most likely one is a large sheet, folded in 4, which is simply an op design made from the letters of his name. I think it

¹⁷⁰ Marjorie Perloff, 'The Deep Minimalism of Ian Hamilton Finlay' *The Battersea Review*, (n.d. c. 2014) <<http://thebatterseareview.com/critical-prose/170-marjorie-perloff-on-finlay>> [accessed January 12 2015]

¹⁷¹ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Kenelm Cox, n.d. c.1966, *A Model of Order*, p. 39.

should make a very satisfactory *P.O.T.H.*'.¹⁷² Finlay relied heavily upon the generosity of his peers for issue twenty-five. He sent letters far and wide, to previous contributors to *P.O.T.H.*, to new collaborators, to correspondents, to those concrete poets within his extended circle, hoping to gather 'as many poems as possible'.¹⁷³ Finlay invited few European poets to submit poems, noting in correspondence with Ernst Jandl that one-word poems intensified the problem of translation, as they presented greater problems to the translator than usual in their concentration of sense. Jandl was an exception: '...your English is such that you could write one-word poems like a native – probably more like an English native than a Scot like me!'.¹⁷⁴ American poets were the most fully represented, with the poems of Guy Davenport, Ronald Johnson, Jerome Rothenberg, Aram Saroyan, Dick Sheeler, Eli Siegel, and Jonathan Williams occupying almost four of the seven pages with 62 one-word poems.¹⁷⁵ This was perhaps to be expected, however, given that one-word poems had attained a certain level of notoriety in America: a public and political outcry had ensued following the inclusion of Aram Saroyan's 'lightht' in George Plimpton's *The American Literary Anthology* (1965).¹⁷⁶ It is important at this juncture to note the degree to which Finlay identified himself as Scottish rather than British, an identity that penetrated these poems in his affectionate descriptions of them to international correspondents as 'wee', rather than 'small'.¹⁷⁷ Although, as *P.O.T.H.* exemplifies, Finlay wanted to keep certain lines of international communication open, offering a melding of voices from across America, Asia and Europe, there was also a continued fidelity to the traditional Scots of his homeland.¹⁷⁸ 'Wee' is both a cultural and conceptual marker: Scottish expression is a vital part of his vision.

The instrumental lines and angles of the square were again at the source of Finlay's initiative. Title and poem would establish a connection, a reciprocity, meeting 'at a tango', by

¹⁷² Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Stephen Bann, dated November 1967, *Midway*, p. 289.

¹⁷³ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Ernst Jandl, n.d. c.1966, *A Model of Order*, p. 40.

¹⁷⁴ Finlay, letter to Jandl, n.d. c. 1966, *A Model of Order*, p. 40.

¹⁷⁵ Jonathan Williams actually submitted fifty-five poems, but only five were used. See back cover of *P.O.T.H.*, 25 (1966).

¹⁷⁶ See Ian Daly, "'You call that poetry?': How seven letters managed to freak out an entire nation", *Poetry* (25 August 2007) <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/179985>> [accessed 12 March 2015].

¹⁷⁷ Finlay, letter to Cox, n.d. c. 1966, *A Model of Order*, p. 39-40. His earliest publications explored Scots dialect, see Ian Hamilton Finlay, *The Dancers Inherit the Party: Early Stories, Plays and Poems*, ed. by Ken Cockburn (London: Polygon, 2004).

¹⁷⁸ See Roderick Watson, 'Scottish Poetry: The Scene and the Sixties', in *The Scottish Sixties: Reading, Rebellion, Revolution*, ed. by Eleanore Bell (Leiden: Rodopi, 2013), pp. 69-92.

which the single word of the poem would set a relationship to the length or incongruity of its title.¹⁷⁹ The explanation for the one-word poems in the letter sent to Jandl is exemplary of the neat instructions supplied to the potential contributors: 'the idea is, that the poems should have only one word, but a title of any length. They will all be set out in the same way'.¹⁸⁰ Contrary to the ascetic typography of earlier 'concrete' editions of *P.O.T.H.*, or the oblique integration of text and image in collaborative issues between Robert Lax and Emil Antonucci (no. 17, December 1965) or Ad Reinhardt and Bridget Riley (no. 18, January 1966), the poems were published in the slanting 'calligraphy' of the graphic designer Jim Nicholson. This teal script, as if in a lined notebook, faithfully copies out each poem, underlining titles, authors, countries of origin, and formulates layouts to occupy almost every part of the stapled white booklet, as a 'little change from the white spaces of concrete'.¹⁸¹ Here, less certainly equals more, in the superabundance of the epigrammatic poems. Although these poems clearly hold some affinity with the reductive forms of concrete poetry, Finlay suggested that they are closer to the 'haiku brevity' of Japanese poetry 'without reading like a pseudo-Japanese poem'.¹⁸² Where the haiku constricts the length of a poem to seventeen *on* or syllables, Finlay's too limits the scope of the poem, albeit to a single syllabic unit. The complementarity of the title, however, creates 'a very adaptable form'.¹⁸³ Nicholson was flummoxed by the poems, complaining to Finlay that 'they were like Greek'; 'you don't understand', Finlay responded, 'it is Greek to me too [...] it is Greek to everyone, it is Greek'.¹⁸⁴ The quality of expansion offered by the title, a variable of no limitation in word count, placed parallel to a fixed lexical counterpart, presents a dialectical relationship not unlike the general rubric he had previously observed in Josef Albers' 'nutshell axioms'.

The poem, Finlay asserts, should be encouraged to intersect with the title as the lines of a geometrical diagram: 'All (true) poems have form, and in this case one should see the title and the word as being 2 straight lines, which come together forming a corner; the corner is the form

¹⁷⁹ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Stephen Bann, dated 25 March 1969, in *A Model of Order*, p. 44.

¹⁸⁰ Finlay, letter to Jandl, n.d. c. 1966, *A Model of Order*, p. 40.

¹⁸¹ Finlay, letter to Jandl, n.d. c. 1966, *A Model of Order*, p. 40.

¹⁸² Finlay, letter to Cox, n.d. c. 1966, *A Model of Order*, pp. 39-40.

¹⁸³ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to George Mackay Brown, n.d. c. 1966, quoted in Alec Finlay, 'Introduction', *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Selections*, p. 38.

¹⁸⁴ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Stephen Bann, dated 18 October 1967, *Midway*, p. 283. Nicholson was also designing Finlay's 'Summer Poem' print.

of this poem.¹⁸⁵ Poem and title remain distinct, perpendicular to one another, they do not overlap or merge but become meaningful at their point of mutual encounter. Finlay supplies the following poem to illustrate his meaning to Cox:

THE BOAT'S BLUEPRINT

water

As a structure it is precarious in its minimalism: the reader must hold the two separate lines in balance to achieve a complex unity. As an image, the poem upholds a horizontal symmetry. A literal reading of the poem would offer the following: the body plan of a boat is met by a waterline. In practice, however, this would be to omit any discursive interest or elucidatory conditions, or deny the spatial and temporal dimensions implied by a 'blueprint', to attest to a more extreme form of modernist experiment that denies an ease of interpretation.

As Finlay makes plain, these corners in language are not closed structures but open to admit reverberations: 'these corners must be so constructed as to be open (opening) in all directions. That is the paradox'.¹⁸⁶ A formal understanding is composed of any number of separately divined possibilities: 'One could explicate this one as follows: the shape of the boat is determined by the nature of the water, or, he who understands water may calculate the appearance of the boat; further, water is blue, water is a blueprint (on white stones), water is clear and has lines on it, like a blueprint...Etc'.¹⁸⁷ Each of these one-word poems may be 'mysteriously open on all sides' – a referential aspect is curtailed to introduce the 'paradox' that this careful act of excision produces a great many ambiguities.¹⁸⁸ More than this, the speculative nature of a boat yet to be made, the drafted lines of a hull, met by the reality of the water, presents a temporal crux. These lines of explication begin to intertwine with one another. Finlay's above list demonstrates the necessary work of cumulative interpretation, with each impression

¹⁸⁵ Finlay, letter to Cox, n.d. c. 1966, *A Model of Order*, pp. 39-40.

¹⁸⁶ Finlay, letter to Cox, n.d. c. 1966, *A Model of Order*, p. 39.

¹⁸⁷ Finlay, letter to Cox, n.d. c. 1966, *A Model of Order*, p. 40.

¹⁸⁸ Finlay, letter to Cox, n.d. c. 1966, *A Model of Order*, p. 39.

building towards the next: ‘shape...appearance...blue...water...clear...lines...blueprint’.¹⁸⁹ The one-word poem, as the simplest geometrical equation in the meeting of two lines, becomes a looser assemblage of interdependent associations, recalling Finlay’s sense of Albers’ enigmatic forms: ‘only when you look at them they undulate, and turn themselves slowly inside-out, and back...so in the end they are like seaweed in the waves’.¹⁹⁰

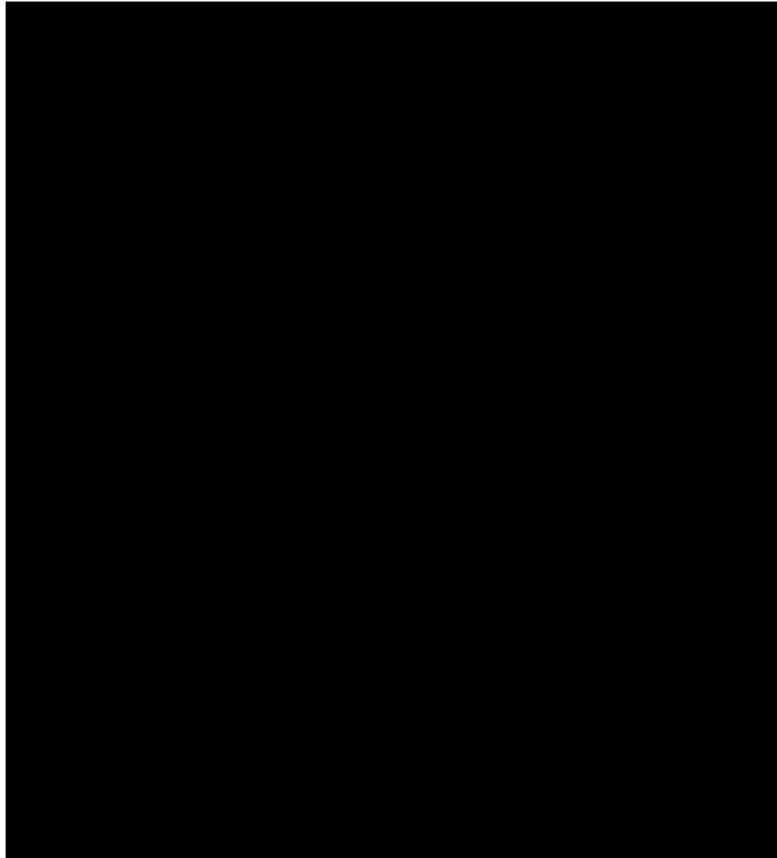


Fig. 33. Josef Albers, ‘Shrine’, *Graphic Tectonics* (1942), zinc plate lithograph on paper, 330 x 313 mm, © The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn and DACS, London 2016.

Some of Finlay’s examples are rather more esoteric than others, recalling the complexity and geometric attachments of crossword clues.¹⁹¹ For example, ‘LA BELLE HOLLANDAISE’ requires a certain degree of knowledge about the origins of the title:

¹⁸⁹ He performs the same exercise on his poem ‘LA BELLE HOLLANDAISE / x-patch’, for Cox’s benefit. Finlay, letter to Cox, n.d. c. 1966, *A Model of Order*, p. 39-40.

¹⁹⁰ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Ronald Johnson, dated 2 August 1964, in *A Model of Order*, pp. 28-29.

¹⁹¹ The first appearance of a crossword in a British publication was in *Pearson's Magazine* in February 1922, and the first to appear in a British newspaper was in *The Sunday Express* on 2 November 1924.

LA BELLE HOLLANDAISE

x-patch

‘La Belle Hollandaise’ is the title of a Picasso portrait of a Dutch girl, and ‘x-patch’ gives: ‘cross-patch’ (as we say of a little girl or boy who is in a bad mood), plus windmill (x) , plus the patched costume of the Dutch, (as is traditionally represented), plus the idea of ‘patch’, perhaps tulip patch, by the windmill, therefore suggesting a canal scene too...¹⁹²

The poem ‘HILL’ is far more accessible, but no less evocative:

HILL

top

hilltop, the idea of a spinning top, the hill as a clean, green top, the sense (which one has on a hill) of the world spinning...¹⁹³

There is a sense that any number of imaginative and personal associations could be brought to bear and wrapped around these pointed poems, as riddles to be unpicked and unravelled.

Although the book *Stonechats* (Wild Hawthorn Press, 1967) collected many of these one-word poems, it was the 1968 collection *Air Letters*, published by the Tarasque Press, that offered the greatest degree of ‘brevity’, angling single words – without the secondary plane of the title – with the diminutive scumbled line drawings of the artist Robert Frame.

The concern for the harmonious ordering of convergences and divergences is closely associated with Finlay’s interest in the linking mechanism of metaphor. The critic Yves Abrioux describes the one-word poems as embodying the ‘unvarnished simplicity’ of the classical era, referring to the formal alignment of the poem ‘The Clouds’ Anchor / swallow’ as demonstrating the ‘Aristotelian definition of a metaphor of proportion’.¹⁹⁴ A sense of proportion, between the two lines, was the main aspect of craftsmanship to be displayed by these poems, and therefore the means by which Finlay judged a one-word poem to be successful. As he outlined in his correspondence with potential contributors, these poems were not fashioned to be ‘briefly witty’ or trivialise the form as mere jokes – though they could of course play on expectation – but they

¹⁹² Finlay, letter to Jandl, n.d. c.1966, *A Model of Order*, p. 40.

¹⁹³ Finlay, letter to Jandl, n.d. c.1966, *A Model of Order*, p. 40..

¹⁹⁴ Yves Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), p. 93. Abrioux also lists Apollinaire’s ‘one-line poems’ and the ‘poetic riddles’ of the Carolingian scholar poets as precedents.

existed to pose a ‘serious’ problem to poetic construction.¹⁹⁵ He acknowledged their germane classical associations by noting that they are ‘very close to the classical Latin epigraph or epigram’, presumably in the sense that they embodied a hermetic knowledge to be deciphered.¹⁹⁶ However, if these poems are ‘tight and schematic as the classical didactic metaphor’, words ‘carefully chosen’, then they are also ‘other’, set apart from more conventional forms of meaning-making.¹⁹⁷ Hypothesising more generally, Finlay made a neat ‘distinction between “didactic” and “free floating”’, drawing upon an essay he was to reference throughout his later career, ‘Icones Symbolicae’ by E. H. Gombrich.¹⁹⁸ Gombrich’s ideas expressed ‘many of the things I have tried to say...ever since I began to write’, Finlay noted, as the essay’s discussion of the representative and the symbolic in the visual image parallels Finlay’s sense of the ‘Categorical Imperative’ underlying all language and the incompatible use of language in the act of writing.¹⁹⁹ Finlay considered this ‘feeling’ the ‘contradiction of the being of language’.²⁰⁰ Although this concept was to find its culmination a decade later in the coincidence of motto and image in Finlay’s ‘Heroic Emblems’, Gombrich’s ‘idea of intuition’ and ‘revelation through visual symbols’ here provides an effective ballast to Finlay’s one-word poems.²⁰¹ Understood in both literal and metaphorical terms, they enact what Gombrich purposed as ‘a representation of the unrepresentable, both demanding contemplation and spurring us on to transcend it’.²⁰² How to achieve the reconstruction of a language that is simultaneously ‘categorical’ and intuitive? For Finlay, this impossible project was a matter of resonance, which was made probable by the smallest means

¹⁹⁵ Finlay, letter to Jandl, n.d. c., 1966, *A Model of Order*, p. 40.

¹⁹⁶ Finlay, letter to Cox, n.d. c., 1966, *A Model of Order*, p. 39-40.

¹⁹⁷ Vincent Sherry, ‘Contemporary British Modernism: The Poetry of Ian Hamilton Finlay, Christopher Middleton, Roy Fisher, Charles Tomlinson and Geoffrey Hill’, *The Georgia Review*, 41.3 (1987), 612-627 (p. 614).

¹⁹⁸ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Hugh Kenner, dated 3 August 1978, in *A Model of Order*, pp. 46-50 (p. 48).

¹⁹⁹ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Tom and Laurie Phillips, dated 26 February 1974, GRI MS 890144, box 2, fol. 1, pp. 1-4 (p. 2-3).

²⁰⁰ Finlay, letter to Kenner, dated 3 August 1978, in *A Model of Order*, p. 48.

²⁰¹ See Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay*, pp. 105-110; and Charles Jencks, ‘Aphorisms on the Garden of an Aphorist’, *Wood Notes Wild*, pp. 107-115. The ‘free-floating symbol’ was actually posited in ‘The Aims and Limits of Iconology’, *Gombrich on the Renaissance: Symbolic Images* (London: Phaidon, 1985).

²⁰² E. H. Gombrich, ‘Icones Symbolicae: The Visual Image in Neo-Platonic Thought’, *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 3 (1948), 163-192 (p. 172).

possible: ‘...if the resonance is sufficient, if the brevity does not induce a sense of breathlessness, then the simpler the image is, the better’.²⁰³

‘Brevity’, in Finlay’s experience, was a contentious term, particularly when applied to concrete poetry. Stephen Bann provided a neat synopsis of the contrast between concrete and abstract in the introduction to his *concrete poetry: an international anthology* (1967): ‘By abstract, I mean something significantly different from “concrete”: something which is in fact almost the antithesis of concrete...One might say that the concrete procedure is inductive, while that of the abstract is reductive’.²⁰⁴ Bann here uses this comparison to draw out the essential difference in approach taken by a poet such as Robert Lax, whose systemic columns of words emphasise language’s disconnect from visual representation. Where the abstract poem is ‘reductive’, related to a process of elimination towards a refined form, so the concrete poem is ‘inductive’, the inference of particulars to formulate points of universal contact. The abstract looks within, the concrete looks without. Bann’s binary, albeit tentatively expressed, is rudimentary. It is most useful as a scale along which the many varied poetic approaches within concrete may be measured; as a critical tool it reveals the many exceptions to the rule, most patently in the comments made by the concrete poet Eugen Gomringer on the necessity of ‘reduced language’ in concrete.²⁰⁵ Ian Hamilton Finlay, however, confounds this schema altogether: his insistence upon ‘brevity’ is also an insistence upon resonance:

A friend comments that I see poetry in terms of the “instant image”, but I think quite the opposite is true – I see it (whether I achieve it is another matter) in terms of the resonant image, and it is precisely this resonance which animates and justifies the surrounding space.²⁰⁶

In a letter sent to Stephen Bann from Gledfield on 25 March 1966, Finlay expressed his frustration at the common misunderstandings that he perceived to have saturated concrete

²⁰³ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Stephen Bann, dated September 1966, *Midway*, pp. 151-154 (p. 152)

²⁰⁴ This distinction arises in a section on the ‘abstract’ poetry of Robert Lax, in Bann, ‘Introduction’, *concrete poetry: an international anthology*, p.25. See Veronica Forrest-Thomson’s ‘Two Types of Obscurity and One Type of Imagery’, in *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth Century Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), p. 46, for a critique of Bann’s formula as a ‘dead loss’.

²⁰⁵ cf. Eugen Gomringer, ‘The Poem as Functional Object’, (1960) trans. by Irene Montjoye Sinor, *Hispanic Arts* 1.3-4 (Winter/Spring 1968), 69-70: ‘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)’.

²⁰⁶ Finlay, letter to Bann, dated September 1966, *Midway*, pp. 151-154 (p. 152).

poetry, from both the public appreciation and, more worryingly, from its own practitioners. Finlay was incredulous that his exclusion from the arrangements for the Scottish Arts Council's proposed 'Concrete Poetry' exhibition at the 1966 Edinburgh Festival, and the criticism of his 'autumn poem' and the 'Reinhardt/Riley *POTH*', were based upon Edwin Morgan's insinuation that "brevity", of Finlay's type, is empty'.²⁰⁷ In correspondence, Morgan had suggested that Finlay's 'autumn poem' was lacking as 'there should be a spade and a man', presumably meaning a more conventional play between object and subject, whereas 'John F[urnival]'s Tower of Babel etc. is good because there's lots to "pore over"'.²⁰⁸ Morgan's 'need for complexity', Finlay argued, was built upon the fallacious assumption that 'complexity is lots of words, and could be "counted"'.²⁰⁹ Morgan's accusation of 'brevity', as the register by which a poem possesses a lack of depth or gravity, gave rise to a realisation:

I personally feel worried, now, that in Britain, 'concrete' is used to mean anything, almost, except something related to Bill, Mondrian, the early Brazilians, Gomringer, Arp, Albers...²¹⁰

For Finlay, this misapprehension of 'brevity' led to a misapprehension of 'concrete' altogether, which was closely allied to imprudent generalisations about the genealogy of abstract art. It was a foundation Finlay feared would be lost should 'someone like Yeddie [Edwin Morgan], who is explicit against brevity, who doesn't like Vasarely (explicitly), who, I'm sure has scarcely heard of Bill...' act as a spokesperson for the British movement.²¹¹ The discordant relationship between Finlay and Morgan has received considerable critical attention, so as to obviate examination here, but it remains pertinent to state that it hinged upon this clash of convictions.²¹² For Finlay, abstraction, as a process of purification in art or literature, an art drawing upon its own resources as opposed to observing its wider arena, was not to contradict everyday life but existed as a kind

²⁰⁷ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Stephen Bann, dated 25 March 1966, *Midway*, pp. 101-2 (p. 101).

²⁰⁸ Finlay, letter to Bann, dated 25 March 1966, *Midway*, p. 101.

²⁰⁹ Finlay, letter to Bann, dated 25 March 1966, *Midway*, p. 101..

²¹⁰ Finlay, letter to Bann, dated 25 March 1966, *Midway*, p. 101..

²¹¹ Finlay, letter to Bann, dated 25 March 1966, *Midway*, p. 102.

²¹² Discussions feature in publications such as R. P. Draper, 'Concrete Poetry' *New Literary History*, 2.2 (1971), 329-340; Alan Young, 'Three "Neo-Moderns": Ian Hamilton Finlay, Edwin Morgan, Christopher Middleton', in *British Poetry Since 1970: A Critical Survey*, ed. by Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980), pp. 112-24.

of humanism in a collective veneration of 'Beauty'.²¹³ For Morgan, drawing upon the writings of Mayakovsky, a line needs must be drawn between such resolutely formal concerns and poetry's social field of operations:

Concrete poets, like other poets, are men who live at a certain time in a certain place and react to their environment. To some, a direct use of contemporary reference or 'committed' material would be anathema because it clashed with the formal aims of the movement; to others, form can itself be seen not as formalism but as an act of comment or protest...²¹⁴

The polarity of their aesthetic views are given their most double-edged expression by Morgan himself, in his 1966 poem 'To Ian Hamilton Finlay', which ends:

You give the pleasure
of made things,
the construction holds
like a net, or it
unfolds in waves
a certain measure,
of affection.
Native, familiar as
apples, tugs,
girls, lettres from
your moulin,
but
drinking tea
you set for Albers
his saucer of milk.²¹⁵

By Morgan's reckoning, Finlay's poems concern themselves with the 'native', the 'familiar', the homely, the 'made', and therefore the circumscribed. In art as in life, Finlay operates within strict parameters. The construction 'holds' or 'unfolds', but never loses structure entirely – expressed in the measure of 'nets' or 'waves'. This 'pleasure' in form, in Morgan's mind, can all be held accountable to Finlay's subservience to Albers. Although Finlay did own a cat named Albers, Morgan's meaning here is clearly an analytical comment aimed at Finlay's purist outlook. Laying offerings at Albers' feet, the 'familiar' becomes maverick, poems become subject to an enforced

²¹³ 'beauty – the content is a fineness of relations, which IS meaning', Ian Hamilton Finlay, Letter to Edwin Morgan, dated 25 July 1963, quoted in Alec Finlay, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Selections*, p. 29.

²¹⁴ Edwin Morgan, 'Concrete Poetry', in *Innovations*, ed. by Bernard Bergonzi (London: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 213-225.

²¹⁵ Edwin Morgan, 'To Ian Hamilton Finlay', in *Wood Notes Wild*, pp. 6-7.

aesthetic distance. Finlay's 'determinedly iconoclastic' approach to language, which later manifested itself in his many sequences of aphorisms and detached sentences, usurped the geometrical figure as contemporary icon.²¹⁶ To say 'TREE' and to mean 'TREE' and to see 'TREE', that was the 'ULTIMATE'.

²¹⁶ Bann, 'Ian Hamilton Finlay: An Imaginary Portrait', p. 67.

Chapter Three

Objects, Concepts, Installations, Bookworks: Literature in an Expanding Field

1. 'Today we have naming of parts': A Minimalist Literature?

In 1976, Blake Morrison prefaced an article for *Critical Quarterly* with a few lines by the poet

Henry Reed:

Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday
We had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning
We shall have what to do after firing. But today,
Today we have naming of parts.¹

This 1942 poem, one of the 'better-known' poems of the Second World War, is a methodical and reiterative description of how to assemble a gun.² Observing a soldier in a wildly floral garden, the poem slowly reveals the disconnection between action, the performance of naming, and the environment in which the gun eventually fires. The gaze swivels in sharp movements from finger to thumb, 'safety-catch' to 'cocking-piece', sliding the spring 'rapidly backwards and forwards', while nature looks on as a 'silent', 'motionless' witness to the wavering energy and intention of these actions. Following Morrison's title, 'In defense of minimalism', one infers from these verse lines that Morrison's minimalism is not merely one of diminutive expression or spatial reductiveness, but a more complex blend of taciturnity, compromise and language: what is said and what is not known. The activity of naming, as the explicit notation of particulars, is an acknowledgment of this division.

¹ Henry Reed, 'Naming of Parts' (1942), in *Henry Reed: Collected Poems*, ed. by Jon Stallworthy (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), p. 49.

² Edna Longley, 'War Pastorals', in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. by Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 461-482 (p. 463).

‘Minimalist’, Morrison notes, is a term that is most commonly applied in literary terms to the work of Samuel Beckett, for ‘its urge towards silence’.³ For Morrison, George Steiner’s collected essays *Language and Silence* (1968) were instrumental in their provision of a framework for thinking about minimalism, particularly as a rejoinder to the ‘exhaustion of verbal resources in modern civilisation’ and as a recognition of the ineffable.⁴ Steiner argued for the ‘reevaluation of silence’ in literature, as a consequence of the epistemology of Wittgenstein, the aesthetics of composers Anton Webern and John Cage, and the spare poetics of Beckett. Their election of silence formed ‘one of the most original, characteristic acts of the modern spirit’.⁵ The Reed epigraph substantiates Morrison’s opening claim that ‘minimalism’ is nothing new to a 1960s or 1970s reader, which in fact ‘could be said to have begun around the time of World War Two’, and became ‘an important, if not the dominant, manner in British poetry’.⁶ Morrison argues, ‘With the myth-kitty ransacked, the social-commentary box finally handed over to the media, and heroism, since Auschwitz, out of place, the most representative and important post-war poets have been forced into an articulation of small, personal experiences, the significance of which may or may not (it depends on how minimalist the poets are) be made apparent’.⁷ This ‘post-1940 minimalist tradition’ curtailed a pretention to universal authority and expression. It was a symptom of the war that modernism, in its ‘hypermetropic...view of history’, ‘Bardic audacity’, ‘large rhetorical gestures’ and ‘authoritative moral pronouncements’, turned from panoramic commentaries to a literature of smaller circumference.⁸ The new minimalism in literature and art constituted barely glimpsed or realised moments of revelation, moments that were perceivable only to those willing to read beyond their surface implications.

For Morrison, this did not come from the expected quarters:

The real sixties contribution to the post-war minimalist tradition came not from the Group, nor from Liverpool and Newcastle, nor even from the neo-Poundians. It came from a number of poets – Ian Hamilton Finlay, David Harsent, Hugo Williams, Michael Fried, Colin Falck, and to a lesser extent Douglas Dunn and Peter Dale – whose work received most of its exposure in *The Review*, and who brought into existence a poetic

³ Blake Morrison, ‘In Defense of Minimalism’, *Critical Quarterly*, 18.2 (1976), 43-52 (p. 43).

⁴ George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958 – 1966* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), pp. 55-74 (pp. 67-68). Published in the same year as the landmark essays: Ihab Hassan, ‘The Literature of Silence’, *Encounter*, 18 (January 1967), 74-81; Susan Sontag, ‘The Aesthetics of Silence’ *Aspen*, 5/6 (1967), section 3.

⁵ Steiner, *Language and Silence*, pp. 67-68.

⁶ Morrison, ‘In Defense of Minimalism’, 43.

⁷ Morrison, ‘In Defense of Minimalism’, 43.

⁸ Morrison, ‘In Defense of Minimalism’, 44.

phenomenon – the mini poem – which looked curiously like several social phenomena – the mini-skirt, the mini-cab, the mini-bus – of the time.⁹

Morrison's assessment discounts a number of influential literary cliques, all of whom were involved with countercultural politics and interdisciplinary experiment between literature and the arts in the mid-1960s: the London-centred Group, co-founded by the art historian Edward Lucie-Smith and poet Philip Hobsbaum; the Northern effluence of creative activity in the shape of the Liverpool poets Roger McGough, Adrian Henri and Brian Patten, and Tom Pickard's Mordern Tower poets in Newcastle; as well as the transatlantic purview of J. H. Prynne and the Cambridge Revival Group.¹⁰ In their place Morrison posits a new 'poetic phenomenon', best represented by a group of writers involved in the publication of the literary magazine *The Review*. Spanning a decade (1962-1972), the Oxford-based *Review* was an enterprising pamphlet-octavo of poetry and criticism run by a committee consisting of John Fuller, Francis Hope, Martin Dodsworth, Colin Falck, Michael Fried and Gabriel Pearson, headed by Ian Hamilton.¹¹ *The Review* frequently published the poetry and critical observations of its editorial board, instituting their minimal preoccupations. Morrison enumerates identifiable attributes: 'a refusal of rhetoric, a distrust of generalisations, an avoidance of public themes, and a belief that since the poet is no longer able to command a view of the whole, he had best stay alone with his insights'.¹² This was poetry and prose of isolation, of immediacy, and of a scrupulous attitude to form and language, whose minimal literary expression spoke to a number of contractions in contemporary culture and revealed that a 'tendency toward minimalist art' signified an 'important post-war climate of feeling'.¹³

⁹ Morrison, 'In Defense of Minimalism', 48.

¹⁰ Robert Sheppard argues that Morrison's proclivity for the poem as a 'small-scale crafted artefact' meant that he was blinkered to these 'extensive intermedial and avant-garde practices', in *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents 1950-2000* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), p. 55. A number of excellent surveys and anthologies cover this ground: Andrew Duncan, *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry* (Cromer: Salt Publishing, 2003); Geraldine Monk, *Cusp: Recollections of Poetry in Transition* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2012); Eric Mottram, 'The British Poetry Revival, 1960-75', in *New British Poetries: the Scope of the Possible*, ed. by Peter Barry and Robert Hampson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 15-50.

¹¹ For a collection of early *Review* criticism see *The Modern Poet: Essays from The Review*, ed. by Ian Hamilton (London: Macdonald & Co., 1968). Hamilton in his 'Editor's Note' here mentions that the magazine relied upon the generosity of 'unpaid and uncomplaining' contributors, p. vii. A complete index of issues has been made available on Ian Hamilton's website: <<http://www.ianhamilton.org/review/index.html>>

¹² Morrison, 'In Defense of Minimalism', 50.

¹³ Morrison, 'In Defense of Minimalism', 50.

At the time of publishing his 'defence', Morrison was well equipped to make such pronouncements on post-war literature. As the result of a PhD at University College London on 1950s literary activity, Morrison's thesis later became a landmark monograph on the British literary scene at mid-century, *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (1980).¹⁴ He defined the prevailing literary fixation in the immediate post-war period as 'intellectual control and mastery of forms', which had resulted in a 'benumbed' and 'shell-shocked' poetry of self-deprecation and understatement that extended into the 1960s.¹⁵ However, the definition offered of a minimal poetry in his article, of the absence of connections made to minimalist art and the selection of writers made by Morrison to fit within his classifications, warrants investigation. Morrison was sensitive to the prescience of his argument, concluding with an appeal: 'the development of a minimalist art has been an important feature of post-war poetry, and ought, with due qualification, to be affirmed'.¹⁶ The extent to which this definition was 'affirmed' by Morrison, or subsequent scholarship is unclear.¹⁷ As Morrison makes no claims for the influence of art objects, commentators or practitioners of minimalist art on British post-war poetry, nor for their largely American origination, his statement remains to be substantiated. For example, his treatise centres upon 'internality' and the miniature, with a diligent evocation of the 'bare essentials of object or image' unique to Imagism and a 'new barbarism' to counteract the 'ordinariness' of poets such as Philip Larkin, but pays no heed to the authoritative thesis set out some years earlier by Richard Wollheim in 'Minimal Art' (1965).¹⁸ Wollheim's definition of minimal art rests not upon the expression of the artist or writer, nor upon the compact size of the object realised, but upon a challenge to the commonly held understanding of artistic labour.¹⁹ Although Wollheim was not well acquainted at this time with the work of any of the New York

¹⁴ A recent monograph usefully reappraises some of the arguments made in Morrison's study: *The Movement Reconsidered: essays on Larkin, Amis, Gunn, Davie and their contemporaries*, ed. by Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Morrison, 'In Defense of Minimalism', 47.

¹⁶ Morrison, 'In Defense of Minimalism', 51.

¹⁷ Morrison does not write any further critical pieces on the group or on minimalism, and there have been relatively few studies made of this 'important feature' of post-war literature. Literary minimalism received greater attention in the United States, with chroniclers such as John Barth outlining its parameters using primarily American examples of music, theatre, poetry and the short stories of 'next-generation writers' Donald Barthelme, Raymond Carver and Robert Coover. See John Barth, 'A Few Words About Minimalism', *New York Times*, 28 December 1986, p.1. This 'next generation' became known in Britain as the 'dirty realists', labelled by the editor of *Granta* Bill Buford, in 'Editorial', *Granta*, 8 (Summer 1983), 4-5.

¹⁸ Morrison, 'In Defense of Minimalism', 50.

¹⁹ Richard Wollheim, 'Minimal Art', *Arts Magazine*, 39.4 (January 1965), 26-32.

artists that have come to be considered the central protagonists of 1960s Minimal Art – Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Sol LeWitt, Ann Truitt and Dan Flavin – he nevertheless began to mark out a tendency in twentieth-century art towards a ‘minimal art-content’.²⁰ The ‘doubts and anxieties’ raised by works such as Ad Reinhardt’s monochromatic paintings, Robert Rauschenberg’s combines, or the ‘non-“assisted” readymades’ of Marcel Duchamp all presented a question: how few criteria are required to define or identify the work of art?²¹

This chapter will begin by offering ‘due qualification’ of Morrison’s claim for minimalism, expanding upon the assumed union between minimalist art and literary enterprise. Charting the ascendancy of American minimalist art within the British cultural landscape, the chapter will argue that the appreciable critical swing in focus from the work of art towards the labour of art was made most apparent, in literary terms, outside of the mainstream. Considering the activities of a number of lesser-known journals, bookshops, publishers, galleries and workshops, this account will broaden critical approaches to literary activity at the end of the 1960s by admitting notions of literature as object, as instrument, and as installation. These interdisciplinary practices embraced anti-compositional methods of design, problematised the ready symbiosis of word and image and queried the necessity of a known audience, to establish a new dynamic between the role of the spectator and the role of the reader. While a number of small presses, which lay outside of the north-south focus of Morrison’s account, were reorienting their relationship to book production and literary composition, the common conception of the work of art itself was undergoing a philosophical revolution.

2. ‘The less there is to see, the more there is to say’: The Problem with Minimalism

In 1976, the same year that Morrison’s ‘defence of minimalism’ was published, a furore had erupted in the British press over the Tate Gallery’s display of Carl Andre’s sculpture, *Equivalent*

²⁰ Richard Wollheim, ‘Minimal Art’, 26.

²¹ Richard Wollheim, ‘Minimal Art’, 26.

VIII (1966) (Fig. 34).²² A purchase made in 1972, the installation had featured on two separate occasions at the gallery in 1974 and 1975, without attracting much attention.²³ However, a contentious article on 15 February 1976 in the business section of the *Sunday Times* discussing the Treasury's assumed disapproval of recent acquisitions provoked a public outcry.²⁴ The installation by the American artist, composed of 120 pale firebricks organised into a serial rectangular formation on the gallery floor, two high, six across and ten long, elicited debate across the pages of tabloids and broadsheets alike. Lambasted and cross-examined, it courted headlines such as 'Grandad was a bricklayer too', 'Banquet of Boiled Eggs', 'What a Load of Rubbish', and 'Art May Come and Art May Go But a Brick is a Brick Forever'.²⁵ It was viewed by many as an elaborate con, focusing upon the disparity between the cost of the artwork and the assumed cost of the materials themselves.²⁶ Protestations were so numerous that Andre even compiled a collaged 'abstract' of newspaper clippings to aid an appreciation of the 'Tate Bricks' saga.²⁷

²² 'The less there is to see, the more there is to say' was a complaint made by Harold Rosenberg, 'Defining Art' in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Gregory Battcock (London: Studio Vista, 1969), pp. 298-307 (p. 306).

²³ See James Meyer, *Minimalism: art and polemics in the sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 189-199.

²⁴ Gilbert & George, Claes Oldenburg and Victor Burgin were named as among the other more controversial acquisitions. Colin Simpson, 'The Tate drops a costly brick', *Sunday Times*, 15 February 1976, p. 53.

²⁵ Donald Walker, 'Arty-Crafty: For the Tate Gallery: a brickbat from the boys on the building site', *The Daily Mirror*, 17 February 1976, pp. 2-3; William Feaver, 'Banquet of Boiled Eggs', *The Observer*, 26 March 1978, p. 25; Anon, 'What a Load of...art work, bob', *Evening Post*, 17 February 1976; Bernard Levin, 'Art May Come and Art May Go but a Brick is a Brick Forever', *The Times*, 18 February 1976, p. 16.

²⁶ Simpson, 'The Tate drops a costly brick', p. 53. The author describes the operation as follows: plan an artwork 'in a low pile on the floor of an art gallery, put a price tag of \$12,000 dollars on them and wait for customers'.

²⁷ Carl Andre, 'The Bricks Abstract', *Art Monthly*, 1 (October 1976), 24.

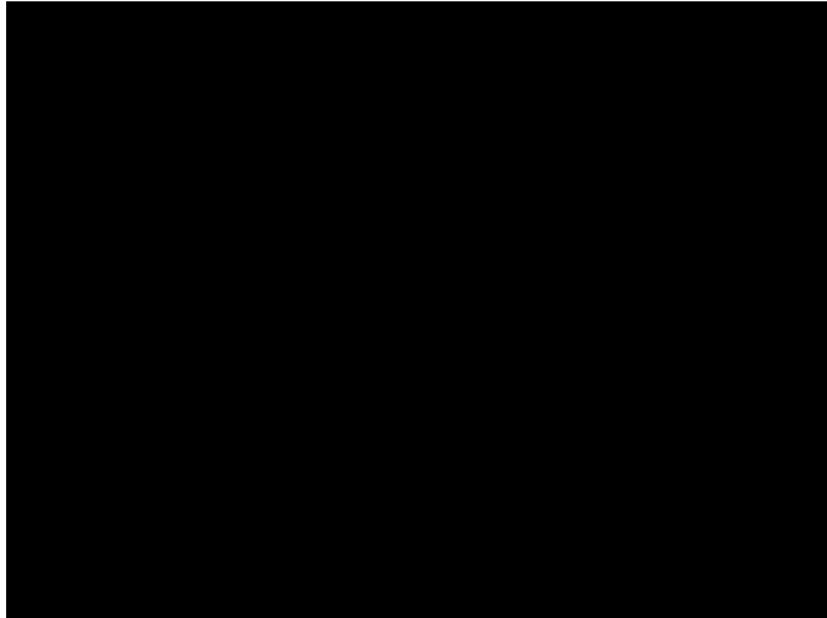


Fig. 34. Carl Andre, 'Equivalent VIII' (1966), firebricks, 127 x 686 x 2292 mm, Tate Gallery, London.

A gallery assistant noted at the time that 'these bricks have really brought the public in. They can't make head or tail of them. Nothing has attracted as much attention as they have'.²⁸ More than 'any single work of the postwar period', *Equivalent VIII* revived critical debate concerning the modernist project, calling into question the imperviousness of the artwork, the correlation between aesthetic value and economic value, and the responsibility of the public institution towards the management of taxpayers' money.²⁹ The most common objection to the installation was over its status as a work of art at all. The perceived logic behind the sequence *Equivalent I-VIII*, what William Feaver called 'the *reductio ad absurdum*', presented the greatest problem.³⁰ The serial arrangement of the bricks, as unattached industrial units unmodified by the artist and in an alignment dictated by an apparently arbitrary schema, were an affront to what many expected from a work of art. James Meyer suggests that their horizontal arrangement on the floor of the gallery also undermined the convention of sculpture as 'an anthropomorphic analogue and vessel of transcendental meaning', in its transition from the plinth and pedestal to the planar or base-level.³¹ Andre placed particular importance on the experience of the work: laid

²⁸ Arthur Payne, quoted in Anon., 'The bricks pull the crowds', *Evening Standard*, 17 February 1976, p. 7.

²⁹ The original sand lime brick version, exhibited at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York in 1966 alongside the seven other *Equivalents*, was destroyed. The sculptures were reconceived by Andre in 1995.

³⁰ Feaver, 'Banquet of Boiled Eggs', p. 25.

³¹ Meyer, *Minimalism: art and polemics in the sixties*, p. 192.

out just above ankle height, Andre's desired 'sensation' was to feel as if one 'was stepping from water of one depth to water of another depth'.³² The bricks were stacked in two layers 'to avoid drift'.³³ The eighth and final structure in an installation of sculptures made from bricks, first exhibited at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York in 1966, the numbered title refers to this larger sequence of works. Although each sculpture is different in its rectangular configuration of bricks, all are made from the same number of bricks and are therefore equivalent in mass and volume. For many critics it was to be parodied: newspaper cartoons depicted tipper trucks dumping bricks over a disgruntled artist and a feature by the *Daily Mirror* ridiculed the 'ground-level art form' by staging a mock exhibition at a London construction site of 'artistic fellow-brickies', creating patterns narrowly reminiscent of optical painting and spelling out the word 'ART' in their house bricks.³⁴ Such unwillingness to accept *Equivalent VIII* echoed Richard Wollheim's apologia for Minimal Art, in which he assessed the principal reason for the resistance of spectators to such art of 'bare uniqueness' was that its objects 'fail to evince what we have over the centuries come to regard as an essential ingredient in art: work or manifest effort'.³⁵ Andre's 'pile of bricks' did not exhibit or 'manifest' enough 'work' or 'effort', in his appropriated materials and apparent simplicity of arrangement.

This point of contention reached its most decisive expression in the *Burlington Magazine* in November 1976. An editorial critical of the Tate's purchase was contradicted in a thoughtful essay by the Deputy Keeper of the Modern Collection at the Tate Gallery, Richard Morphet.³⁶ In one of the lengthiest ripostes ever published by the magazine, as a right to reply to the editorial demanded by the Tate, Morphet offered an elegant defence of 'T.1534' as a work 'among the important art of its period'.³⁷ The rhetorical force of the article is directed towards answering the same question as posed by the editorial: *just how far a public Gallery, which must impose its own kind of*

³² Anon., 'T01534: Equivalent VIII', *Tate Gallery Catalogue*, August 2004

<<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/andre-equivalent-viii-t01534>> [accessed 3 March 2015].

³³ Carl Andre, quoted in David Bourdon, 'The Razed Sites of Carl Andre: A Sculptor Laid Low by the Brancusi Syndrome', *Artforum*, 5.2 (October 1966), 15.

³⁴ Walker, 'Arty-Crafty: For the Tate Gallery', pp. 2-3

³⁵ Wollheim, 'Minimal Art', 30.

³⁶ Richard Morphet, 'Carl Andre's Bricks', *The Burlington Magazine*, 118.884 (November 1976), 762-765; 767. 'T.1534' was the Tate Catalogue code for *Equivalent VIII*. The original editorial was 'T1534. Untitled. 1966' (editorial), *The Burlington Magazine*, 118.877 (April 1976), 187-188.

³⁷ James A. Brown, 'The Burlington Magazine and the "Tate Bricks" Controversy', *The Burlington Magazine Index Blog*, 13 May 2014 <https://burlingtonindex.wordpress.com/2014/05/13/carl_andre/> [accessed 15 March 2015].

*order on what it acquires, can go to accommodate changing attitudes towards art. At what point, if any, does it have to draw the line?*³⁸ Morphet begins by berating the *Burlington Magazine* for following suit with the popular press, failing to question ‘whether “Minimal” art constitutes an important phase in the development of art’, neglecting to mention Andre’s ‘high’ reputation in the art world or to make ‘any attempt to establish for its readers an informed context’.³⁹ Discerning the ‘sharp change in idiom’ exhibited by Andre’s work as a ‘new situation’ in the development of twentieth-century art, where ‘Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Dada, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism...usually involved moving art in some way or other nearer to life outside art’, Andre’s work ‘reveals more than merely physical aspects of the world as it is’.⁴⁰ By drawing attention to the existence of the artwork as a self-enclosed index of actions and decisions, the focus is upon material used and the process of assembly. The ‘work’ or ‘effort’ to be observed was not in the collation of ‘found’ objects to form profitable juxtapositions, as in the balance or asymmetry of Cubist collage, nor in the display of mental and physical exertion in the visionary canvases of Abstract Expressionism, but in the manipulation of elements to construe a shape that requires no inflection. This index is made available to the viewer through the production of clear, lucid forms and the abutting of these visibly distinct elements, communicating its structure both in terms of its material and as a concept, but not as a transcendental idea: ‘My work is atheistic, materialistic and communistic’, said Andre. ‘It’s atheistic because it’s without transcendent form, without spiritual or intellectual quality. Materialistic because it’s made out of its own materials without pretension to other materials. And communistic because the form is equally accessible to all men.’⁴¹

In order to draw out this distinction, and the singular ambition of Andre and his fellow minimalists, Morphet makes a comparison between T.1534 and the work of contemporary British sculptor Anthony Caro:

In a Caro, directness is qualified, also, by the degree to which the spectator is aware of the processes of adjustment, painting (concealing the sculpture’s basic material), bolting, welding, etc., that have been employed. In expressive contrast, T.1534 makes the spectator immediately aware, from any angle, of the whole shape and structure of the work, and also of the precise relationship between the parts and the whole. While the

³⁸ Morphet, ‘Carl Andre’s Bricks’, 762.

³⁹ Morphet, ‘Carl Andre’s Bricks’, 762.

⁴⁰ Morphet, ‘Carl Andre’s Bricks’, 763.

⁴¹ Andre, quoted in Bourdon, ‘The Razed Sites of Carl Andre’, 15.

whole is boldly and unambiguously stated, almost as if it has been punched out from a matrix, it is simultaneously apparent that it is composed of individual 'particles' (the bricks) of a specific size and in a specific orientation.⁴²

The relative openness of Caro's sculpture, in which painted planes and lines of steel and aluminum are brought into correspondence with one another, typically arranged along a horizontal axis, contrasts with the immutability of a minimalist work such as Andre's *Equivalent VIII*.⁴³ The multiplicity of relationships between the individuated bricks, Morphet suggests, are of a consistent nature throughout the installation so as to be immediately apprehended. The evenly distributed bricks are all equally subject to gravitational pull, whereas the coloured girders of Caro's sculptures build from the ground up towards an apparent weightlessness. The varied quality of relationships established at junctures between the separate elements of Caro's sculpture, constitutes a far more intangible experience. A commitment to the pictorial, as had been espoused by critics such as Lawrence Alloway, John Golding, Patrick Heron, David Sylvester, and Andrew Forge, influenced by the formalist thesis of Clement Greenberg, had become outmoded, prompting the purgation of residual illusionism in the art object to focus upon its occupation in space.⁴⁴ Caro had expressed irritation with the common assumption that sculpture automatically meant 'plaster and clay' or 'objects on pedestals', or that sculpture was not subject to the same progressive discourse as any other art form, submitting as an alternative an intention to 'break down the graspability of sculpture'.⁴⁵ By frustrating the ability of a spectator to 'see it at all easily or fully', his sculpture exceeds the illusion of a totalizing whole.⁴⁶

⁴² Morphet, 'Carl Andre's Bricks', 763.

⁴³ See Richard J. Williams, *After Modern Sculpture: Art in the United States and Europe 1965-1970* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 18-38.

⁴⁴ Tim Hilton, 'The Death of Art', *The Listener*, 85.2192 (1 April 1971), 426.

⁴⁵ Anthony Caro, 'Interview with Lawrence Alloway', in *Gazette*, 1 (1961), 1.

⁴⁶ Caro, 'Interview with Lawrence Alloway', 1

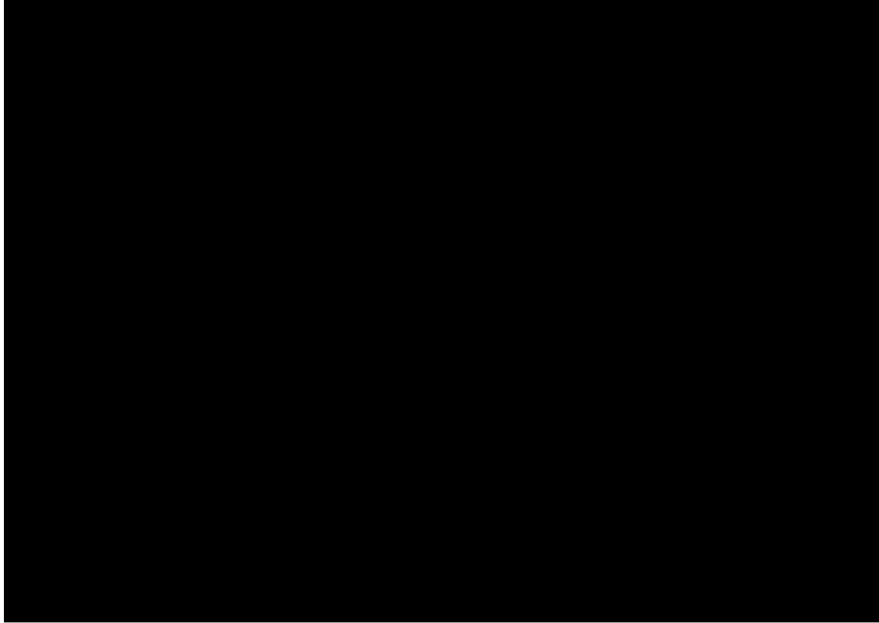


Fig. 35. Anthony Caro, 'Early One Morning' (1962), painted steel and aluminum, 2896 x 6198 x 3353 mm, Tate Gallery, London.

The antithesis posited here had been more fully developed a few years earlier by Michael Fried in his seminal 1967 essay 'Art and Objecthood'.⁴⁷ For Fried the 'crucial distinction' was between '*work that is fundamentally theatrical and work that is not*'.⁴⁸ Minimal Art, or what he prefers to call 'literalist art', is theatrical, as 'it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work': it is an art of 'an object in a *situation* – one that, virtually by definition – *includes the beholder*'.⁴⁹ Recent modernist sculpture, however, typified by Caro's work, exists in the 'mutual and naked *juxtaposition* of the I-beams, girders, cylinders, lengths of piping, sheet metal and grill' rather than in the 'compound *object* that they compose'.⁵⁰ What is essential, or again 'crucial', in the sculpture of Caro is the 'mutual inflection of one element by another', which make each other consequential by virtue of their juxtaposition, as opposed to marking out or announcing their own identity.⁵¹ One of the foremost critics of minimalism, Barbara Rose, referred to this as 'post-cubist' work, in her book of the same year, as it abandoned the relational

⁴⁷ Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' *Artforum*, 5 (June 1967), 12-23. Although *Artforum* was available from specialist vendors in Britain, this essay was reprinted for a British readership in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (University of California Press, 1995), pp. 117-147.

⁴⁸ Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 148-172 (p. 157). All subsequent 'Art and Objecthood' quotations from this volume; italics Fried's own.

⁴⁹ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', p. 152.

⁵⁰ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', p. 161.

⁵¹ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', p. 161.

attachments of the cubist tradition.⁵² ‘Literalist’ art consists in its character as a whole, in the specificity of its materials and in the measurable ‘*duration* of the experience’, whereas Caro’s sculpture goes beyond physical attributes to protean orchestration, overcoming objecthood to create an illusory engagement with space, imitating ‘not gestures exactly, but the *efficacy* of gesture’.⁵³ This intention towards ‘meaningfulness’ is a quality, Fried posits, that Caro’s work shares with music and poetry, as they are also in possession of ‘knowledge of the human body and how, in innumerable ways and moods, it makes meaning’.⁵⁴ By inference then, the self-enclosed literalist work, in its infinite repetition, eschewal of ‘pictorialism’ and creation of its own bounds as immutable ‘gestalt’, is alien to any system with the intention of continual exchange or dialogue with its wider context.

Fried’s hypothesis provides a useful rationale from which to explore the qualities exhibited by his poetry and that of his *Review* peers. The separation between a ‘high modernist *presentness*’, as an object in conversation with itself and the viewer, and a ‘minimalist/literalist *presence*’, as a self-sufficient object in monologue with the viewer, also asserted itself in the literary activities of the period. The terms by which Fried and his fellow *Review* contributors were thought to be minimalist ran in parallel to that of the emergent preoccupations in art critical discourse, echoing Andre’s sense of a work as ‘atheistic, materialistic, communistic’.⁵⁵ For those contributing to *The Review*, the perceived minimal approach facilitated a larger aim than according the poem an appropriate level of concision and therefore complexity: it communicated an ‘awareness of the place a poet and his/her poetry must occupy within a modern social democracy’.⁵⁶ As Hamilton wrote in 1967, ‘Few readers any longer look to literature for direct, abstract wisdom’, because the state of relations between literature and other intellectual disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, or psychology, was such that writers were not expected to impart the accumulated knowledge or recent findings of an expert in a given field.⁵⁷ Writers are exempt from such obligations, ‘in an age that pays high prices for its experts’, on the

⁵² Barbara Rose, ‘Post-Cubist Sculpture’, *American Sculpture of the 1960s* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967), pp. 37-40 (p. 38).

⁵³ Fried, ‘Art and Objecthood’, p. 162.

⁵⁴ Fried, ‘Art and Objecthood’, p. 162.

⁵⁵ Andre, quoted in Bourdon, ‘The Razed Sites of Carl Andre’, 15.

⁵⁶ Morrison, ‘In Defence of Minimalism’, 50.

⁵⁷ Ian Hamilton, ‘The Limits of Literature’, *TLS*, 3413 (27 July 1967), 651.

grounds that their subject is the unpredictable and elusive quality of reality. 'Literature is not required to be paraphrasably instructive, edifying, wise', Hamilton argues, but it does have a responsibility to test facts and ideas within the realm of human experience, to connect the imagination to this experience, to 'make ideas real' by making them 'concretely available to the senses'.⁵⁸ The 'Limits of Literature' were therefore conditioned by modesty, circumspection, and tentative personal expression, avoiding the explicitness of world events or esoteric theoretical discussion in tacit acknowledgment of appropriation by other voices and transposition to other experiences. However, if global concerns exist in this diminutive poetry only in so far as they impinge upon personal life, how does this minimization of focus communicate something more than 'raw nuggets of awareness and observation'?⁵⁹

3. 'the how-much-angst-on-the-head-of-a-pin-school': Miniaturism and *The Review*

In the same year that Fried published his 'Art and Objecthood', the *Times Literary Supplement* printed his poem *Powers*.⁶⁰ Fried had published numerous poems in *The Review*, from 'Parting' in the very first issue (April/May 1962), to the commissioned pamphlet *Appetites* in 1964, to the three poems 'Moment', 'Memories' and 'Talisman' included in the closing 'The State of Poetry' issue (1972). 'Powers', however, is significant as the headline poem to his pamphlet collection of 54 poems with *The Review* almost a decade later, and as the first poem Fried published in a British journal outside *The Review*:

Powers

Our bodies are the closed eyes of a single animal,
Our states of mind so extreme they are the same.
Like the arts, we lend each other new powers.

The poem is telescopic in its description of the intense connection felt between a couple, moving with particular focus from their 'bodies', to their 'minds', to the 'arts' which operate outside of

⁵⁸ Hamilton, 'The Limits of Literature', 651.

⁵⁹ Julian Symons, 'The State of Poetry: A Symposium', *The Review*, 29-30 (Spring-Summer 1972), 29-30 (p. 30).

⁶⁰ Michael Fried, 'Powers', *TLS*, 3428 (9 November 1967), 1058.

their intimately defined unit. Formally, it takes places on three axes: the binding three of the tercet, the duality of 'our' in the sentence of the first two lines and the singularity of the 'other' in the final line. However, at the same moment these divisions are made explicit, the 'you' and 'I', the body and the mind, the line breaks, they are closed into the plural nouns, 'bodies', 'states', 'eyes', 'arts', 'powers'. The inseparability of their minds and bodies reads as that of a metaphysical lyric, rhapsodic in the union of their physical and mental lives: it is 'extreme', 'animal'. It takes on a different character in the final line, however, with the comment that is more conceptually driven. As the concluding line of three it has a resonance which outweighs the earlier two, a sentence in its own right, promoting the closeness of their relationship as a critical conceit which balances their appreciation for one another with that of a relationship to the creative arts. The edifying influence of the arts, instruments in enlightenment, is an instruction also sought in the alliance between two bodies. The poem becomes a tribute to the arts, and the emphasis falls on that noun more than any other in the poem. It exists as a representative example of *The Review's* house style, having migrated to another literary platform, in its economy, self-awareness and cultural resonance.

Martin Dodsworth, a regular contributing essayist of *The Review*, included Fried's 1973 collection in his critique 'Art is Short' for *The Guardian*.⁶¹ Intriguingly, while remarking upon the 'mutterings' that have for some time conceived of a 'new school of minimal poets', he is quick to discount any connection to the 'other arts' in the poetry of Fried, suggesting that, though 'very short', the poems do not have 'much in common with the imagination that commands us to see art in a splash of paint on the floor'.⁶² Nevertheless, the critical language used by Dodsworth when discussing Fried's poetry emphasises physicality, maintaining focus on the poem as a crafted, shaped entity: 'firmness and delicacy'.⁶³ Distancing Fried's aesthetic sense from minimal art practice, Dodsworth characterises Fried's brevity as closer to the established literary tradition of Imagism: composed of an emotional acuity, of an attentiveness to personhood, of moments glimpsed, reflected upon and communicated in an instant.⁶⁴ Maintaining that the strength of

⁶¹ Martin Dodsworth, 'Art is Short', *The Guardian*, 25 October 1973, p. 18.

⁶² Dodsworth, 'Art is Short', p. 18.

⁶³ Dodsworth, 'Art is Short', p. 18.

⁶⁴ Issue 15 of *The Review* (1965) was dedicated to Imagism, discussing the work of F.S. Flint, Marianne Moore and Ezra Pound.

Fried's compositions amount to a meaning cultivated from 'what is not said', Dodsworth suggests that the 'weakness' of these poems lies in their revealing too much: 'the way they call attention to their own execution'.⁶⁵ However, this contradistinction unwittingly typifies the dialectical opposition established between object and spectator in minimalist art. As elucidated some years earlier by the painter William Turnbull in 1968, 'The event no longer happens in the work...but in the observer. The observer's relation to the work should be subject-subject'.⁶⁶ A second review of Fried's *Powers* also noted this self-referential aspect, describing his poetry as 'brilliantly condensed' but 'highly artificial'.⁶⁷ 'To succeed', Peter Porter announced, 'his power of suggestion has to work at lightning speed'.⁶⁸ This goes some way to reproducing what Fried celebrated in the sculpture of Anthony Caro, an 'instantaneousness', by which he imagines that 'if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything'.⁶⁹

The austerity of the magazine's poetic contents extended to critical praxis, which adopted 'astringent' standards 'so high as to be frightening'.⁷⁰ However, this certain acerbity in editorial disposition turns out to have been the consequence of a more developed 'consciousness of technical strength and skill' when compared to its peers, such as *Cornhill*, *The London Magazine*, and *Two Cities*.⁷¹ For this reason, *The Review* became known as 'a conscious growing point of a new generation of talented writers', publishing 'important poems' and tackling 'the claustrophobic atmosphere of existing literary institutions'.⁷² In conversation with the editor Peter Dale of the contemporaneous poetry journal *Agenda*, Hamilton reflected in 1993 that the critical effort behind *The Review* lay in 'defining what we didn't want'.⁷³ Anathema to the intended critical line of *The Review* was the 'sub-journalistic, chopped up prose' of the period, found in the work of The Group or *The Mersey Sound* (1967) poets Adrian Henri, Roger McGough and Brian Patten, and in

⁶⁵ Dodsworth, 'Art is Short', p. 18.

⁶⁶ William Turnbull, 'Notes on Sculpture (excerpts from notes made 1960-1966)', *Studio International*, 176 (November 1968), 198-201. For a review of the minimalist object in the context of abstract art, pop art and nascent conceptual art, see *A Minimal Future?: Art as Object 1958-1968*, ed. by Diedrich Diederichsen and Anne Rorimer (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2004).

⁶⁷ Peter Porter, 'Durrell in Decline', *The Observer*, 17 June 1973, p. 33.

⁶⁸ Porter, 'Durrell in Decline', p. 33.

⁶⁹ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', p. 167.

⁷⁰ Peter Levi, 'Our Intellectual Marines', *Encounter*, 113 (1963), 82-89 (p. 88).

⁷¹ Levi, 'Our Intellectual Marines', 88.

⁷² Levi, 'Our Intellectual Marines', 88.

⁷³ Ian Hamilton, 'Ian Hamilton in Conversation with Peter Dale', *Agenda*, 31.2 (1993), 7-21 (p. 7).

the profusion of individualistic mimeographed publications, what he branded ‘a Kleenex Poetry, a poetry that you could “use” and throw away’.⁷⁴ The ‘taciturnity’ of ‘Ian Hamilton, David Harsent, Colin Falck and others’ was for Morrison ‘less the product of an Absurdist *Weltanschauung* than the natural culmination of a modern British poetic tradition’.⁷⁵ Although Hamilton and his fellow editors admired the discipline and craft of their immediate predecessors, of poets such as Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis and Elizabeth Jennings, who had been brought together for Robert Conquest’s 1956 *New Lines* anthology, there was, nevertheless, a feeling that ‘there still seemed to be a lot missing’.⁷⁶ They were left, Hamilton suggested, without ‘any viable models’ of a poetry that would exhibit the set of values they were tentatively drawing together: a poetry that ‘must at the very least be disciplined and technically interesting’, but also contain ‘more human depth, more *content*’.⁷⁷ The poem must be a complex of feeling with a directness of form, and ‘[Hamilton] and Michael Fried stayed closest to those original principles of brevity, emotional impact’.⁷⁸

The minimalist idiom, however, was not unique to the contents of *The Review*. A number of little magazines and independent presses, such as the Tarasque Press, the Tetrad Press, and *Signals*, had begun to explore the ‘minor mode’ as a response to the increasingly fragmented, graphic and exclamatory underground vernacular. The 1960s witnessed a revolution in the modes and means of publication, with an explosion in the number of small press initiatives.⁷⁹ Against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, Women’s Liberation, psychedelic drugs, environmental causes and the Civil Rights Movement, a proliferation of publishers served their own particular countercultural political or social agenda with pamphlets, magazines, posters and books disseminated as the ‘weapons and mirrors of the underground world’.⁸⁰ The British ‘underground’ was variously defined as an ‘alternative culture’, a ‘movement’, a ‘sub-cultural base’, and yet it was a diffuse constellation of radical and community organisations, characterized

⁷⁴ Hamilton, ‘Ian Hamilton in Conversation with Peter Dale’, 7, 10.

⁷⁵ Morrison, ‘In Defence of Minimalism’, 43.

⁷⁶ Hamilton, ‘Ian Hamilton in Conversation with Peter Dale’, 8.

⁷⁷ Hamilton, ‘Ian Hamilton in Conversation with Peter Dale’, 7.

⁷⁸ Dale, ‘Ian Hamilton in Conversation with Peter Dale’, 9.

⁷⁹ Many of these presses were unified and recorded under the Association of Little Presses, founded by Bob Cobbing and Stuart Montgomery in 1966.

⁸⁰ John Spiers, *The Underground and Alternative Press in Britain: A Bibliographic Guide with historical notes* (Hassocks: The Harvester Press), pp. 15-27 (p. 16).

by a ‘deliberate sell-it-yourself amateurism’, operating against the dominant culture exacted by the British class system, establishment attitudes, censorship and western capitalism.⁸¹ The primary means of unification between these separate bands was through print: ‘the “counter culture” has produced only one broad, unifying institution. It is not a political party or an organisation at all, but a medium: the underground press’.⁸² This moment of increased print activity can also be attributed to technological advances, such as the invention of the mimeograph machine and offset lithography, as well as the expansion in higher education offered by the post-war settlement. The new generation was ‘vastly better informed about a vastly greater range of art than any previous generation’ due to the reproductions made available in relatively cheap editions by publishers such as Penguin, Skira, Phaidon and the public library system.⁸³ The main thrust behind the Gutenberg revolution of the last millennium was that the bound volume, and therefore its contents, could proliferate with greater accuracy and precision, and in far greater number than could be made possible by manual reproduction. For the cultural critic and architectural historian Reyner Banham, this had accelerated by 1969 to form a ‘Gutenberg backlash’, by which the signature obsession of the decade for the ‘fundamental essence of Gutenberg culture – print’ was believed to have waned.⁸⁴

⁸¹ For further discussion of the British Underground Press, see Elizabeth Nelson, *The British Counter-culture, 1966-73* (London: Macmillan, 1989); Peter Stansill and David Mairowitz, *BAMN (By Any Means Necessary): Outlaw Manifestoes and Ephemera 1965-1970* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971); Jeff Nuttall, ‘The Underground’, in *Bomb Culture* (London: MacGibbon & Kee Ltd, 1968), pp. 145-247. For reproductions of underground ephemera, see Jean-François Bizet, *200 Trips from the Counterculture: Graphics and Stories from the Underground Press Syndicate* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006).

⁸² Laurence Leamer, *The Paper Revolutionaries: The Rise of the Underground Press* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 13.

⁸³ Reyner Banham, ‘The Gutenberg Backlash’, *The New Society*, 14 (10 July 1969), 63.

⁸⁴ Banham, ‘The Gutenberg Backlash’, 63.



Fig. 36. Ian Tyson, '23rd Light Poem / 7th Poem for Larry Eigner', *Tetrad Pamphlets*, vol. 1, screenprint on paper, image 305 x 508 mm (London: Tetrad Press, 1970).

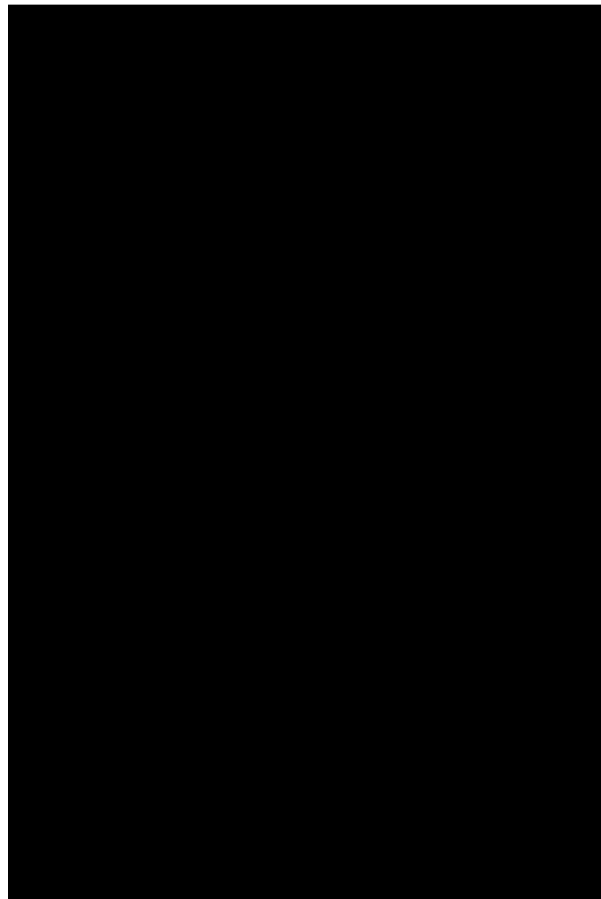


Fig. 37. Ian Tyson in Frank Mitchell, *The 17 Horse Songs of Frank Mitchell*, X- XIII, trans. by Jerome Rothenberg (London: Tetrad Press, 1969).

Nonetheless, this surge in expendable ephemera led to a renewed respect for the technologies of letterpress and printing press, and for the traditions of studio practice, and presses such as the Circle Press in Guildford, Tarasque Press in Nottingham and the Tetrad Press

in London achieved a distinctive acuity of literary and visual expression. For Tetrads, overseen by Ian Tyson, this acuity took shape in Tyson's enmeshed, screenprinted networks or nested geometric shapes that illuminated the equivocal verse of American collaborators such as Larry Eigner (Fig. 36), Jackson Mac Low, and Jerome Rothenberg. Tyson's sensitivity to the enigmatic quality of language in these texts, to the pauses, silences, gaps, and connectives, directed his graphic approach of serialization, linearity and matrices, which can be seen in books such as *Sightings I – IX & Red an Easy Colour* (1964) and *The 17 Horse Songs of Frank Mitchell X-XIII* (1969) (Fig. 37). Tarasque, run by Simon Cutts and Stuart Mills, was closer to the vehemence of its underground counterparts than the more reticent, precisionist Tetrads. A literary periodical, independent press and a bookshop, Tarasque's influence on the 'regular provincial poetry circuit' extended beyond the readership of the magazine, poetry collections, poem-prints, postcards and poem-cards, to also exist upon the more public platform of its Trent Bookshop.⁸⁵ Established in Nottingham in 1964 by locals Mills and the poet Martin Parnell, the bookshop encouraged Nottingham to 'nurture' its relationship with the arts as a challenge to the cultural monopoly of London, as well as to engage with an evolving cultural scene beyond the British Isles.⁸⁶ Each publication was carefully selected to be reflective of the 'heyday of the "Little Magazine" and "Little Press" activity', that included innovative publishers such as Andrew Crozier's Ferry Press, Ian Hamilton Finlay's Wild Hawthorn Press, Gael Turnbull's Migrant Press, Stuart Montgomery's Fulcrum Press, and Jonathan Williams' Jargon Society, as well as numerous transatlantic publications such as *Village Voice*.⁸⁷ Expanding from the 'small literary offering from a Midlands city', it also hosted an international poetry festival from 18-19 February 1966, 'Poetry '66', with a line up to rival Michael Horowitz's landmark International Poetry Incarnation at the Royal Albert Hall of the previous year.⁸⁸ Poetry '66 was an attempt to 'bring to the provinces an attitude to bookselling/bookbuying common [...] only to a few specialist shops in London',

⁸⁵ Peter Fryer, 'Map of the Underground' *Encounter*, 24.4 (October 1967), 6-20 (p. 16).

⁸⁶ Simon Cutts and Stuart Mills, 'A Note from the Editors', *Tarasque*, 1 (Nottingham: Tarasque Press, n.d. c.1965), n.p. The British Library lists *Tarasque* 1 as 1966, but the Tarasque and Simon Cutts Poetry Archive at Princeton University lists the journal as spanning the years 1965-1971. See checklist: <<http://rbcs.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/The%20Tarasque%20and%20Simon%20Cutts%20Poetry%20Archive.pdf>> [accessed 11 November 2015]

⁸⁷ Simon Cutts, 'Metaphor and Motif', *Platform* (1972), 51-52 (p. 51).

⁸⁸ Fryer, 'Map of the Underground', 16.

featuring poets such as Robert Garioch, Spike Hawkins, George MacBeth, Gael Turnbull, and Jonathan Williams.⁸⁹

Tarasque's tone of dissent was best vocalized through the periodical, a little magazine 'of the '60's' that treated little magazines with an unguarded cynicism.⁹⁰ The stylized image of a dragon-like, feathered creature, the 'tarasque', was emblazoned across the cover of almost all of the twelve issues, serving as an indication of the critical temperature of the contents, determined to overcome the excesses of contemporary publishing (Fig. 38).⁹¹ Focusing their sharp editorials on the failure of Michael Horovitz and his 'Children of Albion' to act as an effective counterpoint to the 'boredom which pervades all poetic activity in England', Cutts and Mills named several other figures central to the British avant-garde for rebuke: the poets Bob Cobbing and Adrian Henri, the sigma gatherings orchestrated by novelist Alexander Trocchi, and publications such as the *The International Times* and the *Times Literary Supplement*.⁹² The only way to contend with the verbosity of these 'carpet baggers' and 'prophets of the new' was to divorce language from the 'many loose and indeterminate factors like audience reaction', from the 'utilitarian communicative value of language' and the 'transience of the spoken poem', to create a 'visually directed poem' that would 'suggest a hardness of substance'.⁹³ Cutts and Mills drew a line around a select group of contributing or featured poets who shared similar concerns, the most regular of whom were Pete Brown, Roy Fisher, Spike Hawkins, and Anselm Hollo.

⁸⁹ Poetry 66—Final Plans, (1966), MS487, East Midlands Collection, University of Nottingham, quoted. in Hannah Neate, 'Because the Trent Bookshop is in Nottingham', in *Cusp - Recollections of Poetry in Transition*, ed. Geraldine Monk (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2012), pp. 35-50.

⁹⁰ Stephen Bann, 'Tarasque: an introduction', *Metaphor & Motif*, exh. cat. (Nottingham: Midland Group Gallery, 1972), n.p.

⁹¹ Simon Cutts and Stuart Mills, *Tarasque*, 4 (Nottingham: Tarasque Press, n.d. c.1967), n.p. An explanation was given as the epigraph: 'An animal which lived on the banks of the Rhone, and ravaged the surrounding countryside until it was overcome'.

⁹² Simon Cutts and Stuart Mills, 'Untitled Editorial', *Tarasque*, 5 (Nottingham: Tarasque Press, n.d. c.1967), 3-4 (p. 3).

⁹³ Simon Cutts, letter to Elizabeth Glazebrook, dated 18 June 1968, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute [GRI], Coracle Press Archive, 880074, box 1, fol. 7.

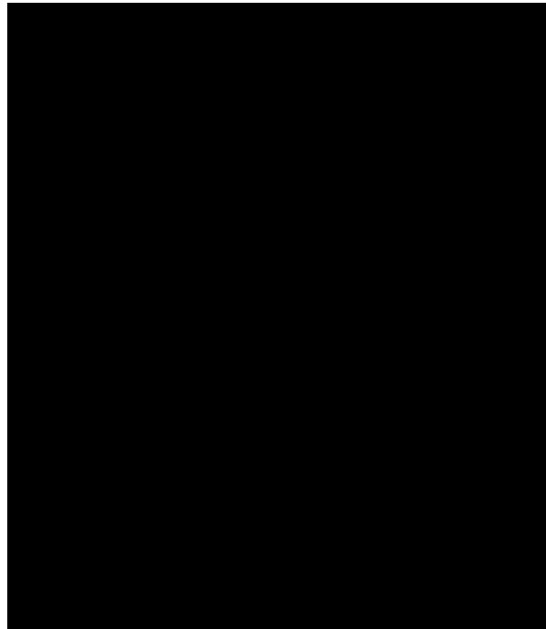


Fig. 38. *Tarasque*, 2 (Nottingham: Tarasque Press, n.d. c.1966).

The first editorial of *Tarasque*, at the beginning of the second issue, laid out the fundamental premise of the magazine: that the poem's focus ought to be 'material' as opposed to 'having something to say'.⁹⁴ There are clear affinities with the aesthetic programme and environmental enthusiasm of Ian Hamilton Finlay, who become correspondent and collaborator with the Tarasque Press from the mid-1960s.⁹⁵ However, as Cutts and Mills were to repeatedly make plain, *Tarasque* was not dedicated to the arena of concrete poetry but was 'post concrete', preferring instead to think of itself as part of the 'derriere-garde' of that movement.⁹⁶ Finlay's valuable example may have reshaped their sense of literary invention, encouraging the creative leap 'from the poem on the page to the poem in a solid, constructed situation', but they intended to take leave of language altogether in favour of plastic expression.⁹⁷ Cutts, as part of the 1969 exhibition 'my paintings your poems', cemented this stance: 'It has now become impossible to continue working with the printed line as a left-over of the syntax imposed by speech. A solution is found in the solidity of structure of the plastic object'.⁹⁸ However this realisation of the poem

⁹⁴ Cutts and Mills, 'Untitled Editorial [pointers]', *Tarasque*, 2 (n.d. c.1966) n.p.

⁹⁵ Finlay published two large screenprints with the Tarasque Press, 'Acrobats' (1966) and 'Sea Poppy II' (1968), as well as three books: *Ocean Stripe Series 5* (1967), *Air Letters* (1968) with drawings by Robert Frame and *Allotments* (1970) with designs by Ian Gardner.

⁹⁶ Cutts, 'Metaphor and Motif', p. 19. A number of Mills' constructed works of this period are visibly derivative of Finlay's own poem-sculptures at Little Sparta; see photographs in *Tarasque* 11/12.

⁹⁷ Cutts, 'Metaphor and Motif', p. 19.

⁹⁸ Simon Cutts, 'Statement', in *my paintings your poems: an exhibition of paintings constructed works and prints*, exh. cat. (Birmingham: Birmingham Post & Mail, 1969), n.p.

as ‘artifact’, of a poetry that ‘brings the poet nearer the plastic artist...than the narrative poet’, was indeterminate.⁹⁹ Cutts and Mills produced a varied programme of works to ply the relationship between word and image, devising books, environmental poem-sculptures, constructed abstract objects, graphic icons designed by their frequent collaborator Ian Gardner, and ‘visually directed’ poems, such as the assembled frames of Cutts’s ‘Window Days’ (Fig. 39).¹⁰⁰ Their ‘post-concrete’ moment did not manage to evince a consistent aesthetic position, sharing only the attempt to visualise intellectual effort through different intermedial means. By way of example, the project that was intended to act as ‘a very concise statement of the post-concrete position’, became the most problematic of Tarasque’s history. A collaborative book, *Allotments* featured the poems of Cutts, Mills and Finlay alongside Gardner’s visually evocative figures. A series of increasingly exasperated letters preceding its publication show that Finlay had grown deeply skeptical of the bid made by Tarasque to create a book that he viewed as enacting an ill-conceived intellectual agenda, dubbing them ‘urban wafflers’.¹⁰¹ For Finlay, the concept, or their concept as it stood, was not enough if its visual realisation lacked aesthetic sensitivity, a representation of the art condition as opposed to art itself, and the exchange culminated in the jibe, ‘you are much less a couple of Post-Concretes than a couple of Concrete Posts’.¹⁰² However, for Cutts, the crucial point was the communication of the concept in as compact a mode as possible: ‘making something aesthetically direct’ by means of ‘a highly aware and self-conscious simplification’.¹⁰³ The ‘purificational’ approach taken by Tarasque, in which ‘the successive stages of “writing” are shrugged off’ to focus upon an increasingly abstract iconography, presaged a broader question: what were the limitations of a language ‘aware’ of its own limitations?¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Simon Cutts, ‘Introduction’, *Tarasque*, 6 (Nottingham: Tarasque Press, n.d. c.1966), n.p. (repr. in Simon Cutts, *Some Forms of Availability: Critical Passages on the Book and Publication* (New York: Granary Books, 2007), pp. 93-94).

¹⁰⁰ Simon Cutts ‘Window Days’, *Tarasque*, 9 (Nottingham: Tarasque Press, n.d. c.1968), n.p., repr. as ‘Airfields’, *Form*, 7 (Cambridge: Philip Steadman, 1968), 23 (Fig. 40).

¹⁰¹ Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Simon Cutts, dated 8 January 1971, GRI 890144, box 1, fol. 6, pp. 1-3 (p. 2).

¹⁰² Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Simon Cutts, dated 19 July 1971, GRI 890144, box 1, fol. 6, p. 1.

¹⁰³ Simon Cutts, letter to Stephen Bann, dated 27 April 1969, GRI 890144, box 1, fol. 6, p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ Simon Cutts, letter to Pete Brown, dated 1 May 1969, (repr. in *Tarasque*, 11/12 (Nottingham: Tarasque Press, 1972), n.p.).

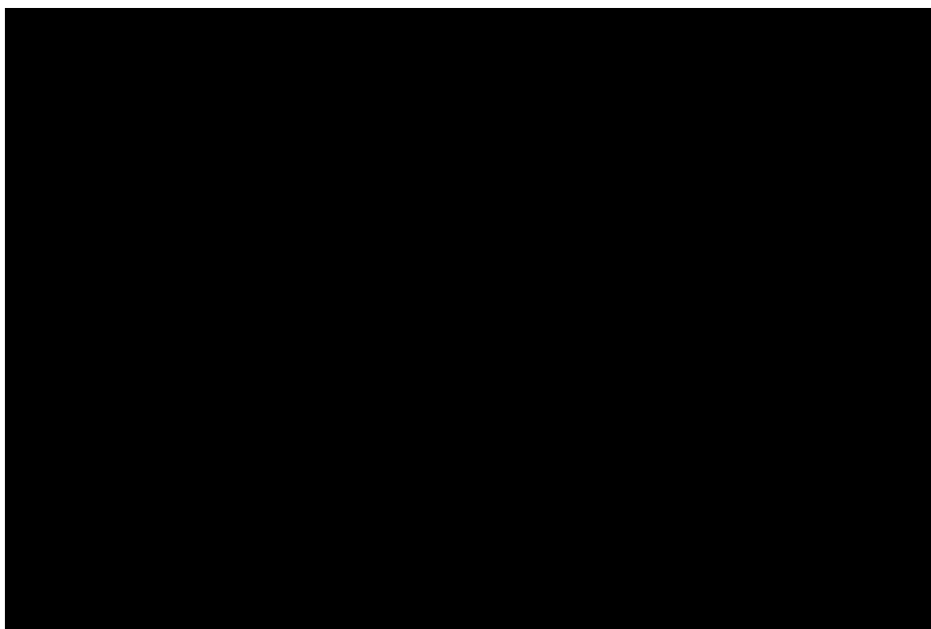


Fig. 39. Simon Cutts, 'Window Days', *Tarasque*, 9 (Nottingham: Tarasque Press, n.d. c. 1968), n.p.

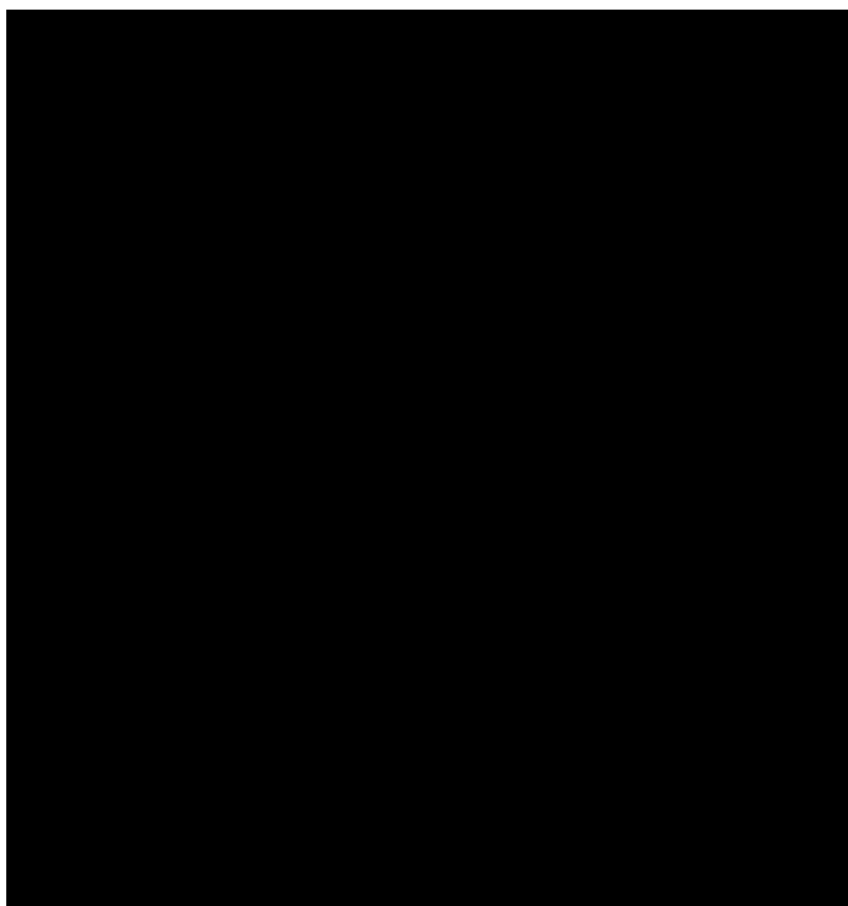


Fig. 40. Simon Cutts, 'Airfields', *Form*, 7 (1968), 23.

4. Elaborating a Manner: From Object to Process to Concept

In 1972 *The Review*, identifying itself as ‘Britain’s most influential postwar poetry magazine’, celebrated its tenth anniversary with a special ‘State of Poetry’ issue.¹⁰⁵ Gathering together the responses of over thirty poets of varying ages and affinities to a short questionnaire, this ‘Symposium’ promised to define the contemporary ‘poetry scene’, appointing the most ‘encouraging’ and ‘discouraging’ developments of the 1960s and offering a glimpse of future developments.¹⁰⁶ Although many of the answers flattered Ian Hamilton’s involvement with the contemporary ‘poetry scene’ and the ‘needle-jet’ brilliance of his poems, *The Review* was also subjected to sharp criticism.¹⁰⁷ For Clive James, the journal of the ‘miniaturists’ had only succeeded in ‘breed[ing] a new strain of super-resistant, sub-microscopic bacterial poem’, poems resistant primarily to criticism in their equivocation, self-effacement, and paucity of material.¹⁰⁸ Other commentators also find fault with this aspect of *The Review* school, such as Julian Symons who considers such poems, ‘raw nuggets of awareness and observation’ that threaten the necessary balance of ‘craft and instinct’.¹⁰⁹ At their worst they are merely ‘transient flashes of wonder at the mere fact of existing at all’.¹¹⁰ Colin Falck offered the final commentary on the state of poetry, concluding the special issue with a critical appraisal of Ian Hamilton’s exemplary ‘rhythmic control’.¹¹¹ The poets that gathered around Hamilton’s *Review*, Falck asserted, had over the decade of its existence begun to ‘forge an idiom which looks flexible enough to deal with any experience the modern world is likely to come up with’, producing ‘a general move in all of these poets [...] towards an intensification of language’.¹¹² This ‘intensification’ was best expressed by the ‘central statement of the new minimalist school’, Colin Falck’s 1968 essay ‘Poetry and Wittgenstein’.¹¹³ This essay, described by Blake Morrison as ‘key’ to the school’s intellectual course and self-identification, considers the function of language, its application and its

¹⁰⁵ Cutts, letter to Pete Brown, *Tarasque*, 11/12, n.p.

¹⁰⁶ Various, ‘The State of Poetry: A Symposium’, *The Review*, 29-30 (1972), 3-74.

¹⁰⁷ Clive James, ‘The State of Poetry: A Symposium’, *The Review*, 29-30 (1972), 16-18 (p. 17).

¹⁰⁸ James, ‘The State of Poetry: A Symposium’, 18.

¹⁰⁹ Julian Symons, ‘The State of Poetry: A Symposium’, *The Review*, 29-30 (1972), 30.

¹¹⁰ Colin Falck, ‘The State of Poetry: A Symposium’, *The Review*, 29-30 (1972), 70-73 (p. 72).

¹¹¹ Falck, ‘The State of Poetry: A Symposium’, 73.

¹¹² Falck, ‘The State of Poetry: A Symposium’, 73.

¹¹³ Morrison, ‘In Defence of Minimalism’, 49.

irrationality.¹¹⁴ Language is necessarily inflected by physical processes, gestural associations, and social contexts, and words have meaning because ‘words are uttered in situations in life which human beings share’, not because they relate in singular fashion to objects or elements in the world.¹¹⁵ Therefore, the meanings of words can only be understood by ‘looking at the parts they play in the publicly accepted institutions of language – by looking, in fact, at the ways in which they can be used’.¹¹⁶ Words connect with our shared impressions, and the ‘intensification of language’, in the manner upheld by *The Review* school, is not the creation of a language more sharply aware of its existence as language, transparent about its reality as a system, but the identification of a language resplendent in its physical import, emotional consequence and collusion of personal contexts. Falck’s reading of Wittgenstein divines a notion of language as not simply a ‘grid which the mind places over reality’, but as a ‘range of activities – such as commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, etc. – which are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing’.¹¹⁷

At this juncture it is useful to consider the correlation between Falck’s sentiments and the writings of Richard Wollheim, who at this time had occasional recourse to Wittgenstein’s theories of linguistic ambiguity when discussing possible definitions of the work of art.¹¹⁸ Wollheim similarly rejected the application of theoretical ‘grid[s]’ in the reading of a work of art or literary text, in favour of the understanding that meaning in art was principally governed by psychological insight. He outlined this difference of approach in the following summary:

structuralism, iconography, semiotics and various breeds of relativism...have in common the belief, explicit or implicit, that pictorial meaning is primarily determined by rules, or by codes, or by conventions, or by the symbol system to which the meaningful picture belongs. I reject this belief. I do not deny that such factors can have a role in shaping, modifying, extending meaning in certain cases, but I do deny that they are primary determinants in meaning.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Morrison, ‘In Defence of Minimalism’, 49.

¹¹⁵ Colin Falck, ‘Poetry and Wittgenstein’, *The Review*, 18 (1968), 3-16 (p. 3).

¹¹⁶ Falck, ‘Poetry and Wittgenstein’, 3.

¹¹⁷ Falck, ‘Poetry and Wittgenstein’, 3.

¹¹⁸ Wollheim’s first major work in the philosophy of art was published in the same year as Falck’s essay: *Art and its Objects: An Introduction to Aesthetics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

¹¹⁹ Richard Wollheim, ‘What the artist does’, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 13-42 (p. 22).

Resisting the arguments made for an account of art in terms of something analogous to the mechanisms of language by studies such as Maurice de Sausmarez's *Basic Design* (1964) or in the systematic approach to cultural phenomena of Roland Barthes, Falck and Wollheim are therefore at odds with the prevailing semiotic rhetoric of the period. Concurrent with the 'State of Poetry' appraisal offered by *The Review* in 1972, Wollheim offered his own estimation of cultural progress in 'Style Now', a lecture delivered and published in 1972.¹²⁰ According to Wollheim, it is not works of art themselves that have an internal 'grammar' upon which they are constructed or understood, but representational 'style' that possesses operative determinants.¹²¹ 'Style', Wollheim asserts, can be considered 'generative in the production of paintings in much the same way as grammar is generative in the production of utterances and inscriptions', by which he means that as style has a methodical way of managing content, different content will receive intelligible formulation.¹²² However, style is not the application of a vocabulary or 'set or list of items' external to the creative process of the artist, but also a consequence of practice, deeply embedded in the conscious and subconscious physical choices made by the artist.¹²³ Falck appears to be asking the same searching questions of literary style when he asks: 'What does insight mean today? What will the poetry of earth be like? What patterns are there? Are there myths, archetypes, to be found? It seems possible'.¹²⁴ For Falck, one answer to these questions rests with the 'internality' and 'felt presence' of the poet, inciting a dependence upon the expression and the individual moment of perception in similar fashion to Wollheim's apprehension of the 'psychomotor' faculties of the artist. However, Falck concludes by suggesting that 'What we need most of all today perhaps is to remember our obligation to the essential'.¹²⁵ The emphasis to be placed on concreteness and particularity is revealing of the solipsistic strain evident within these circumscribed poems, accentuated in the lines extracted from the *Tractatus* that conclude Falck's

¹²⁰ Richard Wollheim, 'Style Now', in *The Power Lectures 1968-1973: Concerning Contemporary Art*, ed. by Bernard Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 133-153.

¹²¹ Wollheim made similar claims, 'that language is not art...that language is a style', in an earlier lecture: Richard Wollheim, 'The art-lesson' in *The Art Lesson: The Maurice de Sausmarez Memorial Lecture* (London: Studio International and Byam Shaw School of Drawing and Painting Ltd, 1971), pp. 1-6.

¹²² Wollheim, 'Style Now', *The Power Lectures*, p. 140.

¹²³ Wollheim, 'Style Now', *The Power Lectures*, p. 145.

¹²⁴ Falck, 'Poetry and Wittgenstein', 15.

¹²⁵ Falck, 'Poetry and Wittgenstein', 13.

essay. Alert to Wittgenstein's reduction of language, logic, meaning and even the world into the mind, one line in particular resonates: '*The limits of my language* mean the limits of my world'.¹²⁶

Therefore, a question remains: how close is the limited literary style of the poets of *The Review* to the manner of Minimalism? If it was simply a matter of length, then Clive James's term 'miniaturist' is more appropriate. For Hamilton, *The Review* came to an end as the poems had tended 'more and more towards the aphoristic, the epigrammatic...they weren't taking on dramatic or narrative challenges or even much of an emotional challenge'.¹²⁷ In the end, they were 'just admiring their own brevity'.¹²⁸ Tightly conceived, containing few asides, dependent clauses or parenthetical remarks, the poems were typically of three to six lines in length. As concise, clever observations or salient statements on general principles, they are thoughts conveyed economically, but always logically and with personal investment. The poets remained resolutely committed to syntax, obeisant of grammar, submitting the part in favour of the syntagmatic whole: the sequencing tactics of metonymy or the fragmentation of individual words was entirely absent. '[E]verything', Fried announces in 'Art and Objecthood', 'in Caro's art that is worth looking at is in its syntax', and this regard for mutually inflective clauses appears to have migrated to his poetic composition.¹²⁹ A magnification of syntax had been one of the central preoccupations of the concrete poetry movement, as a framework to be restructured by surrounding space and vocalization, a directive apt for experimentation. For Hamilton and Fried, however, the conventions of syntax remained unchanged, in spite of the concision of the poems, persisting as the means by which complexities of emotional or mental states could be made intelligible. It was of paramount importance to get "'more of the world"' into...verse: more narrative, more satire, more intelligence', and this was to be achieved through a terseness of expression rooted to the realities of the world as opposed to a radical model of order.¹³⁰

In this way, the founding achievements of Minimalism, the anesthetized surfaces, serial distribution of units or the necessity of corroborative discourse, played little visible part in the

¹²⁶ Falck, 'Poetry and Wittgenstein', 15.

¹²⁷ Hamilton, 'Ian Hamilton in Conversation with Peter Dale', 21.

¹²⁸ Hamilton, 'Ian Hamilton in Conversation with Peter Dale', 21.

¹²⁹ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', p. 162.

¹³⁰ Ian Hamilton, 'Preface', *Fifty Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), pp. ix-x (p. x).

poetry of the 'so-called minimalist group'.¹³¹ It was more a matter of temperament: the poems are simple in their grammar and vocabulary, basic in their linear geometry, small in their formal scope and therefore do not betray the effort spent on their creation. Drawing upon Barbara Reise's consummate definition of the minimalist object in reference to these poems, they also seem 'self-sufficient in merely being'.¹³² Hamilton believed that the minimal style in literature had reached an endpoint by the beginning of the 1970s, but it was at precisely this moment that the work of a number of galleries and independent presses were receiving attention, posing new interdisciplinary approaches to the relationship between literature and visual culture outside of the commanding influence of the literary establishment. The reluctance of *The Review* poets and critics to acknowledge the visual import of their work was redressed by contemporary printmaker presses and galleries such as Beau Geste, Circle, Nigel Greenwood, Situation, and Weproductions, examining the ways in which not only the printed text but the form of the book and its means of distribution became vulnerable to progressive transformation. A conclusion drawn by Wollheim provides a route forward, articulating the assurances offered by concept and technique as opposed to the 'essential' facts of the work: 'It is no longer the *fact* of elaboration, it is the *manner* of elaboration, that leads to expression'.¹³³

¹³¹ Janusz Ryszkowski, 'Recent British Poetry', *The Honest Ulsterman*, 77 (Winter 1984), 76-77 (p. 77).

¹³² Barbara Reise, "'Untitled 1969": A Footnote on Art and Minimalstylehood', *Studio International*, 177.910 (April 1969), 166-172.

¹³³ Wollheim, 'Style Now', *The Power Lectures*, p. 144.

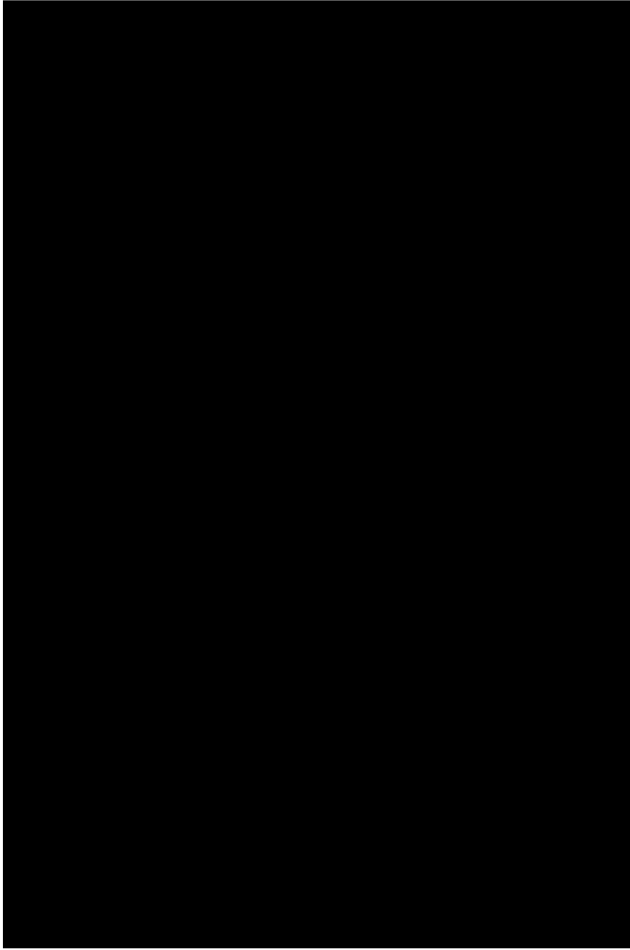


Fig. 41. Poster for exhibition 'Ed Ruscha: Books', 7-30 January 1971, Nigel Greenwood Gallery Ltd., London.

5. 'The Gallery Becomes an Extended Bookshelf': The Bookwork Phenomenon¹³⁴

In January 1971 the Nigel Greenwood Gallery introduced the 'bookworks' of Edward Ruscha to the London art scene.¹³⁵ The gallery had opened the year before, inserting itself into an exclusive London circle of small commercial exhibition spaces committed to showing international developments in contemporary art, including Angela Flower's Gallery and the Lisson Gallery, and joined in the following years by Situation and the Jack Wendler Gallery.¹³⁶ Credited by

¹³⁴ Caroline Tisdall, 'Constructivists, Futurists, Dadaists and the Bauhaus artists all tackled the book as vehicle for art – the most disquieting thing about these new publications, though, is their complacency', *The Guardian*, 7 October 1972, p. 10.

¹³⁵ The books exhibited were *Twentysix Gas Stations* (1962), *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964), *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965), *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), *Royal Road Test* (1967), *Business Cards* (1968), *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass* (1968), *Stains* (1969), *Crackers* (1969), *Real Estate Opportunities* (1970) and *Babycakes with Weights* (1970).

¹³⁶ The Lisson Gallery was founded in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail and the Jack Wendler Gallery opened on 30 December 1971 with the first exhibition of Lawrence Weiner's work in London. See Sophie Richard, 'The International Network and Major Exhibitions: 1970-72 and Later', in *Unconcealed: The International*

Norbert Lynton, in a survey of the cultural achievements of 1970, as ‘the avant-garde platform in London’, Nigel Greenwood’s 60 Glebe Place gallery commanded a sizeable reputation. Following curatorial roles at Axiom Gallery and the Stockwell Depot, assisting a group of sculptors to realise an annual series of independent exhibitions of work, Greenwood’s first few shows staked out his ambitions – showing in swift succession the mixed media wall hangings of Keith Milow, the ‘deep space installations’ of Roland Brener, and the now notorious first presentation of Gilbert & George’s *Singing Sculpture*.¹³⁷ Ruscha’s show ‘Books’, held from 7-30 January, was distinct from the discourse prompted by these shows, all of which engaged with questions of scale, public and place. Ruscha’s curious photographic publications maintain a reticence indicative of a more private, contemplative experience. He surveys the built environment of Los Angeles and its environs with a schematic lens, recording multiple instances of a given architectural vernacular – swimming pools, car parks, apartment buildings, petrol stations, or from the realm of everyday objects and occurrences – stained surfaces, business cards, ‘small fires’. Ruscha’s interrogative photographic practice resists such ease of comprehension, however, seeking to frustrate or confound the function of the images presented and their capacity to elucidate a given theme or narrative. Efforts made to undermine the aesthetic project of the books were made manifest in the seeming reproducibility of the images, in their ‘deadpan, anonymous, amateurish approach to photographic form’, as well as in the reproducibility of the book object itself.¹³⁸

Network of Conceptual Artists 1967-77 Dealers, Exhibitions and Public Collections, ed. by Lynda Morris (London: Ridinghouse, 2009), pp. 105-168.

¹³⁷ Norbert Lynton, ‘1970: The Year They Took Painting Out of the Picture Frame’, *The Guardian*, 2 January 1971, p. 6. Greenwood also had a fledgling broadcasting career, hosting a BBC2 documentary, ‘Canvas’ offering his ‘reflections on great paintings’, broadcast on 24 June 1969. For an excellent survey of Greenwood’s Stockwell Depot activity, see Sam Cornish, *Stockwell Depot 1967-1979* (London: Ridinghouse, 2015).

¹³⁸ See Benjamin Buchloh, ‘Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions’, *October*, 55 (1990), 105-143.

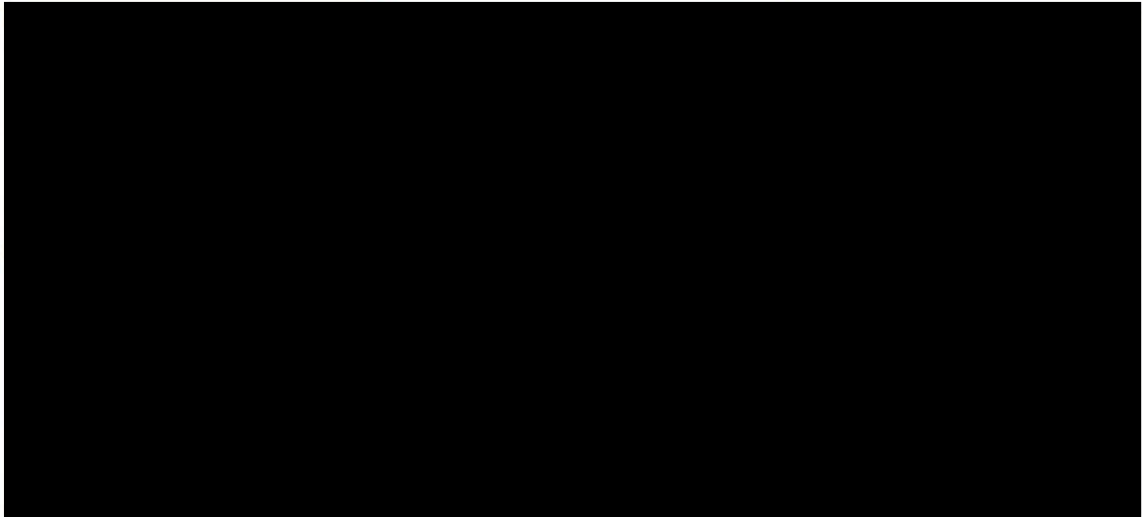


Fig. 42. Ed Ruscha, *News, Mews, Pens, Brews, Stems & Dues* (London: Editions Alecto, 1970).

By the time the show opened, Ruscha had produced eleven of these ‘bookworks’, such as *Twentysix Gas Stations* (1963), *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), *Business Cards* (1968), *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass* (1968) and *Real Estate Opportunities* (1970). Ruscha has subsequently described his books as like ‘a wolf in sheep’s clothing’, made powerful through their intention to ‘disorient’ approaches made to read or view them.¹³⁹ Ruscha famously remarked that he desired precisely this response from a spectator when faced with his books: *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* ‘had an inexplicable thing I was looking for, and that was a kind of “Huh?” That’s what I’ve always worked around’.¹⁴⁰ The ‘Huh?’ response, however, is intensified in Ruscha’s work as it is dependent on the book structure; Ruscha’s books cannot be defined as documentation, as literary texts, as photographic essays, as collations of reproductions or as an exposition of a theoretical stance. His books existed to disrupt these categories, and it was this ‘unruly optical unconscious’ that beguiled a number of British writers and artists.¹⁴¹ By their nature as books, certain assumptions are brought to bear upon the ways one is required to scrutinise the laconic snapshots of mundane subject matter: linear narrative, graphic conventions of the printed page, consistency of phrasing, paper quality. This suggestion introduced a rift in the established illustrative correspondence between language and image, by which explanatory texts, titles or

¹³⁹ Edward Ruscha in Bernard Blistène, ‘Conversation with Ed Ruscha’, in *Edward Ruscha: Paintings/Schilderijen*, exh. cat. (Rotterdam: Museum Boyens-van Beuningen, 1989), p. 134.

¹⁴⁰ Edward Ruscha, “...a kind of Huh?”: An Interview with Edward Ruscha by Willoughby Sharp’, *Avalanche*, 7 (Winter/Spring 1973), 30-39 (p. 30).

¹⁴¹ Kevin Hatch, “‘Something Else’: Ed Ruscha’s Photographic Books’, *October*, 111 (2005), 107-126 (p.124).

captions were either entirely absent or served as provocations to the authenticity of the photographs. The images too adopt an internal logic of their own, a non-hierarchical presentation which even on occasion disputes the validity of the book itself – *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964) ends with the *non sequiturs* of a photograph of milk and nine blank pages.¹⁴² More accurately, Ruscha sought to eschew the standards of the artists' book, the traditionally crafted *livre d'artiste* notable for its limited number, reciprocity between text and image, and costly production, in favour of a more commercially produced book. In an interview from 1965, he described his desired 'clear-cut machine finish' across each and every number of those printed, with the intention of advancing a new form of artistic presentation, a 'mass produced object of high order' with 'none of the nuances of the hand-made and crafted limited edition book'.¹⁴³ Ruscha dispensed with the customary aura of the unique art object to prioritise the use of 'a processed media' and to 'illustrat[e] ideas'.¹⁴⁴ He had responded with great energy to London, working with Editions Alecto the preceding year on the silkscreen printing project *News, Mews, Pews, Brews, Stews & Dues* (1970), in which he experimented with blending his own 'inks' from 'foodstuffs, crushed flowers, syrups and sauces' (Fig. 42).¹⁴⁵ Amused by the native wit and curious idiomatic language of Britain, as well as by the potential for new properties and consistencies of matter for printmaking, he presented a work that undermined the levity of its austere, anglicized typography. Like his first book project with Editions Alecto, *Stains* (1969) (Fig. 43), Ruscha's projects adopt a mock solemnity, which permit them a degree of ambiguity: 'Not quite Pop paintings in book form, not exactly eccentric documentary projects, and not merely a pit stop on the road to Conceptualism'.¹⁴⁶ Even the publicity for the exhibition debunked the notion of artists' books or art objects as precious or irreplaceable commodities, as Ruscha was photographed sprawled beneath a mess of his titles, inscribed, propped up or left open down the length of his supine body (Fig. 39).

¹⁴² Hatch, "'Something Else': Ed Ruscha's Photographic Books', 114.

¹⁴³ Edward Ruscha in John Coplans, 'Concerning *Various Small Fires*: Edward Ruscha Discusses his Perplexing Publications', *Artforum* 5 (February 1965), 24-25, (repr. in *Leave any Information at the signal: writings, interviews, bits, pages*, ed. by Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004) pp. 23-27).

¹⁴⁴ Christopher Fox, 'Ed Ruscha Discusses his Latest Work with Christopher Fox', *Studio International*, 179 (June 1970), 281, 287.

¹⁴⁵ Fox, 'Ed Ruscha Discusses his Latest Work with Christopher Fox', 287.

¹⁴⁶ Hatch, "'Something Else': Ed Ruscha's Photographic Books', 108.

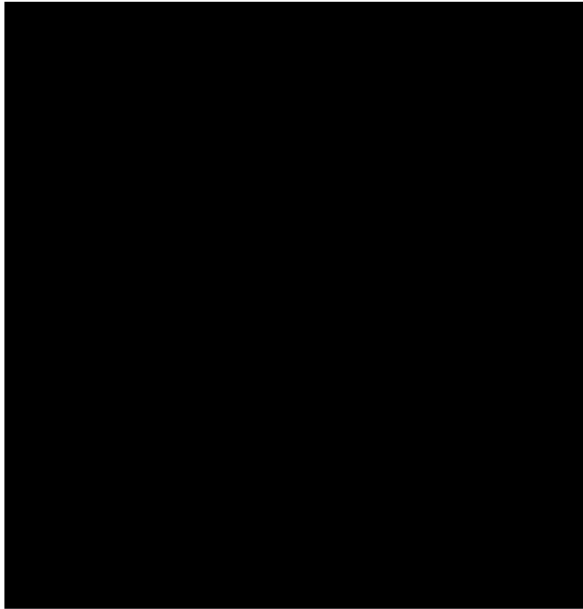


Fig. 43. Ed Ruscha, *Stains* (London: Editions Alecto, 1969).

For Clive Phillpot, the foremost apologist of the period for this developing artistic current of ‘bookworks’, and the head of the Chelsea School of Art library, Ruscha’s *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* (1963) had marked ‘a shift in the attitude of artists towards the book’.¹⁴⁷ As Ruscha acknowledged, there was a defiance required to the presentation of books in fine art spaces: ‘It’s just that traditionally the book has not been accepted as a work to be put in an art gallery’.¹⁴⁸ Early in 1972 Phillpot was commissioned by the editor of *Studio International* Peter Townshend to write a regular column, ‘Feedback’, to scrutinise ‘publications that were “not normally discussed or reviewed widely”’ and to document the growing preoccupation in the arts with the book as medium.¹⁴⁹ There was significant debate about how to define or classify such works, which Phillpot often manifested internally within his column, wrestling over the appropriate means of description or appellation. His second column, the first to centre on the book as a ‘vehicle for visual ideas’, offered a survey of mainly British examples, holding in the balance the two emergent tendencies of the book in art as means of documenting practice as well as mutable physical object: ‘it has acquired a new status as a convenient record of events as a

¹⁴⁷ Clive Phillpot, ‘Twenty-six gasoline stations that shook the world: the rise and fall of cheap booklets as art’, *Art Libraries Journal*, 18.1 (1993) 4-13, (p. 4); Edward Ruscha, *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* (Hollywood, Calif.: Heavy Industry Publications, 1963).

¹⁴⁸ Ruscha, “...a kind of Huh”, 34.

¹⁴⁹ Phillpot believed this column was modeled on the ‘Rumbles’ column of the American journal *Avalanche*, which also surveyed the developing field of artists’ bookworks; Clive Phillpot, *Booktrek: Selected Essays on Artists’ Books (1972-2010)* (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2013), p. 14.

result of the advent of performance art and evanescent artworks, but also as a specific visual medium with its own possibilities and limitations, which also happens to be activated by the reader'.¹⁵⁰ Artists such as Hamish Fulton, Richard Long and Bruce McLean publish books as extensions of their work, using photographs and textual reflections as record; Eduardo Paolozzi, Dieter Rot, and Tom Phillips attend to language and play with the conventions of printed matter; while John Latham and R.B. Kitaj take advantage of books and their associations as objects within their assemblages. Ruscha, however, often featured as a lone figure in Phillpot's critical overviews. Ruscha 'triggered a defeat for the old regime' by producing 'art for the paperback era', in his insistence upon a more democratic approach to the artists' book, demanding greater print volumes, refusing to number subsequent editions, emphasising the industrial origins of the book.¹⁵¹ In a number of essays, Phillpot considers *Twentysix Gas Stations* to be in its 'artlessness' not only the primary exemplar of the new concept of cheap multiple booklet as art, but also the first in a 'subgenre of Conceptual art', an artistic mode of catalogues, pamphlets or lists that provided suitable means through which to bring together related, or indeed unrelated, phenomena or things.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Clive Phillpot, 'Feedback', *Studio International*, 187.947 (September 1972), 64.

¹⁵¹ Clive Phillpot, '1960-1980', *Art Monthly*, 209 (September 1997), 48-49 (p. 48). The first edition numbered 400 copies, which Ruscha individually numbered, but Ruscha believed this to be a 'mistake' and so the subsequent editions, of 500 copies in 1967 and 3000 copies in 1969, are not numbered.

¹⁵² In 1964, the price of the book in the US was \$3.00: see advertisement 'Rejected...' in *Artforum*, 2.9 (March 1964), 55. Phillpot, 'Twentysix gasoline stations that shook the world', 4.



Fig. 44. John Latham, 'Burial of Count Orgaz' (1958), Canvas, plaster, spoon, sponge, books, bottle, gas light fitting, gas pipes and other materials, 1219 x 914 x 216 mm, Tate Gallery, London.

Books were not only used to complicate the reverence typically directed at objects within a gallery or scholarly context, or the nature of language as a medium, they also became the instruments of iconoclastic protest against the culture industry. The British artist John Latham was perhaps the earliest of the period to regard the book as a physical object to be employed in his artwork, subjecting books to both acts of worship and acts of mortification. Latham first used books as components in reliefs or combine paintings in 1958: torn, plastered, partly burnt, splayed and overpainted books were incorporated into wall-mounted assemblages of subsidiary found objects, such as in *The Burial of Count Orgaz* (1958) (Fig. 44). Books sourced from secondhand shops thrust their spines or bare the leaves of their textblocks to assert a material

presence, ‘un-still-lives’ which on occasion included moveable elements, and yet the books are immobilised. Latham strips books of their role as records of verbal information: they can no longer be leaved, read or filed. However, as Lawrence Alloway recognised, this was an ‘act of creation’, by which ‘a non-verbal art appears out of the wreckage of the printed word’.¹⁵³ Latham emancipates books from a circuit of received opinion, from a system of known codes, from their existence as an instant – an ‘animate black dot’ – on a timescale of cultural history, to acknowledge an existence far more versatile and incendiary.¹⁵⁴ As books continued to feature in Latham’s work, he began to notice the parity between his earlier spray paintings and the printed page: both consisted of black marks introduced into white planes. However, as John A. Walker astutely notes, ‘while in the case of the paintings the “geometry” – the pattern of points’ was perceived spatially, in the books the marks were marshaled in linear fashion. Marks made on a canvas could remain atemporal in their presentation to the perception of a viewer, while reading a sequence of words ‘necessarily activates passing time’.¹⁵⁵

Throughout the mid-1960s Latham performed his controversial Skoob Tower Ceremonies (1964-1968), involving the ritualistic burning of tall towers of interleaved (typically) reference or art books (Fig. 45), his ‘Book Plumbing’ installation at Better Books bookshop in which volumes were aerated, thrown off shelves and covered in viscous yellow foam (Fig. 46), and the notorious *Still and Chew: Art and Culture 1966-1967*, in which he directed a group of art students, including Barry Flanagan, to dismember a copy of Clement Greenberg’s seminal formalist study *Art and Culture* (1961), chew on fragments of the pages and then spit the pulp into a phial which would represent the ‘essence’ of Greenberg and his aesthetic enterprise.¹⁵⁶ For Latham, books such as reference texts or Greenberg’s thesis were authoritarian, the mere apparatus of a self-perpetuating cultural programme, forming a profiteering education industry to which he later referred as the ‘Mental Furniture Industry’.¹⁵⁷ Encyclopedias represented a fixed

¹⁵³ Lawrence Alloway, *John Latham: Assemblages*, exh. cat. (Oxford: Bear Lane Gallery, 1963), n.p.

¹⁵⁴ The University of Arts London are currently making Latham’s archive available online: <<http://www.ligatus.org.uk/jla/>> [accessed 13 April 2016]

¹⁵⁵ John A. Walker, ‘John Latham and the Book: The Convergence of Art and Physics’, *The Burlington Magazine*, 129.1016 (November 1987), 715-720 (p. 717).

¹⁵⁶ One of the most documented Skoob ceremonies took place at the Destruction in Art Symposium at Better Books, London, 9-11 September 1966. See *The Portable John Latham*, ed. by A. Hudek and A. Velios (London: Occasional Papers, 2010).

¹⁵⁷ See Claire Louise Staunton, ed., *Mental Furniture Industry* (London: Flat Time House, 2013).

body of knowledge, rapidly superseded and outdated, and he often took critical aim at books with grandiose or presumptuous titles, such as *A Handbook of Reason*, which he intended to use as part of a monumental public sculpture in Scotland. In confounding the literary text, Latham evidently prompts questions about the form and the function of the book at mid-century. However, it is the explicit affront to cultural values that the desecration of the book presents that is of greater pertinence here. The burning of innumerable volumes in Nazi Germany remained in very recent memory. As one of Latham's reviewers reflected in 1963, books are 'perhaps the most heavily sanctioned objects a culture can possess, along with its works of art; only philistines mutilate them or barbarians burn them'.¹⁵⁸ There is something deeply disturbing about the destruction of a book; they are symbols of learning, exchange, knowledge, enlightenment and culture, encircling systems of thought and belief. The abuse of the book within Latham's artistic practice was augmented in order to confront and challenge these associations, but never as a mere exercise in formal arrangement or an act of gratuitous violence. *Still and Chew* has remained Latham's 'most famous assault on a book', as his defining iconoclastic act, but Latham's oeuvre as a whole effectively repositioned the material and cultural status of the book.¹⁵⁹ Latham's work marked a shift in the relationship between word and image in modern art – outdistancing the adoption of the printed word in collage in favour of the inclusion of the book in assemblage. As a result, his work precipitated a period of redefinition, in which the book was placed at the centre of an emergent critique of traditional paradigms of visuality.

¹⁵⁸ Anon., 'Mr John Latham's Exhibition', *The Times*, 15 June 1963, p. 5.

¹⁵⁹ Walker, 'John Latham and the Book', 719.

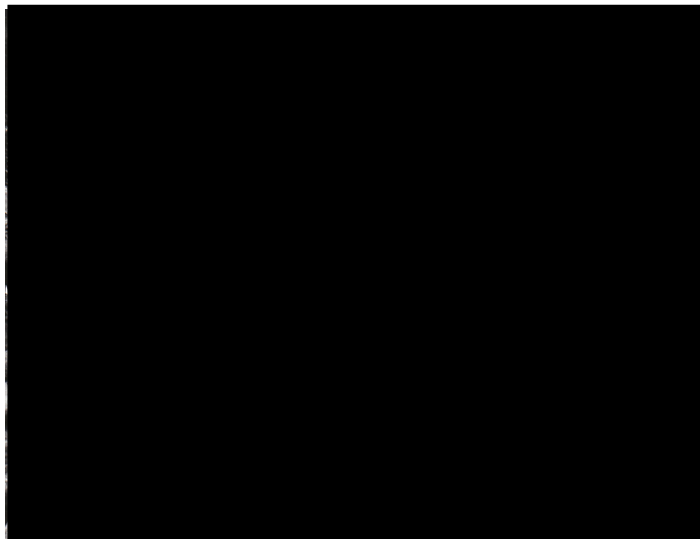


Fig. 45. John Latham, archival photograph of 'Skoob Tower' (1966), Flat Time House Gallery, London.

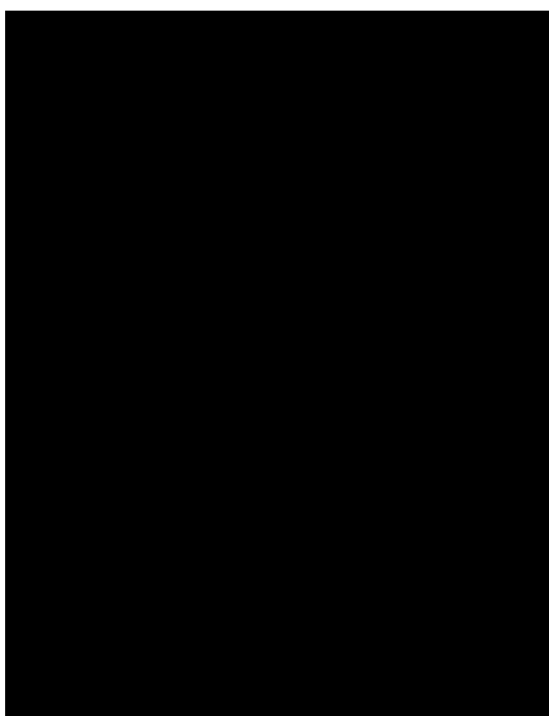


Fig. 46. John Latham and Jeffrey Shaw, archival photograph of 'Book Plumbing' (1967), Cobbing Family Archive, London.

Nigel Greenwood was known for his particular sensitivity towards artists' publications. The gallery was often characterized as a focal point for the London 'book art' community, not only because the gallery had a permanent bookshelf of rotating titles or because it produced publications to accompany exhibitions, but also because it had a commitment to showing and dealing in some of the most inventive bookworks by young British artists, such as John Stezaker

and Telfor Stokes.¹⁶⁰ The gallery would frequently send out to subscribers 'Books Available' lists of newly acquired titles from across the globe.¹⁶¹ The show that preceded Ruscha's 'Books', organized by Greenwood and the artist David Lamelas, consisted solely of a volume of written responses entitled *Publication*.¹⁶² Thirteen artists, including Keith Arnatt, Daniel Buren, Barbara Reise and Lawrence Weiner, were asked to react to three statements about the possible use of 'language as an art form': '1: Use of oral and written language as an Art Form; 2: Language can be considered as an Art Form; 3: Language cannot be considered as an Art Form'.¹⁶³ The exhibition sought to vouch for the use of printed text as an artistic material, as well as attesting to the validity of the book itself as an art object within a space. Lamelas posits in his brief introduction that the publication 'constitutes the form of the work', though there were some disputes about the nature of 'form' when applied to language works. *Publication* was influenced by a number of American exhibitions that had been organised around the notion that exhibitions did not require works of a physical realisation, but could exist as documentation, tabulation, preparatory materials or as written communication. Mel Bochner's 1966 installation *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art*, at the School of Visual Arts, New York, now heralded as the 'first truly conceptual exhibition', was transformative in the selection and preparation of materials exhibited and the style of presentation.¹⁶⁴ Bochner assembled the plans and miscellany of artistic production by artists such as Dan Flavin, Eva Hesse and Donald Judd, and photocopied them for inclusion within four binders, which were set individually upon four white pedestals in the centre of the room.¹⁶⁵ Where the artists had viewed these sketches, designs and written plans as a means to produce work, Bochner elevated the plan to something worthy of attention and revealed the elaborate procedures behind works of seemingly limited labour. Two subsequent shows in New York, Douglas Huebler's solo show in

¹⁶⁰ Phillpot, *Booktrek*, p. 13.

¹⁶¹ Examples of these lists can be found in London, Tate Gallery London, Tate Archive (TGA), Barbara Reise Archive, Galleries Ephémère E-L, TGA.786/8/9/25/31.

¹⁶² 'Publication' was held at the 60 Glebe Place premises from 23 November – 6 December 1970.

¹⁶³ David Lamelas, ed., *Publication* (London: Nigel Greenwood Inc Ltd, 1971). Greenwood published 1000 copies of the slim, monochrome edition, of which the first 100 were signed and numbered.

¹⁶⁴ Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969', p. 109. Exhibited 2–23 December 1966; see James Meyer, 'The Second Degree: Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art', in *Mel Bochner: Thought Made Visible 1966-1973* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1996), pp. 95-106.

¹⁶⁵ Meyer, *Minimalism. Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, pp. 175-179.

November 1968 and Lawrence Weiner's *Statements* in December 1968, both arranged by the leading American curator of the new conceptual art, Seth Siegelaub, also consisted solely of publications containing pithy reflections on contemporary art practice.¹⁶⁶ For Huebler, 'The existence of each sculpture is documented by its documentation', using 'photographs, maps, drawings and descriptive language' as representative of the sculptures themselves.¹⁶⁷ Weiner offered his works as 24 'general' and 'specific' statements, printed one to a double page, relating to simple actions that would modify the physical environment. December 1968 also marked the printing of another exhibition as publication, which became known as the 'Xerox Book', furthering the suggestion that a construction in language can work as a sculpture equally as well as a physical object.¹⁶⁸ The volume, entitled *Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Lawrence Weiner*, was edited by Siegelaub and the American collector Jack Wendler, gaining a reputation as an unprecedented incursion upon the format of the group exhibition. Each of the artists had been attributed 25 pages upon which to display their work and were encouraged to treat the Xerox machine as a conceptual constituent of their work, not merely as a means of distribution.

It was Ruscha's exhibition 'Books', however, which had a marked influence upon the ways in which British artists and publications approached the book – querying its status as multiple, as sequential, as object – and it also came to be a foundational moment, at the beginning of 1971, in the recognition of a new cerebralism in contemporary art. In a review of the exhibition for the *Guardian*, the critic Nigel Gosling argued that 'Books' was one of two shows to mark the arrival of a 'team of nimble-footed flyweights' who engage with an emergent art that is 'concerned more with documentation than sense-appeal'.¹⁶⁹ Ruscha's work is comprised of 'unpretentious booklets filled with pretentious snaps of places and things which he finds relevant to each other', offering no 'feast for the eye' but which instead 'slightly shift the

¹⁶⁶ Douglas Huebler, *Douglas Huebler: November, 1968* (New York: Seth Siegelaub, 1968). Lawrence Weiner, *Lawrence Weiner, Statements* (New York: The Louis Kellner Foundation, 1968).

¹⁶⁷ Douglas Huebler, 'Untitled Statements (1968)', *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. by Kristine Stiles and Howard Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 840.

¹⁶⁸ For discussion of the *Xerox Book*, see Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (London: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 130-151.

¹⁶⁹ Nigel Gosling, 'Rival Extremes', *The Observer*, 17 January 1971, p. 23.

angle from which we look out at the world'.¹⁷⁰ Similarly, the show concurrently running at the Lisson Gallery, 'Wall Show', held throughout the month of January, offered a series of wall-mounted provocations that challenged the brain but never the heart, 'for we are in scientific or philosophical territory here. You could call this sci-phi art'.¹⁷¹ Gosling's fascination for the objects and installations of artists such as Keith Arnatt, John Hilliard and David Tremlett rests with the extreme efforts of perception: 'It is like leafing through a score written in a half-unknown notation, normal signposts are omitted, a whole range of sensual instruments are ignored'.¹⁷² The ability to *read* the work, to construct a programme by which it may be viewed and understood, to feel one of an expected range of emotions, is frustrated, forcing Gosling to slow the pace of both his feet and thoughts as he moves through the space. Gosling's sense that this new artistic 'territory' is devoid of visual gratification was a central claim of a nascent conceptual art, which no longer sought creativity from purely visual sources. 'Wall Show' was one of a number of small exhibitions at the turn of the decade, such as 'Idea Structures' at the Camden Arts Centre in 1970 and 'Visions Projects Proposals' at the Midland Group Gallery in 1970, to explore a new artistic direction that had entered a wider public discourse following the landmark 1969 show 'When Attitudes Become Form' at Kunsthalle Berne and subsequently the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.¹⁷³ In his prefatory note to the exhibition catalogue, the American curator Harald Szeemann stakes out an arena for conceptual art at the end of the 1960s, suggesting that the splintered critical vocabulary – "Anti-Form", "Micro-Emotive Art", "Possible Art", "Impossible Art", "Concept Art", "Arte Povera", "Earth Art" – are all aspects which inform the international conceptual style.¹⁷⁴ The defining characteristic, however, 'is no longer the articulation of space but human activity', by which he means an emphasis upon process, as opposed to 'pre-formed pictorial opinions'.¹⁷⁵ All of the artists represented, among whose number in the London showing were four British practitioners, Victor Burgin, Barry Flanagan, Roelof Loew and Bruce McLean, appear to 'share a dissatisfaction with the status of

¹⁷⁰ Gosling, 'Rival Extremes', p. 23.

¹⁷¹ Gosling, 'Rival Extremes', p. 23.

¹⁷² Gosling, 'Rival Extremes', p. 23.

¹⁷³ 'Visions, Projects, Proposals' was part of the Nottingham Festival, 11 July – 2 August 1970; 'Idea Structures' ran concurrently throughout July – August 1970, and was organized by Charles Harrison.

¹⁷⁴ Harald Szeemann, 'About the Exhibition', *When Attitudes Become Form: works-concepts-processes-situations-information*, exh. cat. (London: Thomas Jenkins, 1969), n.p.

¹⁷⁵ Szeemann, 'About the Exhibition', *When Attitudes Become Form*, n.p.

the art work as a particular object in a finite state, and a rejection of the notion of form as a specific and other identity to be imposed upon material.’¹⁷⁶ Charles Harrison, the organiser of the London version of the show, added this exposition of conceptual practice to the catalogue in his essay ‘Against Precedents’, emphasizing the power of the conceptual object – made manifest ‘solely through information – in its isolation from the contamination of prior experience, ideas or contexts and its new troubling status within an expanded field of formulation and presentation’.¹⁷⁷

For Clive Phillpot, Conceptual art was ‘even more of a radical break in the 20th century than Cubism had been’, and the ‘slight publications’ that were beginning to appear in galleries and bookshops, such as *Situation*, *Indica* and *Compendium*, were ‘manifestations of this break’.¹⁷⁸ Although ‘book art’ could not be considered to constitute a modern movement and did not have any one governing approach, Phillpot nevertheless noted in 1973 that ‘its emergence at this particular time is significant’.¹⁷⁹ The form of the book had become the consummate conceptual art object:

Conceptual art, in that much of it involves verbal matter, or is consciously a dematerialisation of the artist’s work down to print manifestations, is often better suited for presentation in book form than on the walls of a gallery, simply by virtue of the intrinsic superiority of the book as a vehicle for this kind of information.¹⁸⁰

‘Dematerialisation’ was something of a watchword following the publication of the 1968 essay ‘The Dematerialisation of Art’ by Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler. It documented an art ‘which emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively’, of which the endpoint envisaged the conventional art object ‘becoming wholly obsolete’.¹⁸¹ The typical book, in the conventions of its binding, its white pages, the standards of graphic layout, narrative chapters, prefaces, bibliographies, the intentions of its typeface, is here reconditioned to invoke the possibility of a

¹⁷⁶ Charles Harrison, ‘Against Precedents’, *When Attitudes Become Form*, n.p. Richard Long also featured in the exhibition, though through inclusion in Gerry Schum’s ‘Land Art’ film.

¹⁷⁷ Harrison, ‘Against Precedents’, *When Attitudes Become Form*, n.p.

¹⁷⁸ Phillpot, *Booktrek*, p. 13.

¹⁷⁹ Phillpot, ‘Feedback’, 38.

¹⁸⁰ Clive Phillpot, ‘Book Art: Object & Image’, in *Artists’ Bookworks*, exh. cat. (London: British Council, 1975), n.p.

¹⁸¹ John Chandler and Lucy R. Lippard, ‘The Dematerialisation of Art’, *Art International*, 12.2 (February 1968), 31-36. The essay was subsequently expanded by Lippard into the annotated anthology *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object 1966-1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

different order of priorities.¹⁸² What made the book different from any other mode of artistic expression, than the painting, sculpture, film, performance, installation or ‘intermedial’ practices?¹⁸³ The artists’ book historian Stephen Bury suggests that in the late 1960s the book was ‘particularly fitted to be a favourite medium of the conceptual artist’ as it became a ‘*tabula rasa*’ on which the conceptual artist could experiment, offering the possibility to work with notions of duration, narrative, seriality, sequence, the relationship between text and image, in a relatively economical, accessible, reproducible way. Moreover, throughout the 1960s the book had been ‘freed [...] from being the incubus of being the main channel for communication’ by the rival outlets of mass media, television and information technology, meaning that the trained purpose and format of the book was more open than ever to debate.¹⁸⁴ The increasing number of works that used inexpensive and small format production methods demonstrated a sensibility guided as much by the revolutions taking place in print technology as by the conceptual desire to agitate the perceived primacy of the art object.¹⁸⁵

The attempt to define the increasing use of the book structure as well as literary or printed forms within the visual arts was at this juncture fraught with inconsistencies. Clive Phillpot was the most committed critic in his attempts to explain in precise terms the differences between the book employed as artistic medium and language employed as artistic medium, and how the form of the book was irrevocably altered by the emergence of conceptual art. He nominated the conjunction ‘book art’ to draw out a distinction between a practice involving mass-production techniques and (relatively) low cost, accessible editions, and the exclusivity, high cost production and high craft associated with the ‘art of the book’.¹⁸⁶ Book art referred to ‘artworks that employ the form of the book. Such works are of two broad types: those that look like books (“book objects” that simply mimic the form and are actually a kind of sculpture); and

¹⁸² Useful anthologies of twentieth-century artists’ books include Joan Lyons, *Artists’ Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1985); Renée Riese Hubert and Judd D. Hubert, *The Cutting Edge of Reading: Artists’ Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1999); Riva Castleman, *A Century of Artists Books* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002); Wendy Weitman and Deborah Wye, *Eyes on Europe: Prints, Books & Multiples* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2006).

¹⁸³ ‘Intermedia’ has been a guiding principle in the criticism of the American poet and publisher Dick Higgins since the mid-1960s. His ‘Statement on Intermedia’, dated 3 August 1966, was first published in *Dé-collage*, 6 (1967), n.p.

¹⁸⁴ Stephen Bury, ‘The artist and the book format’, in *Artists’ Books: The book as a work of art 1963-1995* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), pp. 1-5 (p. 5).

¹⁸⁵ See Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1995), p. 12.

¹⁸⁶ Phillpot, ‘Book Art: Object & Image’, n.p.

those that *behave* like books (“bookworks” that actively employ the essential characteristic of the book form – a sequence of pages).¹⁸⁷ By way of example, the opposition can be illustrated by the use of books in the sculptural assemblages of the artist John Latham as compared to the elaborate sequencing of photographic images in the books of Hamish Fulton. Clive Phillpot had offered further qualification in his definition of book art, by which one may also consider ‘unique’ book works and book objects, and ‘multiple’ book works and book objects. For Phillpot, it was the conjunction between the multiple and the book, between the object and its potential for replication, which produced the most fundamental break with convention: ‘each multiple bookwork is by definition an artwork. And each of those works of art has the same capacity to convey the artists’ ideas and their vision, and – like each print of a movie or each book of verse – to generate a direct response from each viewer/reader’.¹⁸⁸ The democratic multiple became ‘the definitive paradigm for artists’ books’, as unlike a traditional painting or sculpture, the works are not confined to being shown in any one particular location, at any one time, and can therefore freely circulate within a wider network of exchange. He devised two diagrams (Figs 47 and 48) to elucidate his situating of the bookwork within ‘the universe of art’, in which ‘bookworks’ occupied the most closely conceived central overlap between art and literature, between a book as object and as literary text, between form and content.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Clive Phillpot, ‘Two Decades of Book Art’ *Arts In Virginia*, 23.1-2 (1982-1983), 44-55.

¹⁸⁸ Phillpot, ‘Two Decades of Book Art’, 46.

¹⁸⁹ Phillpot, ‘Twentysix gasoline stations that shook the world’, p. 4.

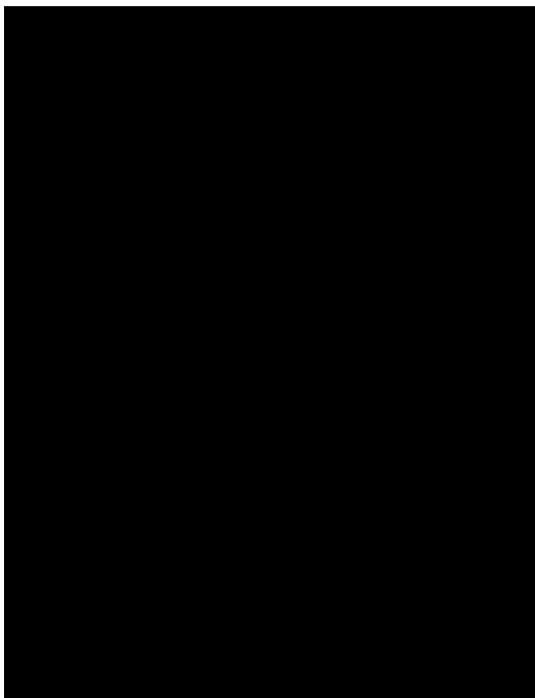


Fig. 47. Clive Phillpot, 'Artists' Books', in 'Twenty Gasoline Stations that Shook the World: The Rise and Fall of Cheap Booklets as Art', *Art Libraries Journal*, 18.1 (1993), 4-13.

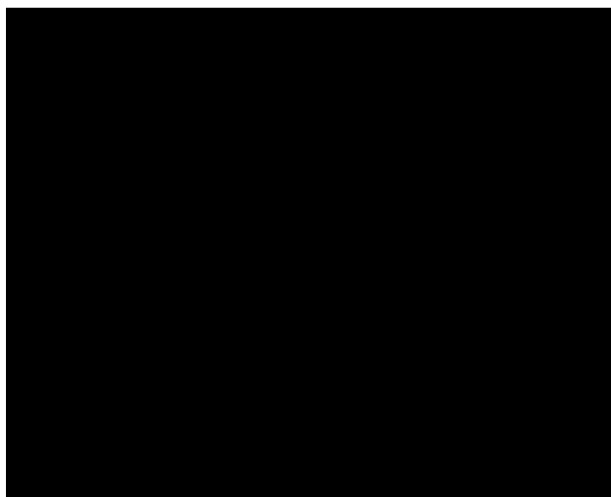


Fig. 48. Clive Phillpot, 'Artists' Books' in 'Twenty Gasoline Stations that Shook the World: The Rise and Fall of Cheap Booklets as Art', *Art Libraries Journal*, 18.1 (1993), 4-13.

The exhibition 'Book as Artwork' in 1972, at Nigel Greenwood's new Sloane Gardens gallery premises, marked the high point in the run of recent exhibitions to focus on the form of the book and to situate the phenomenon in dialogue with conceptualism. Two hundred and sixty examples of artists' books, from the period 1960 to 1972, were showcased in the exhibition, in an attempt to legitimize a recent phenomenon as a developing field of practice. The main impetus for the show was not commercial, but to be held 'for the benefit of London', with the simple intention of showing works that had not otherwise been seen because of their limited financial recompense.¹⁹⁰ In the ambitious introductory essay included within the exhibition catalogue, the Italian art historian Germano Celant offered an overview of recent activities in an attempt to define the varied approaches to the book as object and to the use of language as an artistic medium.¹⁹¹ Celant acknowledged the provisional nature of his survey, judging it inevitably 'incomplete' as it was the 'first analysis of books as artworks', but failed to mention the extent of

¹⁹⁰ Lynda Morris, letter to Germano Celant, dated 18 August 1972, London, Chelsea School of Arts Special Collections [CSA], Nigel Greenwood Inc. Archive [NGA], fol. 1.3, p. 1.

¹⁹¹ Germano Celant, 'Book as Artwork', in *Book as Artwork 1960/1972* (London: Nigel Greenwood Inc. Ltd, 1972), pp. 3-30. Celant's introduction had been modified from an earlier version 'Book as Artwork 1960/70' published in September 1971 in the Italian publication *Data*. The exhibition ran from 20 September to 14 October 1972.

his personal investment as much of the material was drawn from his own collection.¹⁹² The show was organized by Celant in collaboration with the curator Lynda Morris, who had founded the bookshop at the Institute for Contemporary Arts, London, and subsequently worked as Nigel Greenwood's assistant.¹⁹³ Morris worked with Celant and Greenwood to devise the means of display in the exhibition, which she later described as 'a single shelf running round the room with the rare books behind perspex. There was a second lower shelf where we put spare copies of the books that could be looked at and that were for sale'.¹⁹⁴ This was crucial, as the dual nature of bookworks were simultaneously on display, with a visual correspondence established between books to be viewed (granted the reverence of the exhibited object), and books to be read (as vehicle of information). At the same time, it questioned the evolving status of the book, now revered as an art object and screened off behind the panel of a cabinet from any potential readers. 'A book for me is complete in its own right', Nigel Greenwood claimed in reference to the exhibition, 'It doesn't require any qualification. It's, as you say, self-contained. I can pass it on, but I don't have to'.¹⁹⁵

Morris also worked extensively with Celant to augment his collection, adding titles that had been disregarded by Celant's chronological survey.¹⁹⁶ Of the books included in the exhibition, only 34 were produced in Britain, although Celant does include within this number a wide range of galleries and studios producing publications such as Lisson, Situation, Greenwood, Jack Wendler, Kelpira Studios, as well as the small independent presses Art-Language, Tetrad Press, Latimer Press, Gilbert & George's press Art for All. There is a significant emphasis placed upon American artists and galleries, as well as upon lesser-known Italian examples.¹⁹⁷ Although the main thrust of the exhibition was to account for books as artworks in their own right, and for the varied ways in which the artist may make use of the book, it could also be viewed as an attempt to mark the appreciable division between the mechanics of language in a book and in an

¹⁹² Germano Celant, letter to Nigel Greenwood, dated 10 August 1972, CSA NGA, fol. 1.1, p. 1.

¹⁹³ 'Celant's original list was enhanced from 75 to around 150 titles by Morris', see Richard, 'The International Network and Major Exhibitions: 1970-72 and Later', in *Unconcealed*, pp. 141-42.

¹⁹⁴ Richard, 'The International Network and Major Exhibitions: 1970-72 and Later', in *Unconcealed*, pp. 141-2.

¹⁹⁵ Nigel Greenwood, 'Interview with Nigel Greenwood [by Catherine Butcher (née Moseley), December 2000]', *Nigel Greenwood Inc Ltd: Running a Picture Gallery*, exh. cat. (London: Chelsea Space, 2016), n.p.

¹⁹⁶ Lynda Morris, letter to Germano Celant, dated 11 September 1972, CSA NGA fol. 1.9, p. 1.

¹⁹⁷ Celant, 'Book as Artwork', p. 9.

artwork. Celant credits the American composer John Cage and the Italian artist Piero Manzoni with ushering in a new age of an 'all is possible' attitude towards the form and function of the book, through Cage's seminal 1961 *Silence* and Manzoni's *Life and Works* ('The Transparent Book').¹⁹⁸ Both projects dealt with absence or erasure, presenting books in which language or notation is either obscured, removed or simply not present, and, therefore, language becomes a sign in the negative sense: a pause, a space, a spectre on the page. The exhibition sought to problematise both the form of the book in conjunction with the use of language: whereas the traditional *livre d'artiste* concerned itself with the embellishment and extension of an authored text, contemporary bookworks exposed the inadequacy of script, language and syntax.

Of all the books selected for exhibition by Celant and Morris, one arguably went further than any other in its efforts to undermine the strictures of the literary text. A slim, loose-leafed boxed pamphlet of ten screenprints, *A Humument* (1970) by the painter Tom Phillips, was unusual in its inclusion and manipulation of a pre-existing literary work. As explained in the notes accompanying the publication, a Victorian novel had been 'taken page by page and altered, adapted and metamorphosed', obscuring the original printed text with imaginative pictorial compositions and exhuming new narrative directions.¹⁹⁹ The project began 'around noon on the 5th of November 1966', on one of Phillips' regular weekend excursions with the artist R. B. Kitaj to search for bargains and curios at Austin's furniture repository in Peckham Rye, London.²⁰⁰ Eyeing the vast number of books deposited following home clearances, Phillips agreed with Kitaj that the first book he found for threepence would necessarily form the basis of 'a serious long term project'.²⁰¹ An 1892 volume by little known novelist W. H. Mallock immediately caught Phillips' attention, due to its yellow colouring and the beguiling nature of its title, *A Human Document*.²⁰² However, its jaunty exterior communicated little of the objectionable character and stiff prose of the contents, in which anti-Semitic convictions and class prejudice govern the moralizing tale of an extra-marital affair. The 'art gamesmanship' of Phillips' enterprise was therefore to resist Mallock as an authoritative voice, and, by extension, to resist the suggestion

¹⁹⁸ Celant, 'Book as Artwork', pp. 17-22.

¹⁹⁹ Tom Phillips, *A humument*, 1 (London: Tetrad Press, 1970); limited edition of 100 copies, plus 25 hors commerce.

²⁰⁰ Tom Phillips, 'Notes on *A Humument*', *A Humument*, 5th ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), n.p.

²⁰¹ Phillips, 'Notes on *A Humument*', n.p.

²⁰² Phillips, 'Notes on *A Humument*', n.p.

that any literary text is immovable.²⁰³ Mallock's novel merely becomes the pretext for a narrative teeming in prospects – for humour, happiness, eroticism, enlightenment, allusion. Unexpected encounters between words are made as likely as uncommon encounters between potential lovers.

Taking as its starting point the textual grid of the printed page, Phillips' method was initially led by scoring out unwanted words or passages and extracting certain phrases to link them with connective, delineated 'rivers', leaving much of the text partially readable beneath intricate pen and ink cross-hatching. Phillips had been impressed by an interview with William Burroughs in the Autumn 1965 issue of the *Paris Review*, in which Burroughs discussed the cut-up technique and the 'very complex association lines' between word and image.²⁰⁴ This led Phillips to a number of experiments with collage in the column edges of publications such as *The New Statesman*, devising his own variant of cut-up the 'columnedge poem', before deciding to 'push those ideas into a more ambitious service' in book form.²⁰⁵ *A Humument* had already received limited attention prior to its first publication in 1970 and as part of the exhibition in 1972, as sample pages and commentaries had been included in the *I.C.A. Bulletin* in 1967, and in *Pages* and the *London Magazine* in 1970.²⁰⁶ Spreads from subsequent versions of *A Humument* also featured in experimental poetry magazines, such as *Arlington*, *Exit* and *Stereo Headphones*.²⁰⁷ However, Phillips developed a more radical obliteration of the text by the time he began work on the 1970 first volume of *A Humument*, beginning with studies in acrylic gouache, as well as pen and ink, to completely rework the surfaces of nominated pages. Isolating words or phrases using speech bubbles, banderoles, incorporated illustrations or outlined boxes, the more painterly qualities of Phillips' compositions also embraced a strong graphic emphasis. Each of the ten sheets that comprise the book, made with the printmaker Ian Tyson at his Tetrad Press, employed 'different methods of printing relating to the content'; etching, letterpress, litho and screen printing.²⁰⁸ This approach was sensitive to the shifting visual registers on display on each page: parodic nods to popular painters, the union of pure geometric forms, the pointillist

²⁰³ Evan Anthony, 'Hanging matter', *The Spectator*, 7582 (20 October 1973), 521.

²⁰⁴ Conrad Knickerbocker, 'The Art of Fiction: William Burroughs', *The Paris Review*, 35 (Autumn 1965), 13-49.

²⁰⁵ Tom Phillips, *Tom Phillips: Works and Texts* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1992), p. 255

²⁰⁶ *I.C.A. Bulletin*, 169 (May 1967); *Pages*, 1 (Autumn 1970); *London Magazine*, 9.11 (February 1970).

²⁰⁷ See Chris McCabe, 'A Little White Opening Out of Thought', *Poetry Review*, 102.3 (Autumn 2012), 34-41.

²⁰⁸ Ian Tyson, in correspondence with the author, 27 June 2016.

representation of a window (Fig. 49), the cartoonish depiction of a misshapen female body, the surrealist constellation of shapes, arrows and floating lines (Fig. 50). What slowly emerges, through the gnomonic, spatialised fragments of narrative, is a plot concerning a male protagonist 'Toge' and his frustrated love affair.



Fig. 49. Tom Phillips, *A humument*, 1 (London: Tetrad Press, 1970).

Is it possible to understand what Phillips is doing as 'writing'? What kind of creative act or kind of authorship is at work here? A number of restrictions governed Phillips' work of renovation; the text should be the first thing to be decided upon, the numerical order of the pages is not to be the order of their making, the name of the protagonist 'toge' should be isolated whenever 'altogether' or 'together' appeared in the text, no extraneous material could be imported into the work.²⁰⁹ Many of these procedures were also occasionally used, such as flipping a coin to determine the words selected between divided sections of pages and even the title itself

²⁰⁹ Phillips, *Tom Phillips: Works and Texts*, p. 256.

was the result of an ‘invited accident’, folding the pages over to make the running title read ‘A HUMUMENT’ (ie. A HUM(AN DOC)UMENT). The first versions are often described by Phillips as a work of exhumation or extraction, scouring the pages of Mallock’s novel to free hidden layers of comic, poetic, historical and metaphysical implication. For Phillips, early versions ‘could be regarded as preliminary opencast mining leaving more hidden seams to be investigated’, exposing the probing nature of this method of composition, the ventriloquizing of other texts, and laying the groundwork for the many subsequent versions of *A Humument* that have continued to be produced throughout Phillips’ lifetime.²¹⁰ As a book or work of literature it is acutely aware of its own strange ‘treated’ genre, replete with references to Phillips’ apparent procedure and to the problems presented at the reading of it: ‘attempt to cripple sentences’; ‘meaning / losing its meaning when / it follows / any picture of the / part of a / half of / a picture’; ‘fragments / fragments’.²¹¹ As N. Katherine Hayles argues, *A Humument* insists on its own materiality, upon a ‘materiality that goes beyond verbal content to include gutters, margins, white space and the paper fiber as it interacts with paint’.²¹² And yet it also insists upon its conceptual nature, upon the understanding that books are inevitably intertextual, and that all writing emerges from the selection of words from a finite reserve. It asks of itself whether one can view *A Humument* as a book, asking the reader to ‘question / whether the book is this – / it is as / If it is / and / exists in the / purposes it / does’.²¹³ *A Humument* dramatizes the condition of literature, using amassed found elements to build a work of contemporary *bricolage* while also performing what Phillips described as a ‘massive *deconstruction* job’ in its willingness to debunk the integrity of a text.²¹⁴ It asks not only what the purpose of the book had become (and asked according to what criteria one might now begin to define a book) but also what that purpose suggested about the afterlife of the literary text beyond the book form, both of which were central questions posed by Celant and Morris’s exhibition.

²¹⁰ In 1971 Phillips published *trailer* with edition hansjorg mayer, as ‘a precursor to *A Humument* comprising 75 original pages’. Within a week of completion in his treatment of the full novel, *A Humument* is exhibited in its entirety at the I.C.A. in 1973. The Tetrad Press published ten separate editions of prints from *A Humument* from 1970-1976, as well as a poster in 1971. This recently culminated in a 40th anniversary special binding of the Tetrad editions in 2013.

²¹¹ Phillips, *A humument*, vol 1, n.p.

²¹² N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2002), pp. 98.

²¹³ Phillips, *A humument*, vol 1, n.p.

²¹⁴ Phillips, *Tom Phillips: Works and Texts*, p. 259.

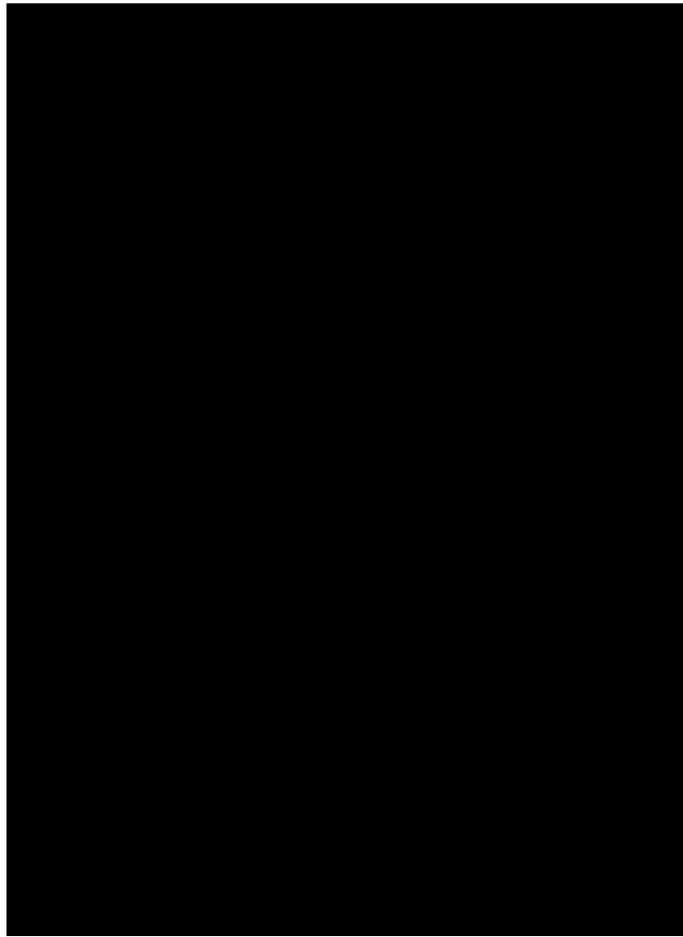


Fig. 50. Tom Phillips, *A humument*, 1 (London: Tetrad Press, 1970).

6. A Second Order Discourse: Language as the 'ultimate artistic abstraction'

Germano Celant pinpointed a particular moment in the history of art and literature, suggesting that 1966 was a foundational year in the progressive development of non-visual and conceptual bookworks. It was in this year, Celant remarks, that the 'recognition of language as the ultimate artistic abstraction' was achieved, by artists such as Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin, Harold Hurrell, On Kawara, Christine Koslov, Joseph Kosuth, and Mel Ramsden.²¹⁵ For Celant, the works of Art & Language were a vital separate strand to the scene he hoped to trace, and works of the period such as the *Measurement Drawings* and *Time Drawings* (1966-67) of Atkinson and Baldwin, Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965) and *Present Whereabouts Unknown*

²¹⁵ Celant, 'Book as Artwork', p. 27.

(1966) and Koslov's telegrams or *Practice Project* (1966), produced a new 'artistic consciousness' trained towards the written or spoken word as a necessary part of the work of art.²¹⁶ These artists advanced the notion that the concept on which a work is based can prevail over its physical actualisation. Therefore, attention was transposed from the objective and the physical to the idea at work, to the exploration of the concept underpinning a work of art and to written language, 'which uses words knowing that they have no intrinsic importance but that important information is derived from their function'.²¹⁷ Language was not used to refer to objects within the vicinity, to environments or to happenings, it was not used as documentation, poetic expression or as critical support as in the work of minimalists such as Carl Andre, Donald Judd or Robert Smithson, but used only to document itself or abstract concepts. The inclusion of text in the new art did not necessarily mean that the forms of the words were aesthetically consequential, but that their meaning or their point of argumentation was an integral part of the composition. The hypothesis essential to Conceptual Art was 'to replace the object of spatial and perceptual experience by linguistic definition alone', recasting the practice of art as a form of critical enquiry or analytic proposition.²¹⁸

However, Celant's claim that 1966 marked an identifiable nexus point in the confluence of conceptual ideas and artworks was simply too early an estimation for the British art scene. Although the works Celant references were indeed in production during that time, most of them were conceived or created in America, and very little minimalist art had been seen in the United Kingdom until 'The Art of the Real' exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1969, let alone examples of a nascent conceptual art.²¹⁹ A number of solo shows and small group shows had been held at the aforementioned private galleries, but as Paul Overy noted in *The Times*, 'I suppose it could be argued – as Donald Davie once argued that poetry published in little magazines and by small limited edition presses wasn't really published at all, because so few people read these publications – that work shown in these small, inaccessible private galleries isn't really "seen"'.²²⁰

²¹⁶ Celant, 'Book as Artwork', p. 27.

²¹⁷ Celant, 'Book as Artwork', p. 27.

²¹⁸ Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969', p. 107.

²¹⁹ 'I think I'm right in saying nothing by Judd, Morris, Smithson, LeWitt or Andre was shown in any London gallery until 1969'; see Charles Harrison, 'The late sixties in London and elsewhere' in *1965 to 1972 – when attitudes became form* (Cambridge: Kettle's Yard Gallery, 1984), pp. 9-16 (p. 11).

²²⁰ Paul Overy, 'Stimulating or just infuriating?', *The Times*, 21 August 1972, p. 5.

‘The ‘Book as Artwork’ exhibition partly overlapped with the Hayward Gallery’s controversial exhibition ‘The New Art’, upheld as ‘the first substantial institutional survey of British conceptual art’.²²¹ In the introduction to the show, the curator, Anne Seymour, highlighted the scarcity of opportunities to view conceptual work in Britain: ‘Although this kind of thing has long been featured in art magazines and things have snowballed in the field of written and photographed information since 1969 [...] in Britain we have actually *seen* very little of it’.²²² Although this placed a premium on gallery display, the necessity of which for some conceptual works was of little consequence, it did tap into the feeling of exclusivity that surrounded conceptual art. Seymour was underlining the importance of public institutional support of a particular area of art that had received ‘no real acceptance’ in Britain, in an effort to encourage its acceptance from a wider public.²²³ ‘Conceptual Art’, Richard Cork later reflected, was a ‘forbidding label’ in early 1970s Britain, to be memorialised as the time when ‘the centuries old dominance of painting and sculpture gave way at last to a general acknowledgement that “art” could assume a far greater range of material identities’.²²⁴ In a 1970 *Encounter* feature entitled ‘Aesthetics Adrift’, Edward Lucie-Smith supplied a dismissive account of the shift that had taken place in Britain over a few short months: ‘from the desert of Minimal Art (elaborate explanations concerning simple objects), we drag ourselves to the adjoining desert of Conceptual Art (elaborate explanations about an absence of objects)’.²²⁵ The accusation of an aesthetic aridity, leveled here by Lucie-Smith, emerged as a result of the ‘art propositions’ offered by the foremost representatives of British conceptualism.

In 1968, the formation of the group Art & Language gave name to the numerous associated practices that had developed between four English artists: Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin, and Harold Hurrell. Convening in Coventry, the group grew to stand for a collaborative practice and a shifting membership in connection with the Art &

²²¹ See Joy Sleeman, ‘*The New Art*, Hayward Gallery, London, 1972: new as compromise, or when what happens around the exhibition is as interesting as what happens in the exhibition’, *Sculpture Journal*, 21.2 (2012), 63-74.

²²² Anne Seymour, ‘Introduction’, *The New Art* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1972), pp. 5-7 (p. 5).

²²³ Seymour, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

²²⁴ Richard Cork, ‘Introduction’, *Everything Seemed Possible: Art in the 1970s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 1-34 (p. 9).

²²⁵ Edward Lucie-Smith, ‘Aesthetics Adrift’, *Encounter*, 35.3 (September 1970), 61-64 (p. 61)

Language press and the journal *Art-Language*, first published in May 1969 with the subtitle ‘The Journal of conceptual art’, with Atkinson, Bainbridge, Baldwin, and Hurrell listed as editors.²²⁶ This small grouping, what Atkinson warily described as a ‘think tank’ before its formalisation through the journal, played an essential role in the early development of a conceptual art in Britain, organising themselves around the conviction that mainstream modernist art no longer held itself to appropriate critical account.²²⁷ Celant considered the Art & Language group to represent ‘the most radical aspect of conceptual art’, following the ‘anti-retinal’ creed of Marcel Duchamp in their commitment to producing ‘non-visual’ artworks.²²⁸ In the first editorial for the art journal established by the group, *Art-Language*, the editors exerted pressure upon the established constructs and conventions of visual art, by claiming that the first point of departure in Conceptual Art is to question ‘the condition that seems to rigidly govern the form of visual art – that visual art remains visual’.²²⁹

However, the paucity of the visual experience in Conceptual Art, Art & Language suggested, was not due to a lack of material subject to view, but to the emphasis placed upon the material on view – such as written language – that does not have the same visual register. The conventions of modern art have long relied upon a ‘hierarchy of languages’: the ‘initial language has been what is called “visual”’, and ‘the support languages’ which are of “conventional written sign” language form’.²³⁰ As communicated by the editors, the visual form was increasingly governed by ‘the form of the conventional signs of the written language’ and the content of the artist’s idea was ‘expressed through the semantic qualities of the written language’.²³¹ The efforts made to ‘carry artistic practice into the territory of language’ has since been characterised by a later, influential member of Art & Language, Charles Harrison, as ‘a form of insurgency’, a

²²⁶ See Art & Language, ‘Voices Off: Reflections on Conceptual Art’, *Critical Inquiry*, 33.1 (2006), 113-133.

²²⁷ Terry Atkinson, ‘Concerning the Article “The Dematerialisation of Art” [1968]’, in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 52-58.

²²⁸ Celant, ‘Book as Artwork’, pp. 29-30.

²²⁹ The Editors, ‘Introduction’ in *Art-Language: The Journal of conceptual art*, 1.1 (May 1969), 1-10 (p. 1). Harrison has since confirmed that the unsigned introduction was written ‘principally by Atkinson’. See Charles Harrison, Introductory note to ‘Terry Atkinson, ‘Art & Language (Terry Atkinson, b. 1939) Editorial Introduction to *Art-Language*’ in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, rev ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p. 885.

²³⁰ The Editors, ‘Introduction’, *Art-Language*, 1.1 (May 1969), 2.

²³¹ The Editors, ‘Introduction’, *Art-Language*, 1.1 (May 1969), 2. This shift had been articulated in a June 1967 press release for the first of the four ‘Language’ exhibitions at the Dwan Gallery, New York, by Robert Smithson, ‘Language to be Looked At and/or Things to be Read’, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack D. Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 61.

deliberate assault made to blur the distinctions between work and text.²³² The intention, however, was not to usurp all forms of visual appreciation:

The substantial aim was not simply to displace paintings and sculptures with texts or ‘proceedings’, but rather to occupy the space of beholding with questions and paraphrases, to supplant ‘experience’ with a reading, and in that reading to reflect back the very tendencies and mechanisms by means of which experience is dignified as artistic.²³³

If language was to ‘occupy the space of beholding’, if reading was to supplant the aesthetic ‘experience’, what challenges does this present to the psychology of perception? The questions asked by theorists such as Rudolf Arnheim and Anton Ehrenzweig about whether ordinary habits of seeing are suspended in the presence of art had become particularly prescient for those engaged in conceptual art, conceptualists who were resistant to the notion that modern art of note was attentive to the quality of visual effect. For the editors of *Art-Language*, the paradigm work of art could no longer be understood as something whose semantic impact is lodged within formal boundaries. Principal attention was paid to the discursive processes of production, and this was the work selected for display. This line of enquiry is what led to the question of whether the editorial, a work of prose, could be ‘itself an attempt to evince some outlines as to what “conceptual art” is, come up for the count as a work of conceptual art?’²³⁴ The idea is addressed conceptually through language rather than perceptually through sight. They wanted to enforce a reassessment of what the presentation of art and the procedures of art-making entailed, to become ‘radical systems analysts within the institutions of the art world’ and, in doing so, hold to account the void left by the experiential promise of modernist art.²³⁵ The making of art and the making of art theory was to become part of the same process. By the end of the 1960s, as Harrison has since asserted, the ‘great twentieth-century adventure of abstract art was finally over’, in part razed by the climate of ’68, the Marxist critique of fetishism and the Situationist critique of spectacle.²³⁶ For critic Philip Toynbee, it was ‘unacceptable’ that by the end of the 1960s the British art scene was witnessing an age of ‘extraordinary critical leniency’, creating a

²³² Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), p. 55.

²³³ Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language*, pp. 55-56.

²³⁴ The Editors, ‘Introduction’, *Art-Language*, 1.1 (May 1969), 3.

²³⁵ Charles Harrison, *Since 1950: Art and its Criticism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 137.

²³⁶ Harrison, *Since 1950: Art and its Criticism*, p. 134.

critical atmosphere ‘too easy’ in its ready admittance of anything perceived to be new.²³⁷

Therefore, the question faced by artists at the dawning of the 1970s was how the practice of art was to be a more rigorous hermeneutic act, and how it might be discernable from and connected to other cultural and intellectual practices, if stands, frames and plinths no longer sufficed in signaling the significance of an object against any other object in the social and cultural milieu. More than this, it was to question whether the anomalous nature of these artworks, ‘pieces of paper covered in writing’, could disrupt the established systems of value and exchange in the British art market.



Fig. 51. Mel Ramsden, ‘Secret Painting’ (1967-8), acrylic on canvas, 120 x 1220 mm, with photostat, 910 x 1220 mm, Collection Bruno Bischofberger, Zürich.

From the earliest experiments taking place in British conceptualism, Charles Harrison has since noted, ‘texts advanced into the sphere of art lived with insecurity and absurdity’.²³⁸ Much of this, he suggests, was the result of claims that the language artworks in question ‘were kinds of abstract art, or were colonizing the space that abstract art itself had claimed.’²³⁹ The extensive critical discourse that was involved in the appreciation of abstract art had rendered the paintings and sculptures themselves as demonstrations of a given theoretical line, meaning that writing surrounding or supporting artworks began to feel more and more like a representative

²³⁷ Philip Toynbee, ‘Life is long and art is fleeting’, *The Guardian*, 8 January 1967, p. 24.

²³⁸ Harrison, *Since 1950: Art and its Criticism*, p. 142.

²³⁹ Michael Baldwin, quoted in Harrison, *Since 1950: Art and its Criticism*, p. 142.

medium.²⁴⁰ This was parodied in works by affiliated members of the group, such as in Mel Ramsden's early conceptual works 'Guaranteed Painting' (1967-8), 'Secret Painting' (1967-8) (Fig. 51), and '100% Abstract' (1968). These pictures satirise the preoccupations of those engaged in the critique of abstract art, in the attempt to intercede on behalf of the impervious painted surface and the assumption that the intensity of effect can be in some way graded or quantified. Text and image are brought into direct contest with one another, their separate means of expression vying for the viewer/reader's attention, holding the two optical demands in suspension. The two former pictures lampoon the impenetrability of their source, the pre-eminent work of modern abstraction Kazimir Malevich's 'Black Square', through a sentence of authoritative type justifying an association with the monochrome canvas. Whereas 'Guaranteed Painting' is in descriptive mode – 'PAINTING CONTAINS 6' X 6' BLACK SQUARE' – 'Secret Painting' is in projective mode – whereby language confronts the hermetic nature of the painting. There are three elements to 'Secret Painting': a painting, a text vouching for the painting's existence, and a thick overpainted layer which could either be an invitation to reimagine the surface or to obscure another picture beneath. Positioned like a caption text but situated within a frame, the use of language here does not provide assurance or ready tools of appreciation to the viewer/reader. It delivers information regarding the artwork, a direct 'straight information' in order to counter the distraction or obfuscation associated with visual representation. The work is transfixing in the superfluity of its re-representation of itself, as well as its deliberate mixing of messages.

The ambiguity over the status of text that may or may not itself be art was exploited to a further extent by Michael Baldwin, displacing the painting in dialogue with writing for a textual monologue: passages of theoretical prose as the framed works on display. A departure from text conceived as writing, as Baldwin reflected in 2001, presented the thought that text 'could occupy a dimensional space more interestingly than a stripe'.²⁴¹ The spectator would have to work extremely hard not to read the lines of type as text, or at least to be able to resist the slippage in medium specificity between registering word or image. Works such as the *Title Equals Text*

²⁴⁰ See Charles Harrison, 'The Trouble with Writing', in *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art & Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 3-34.

²⁴¹ Michael Baldwin, letter to Charles Harrison, dated 2001, quoted in Harrison, *Since 1950: Art and its Criticism*, p. 142.

series (1967), conceived with Terry Atkinson, and the *Abstract Art* series (1968) were photostats of extracts of print; essayistic disquisitions of syntax, the art object, logic, structuralism, and ontology. Works within the *Abstract Art* series, such as nos 2 and 3, appear on first glance to be found texts, but on closer inspection consist of irreverent reviews of scholarly monographs in the typographic guise of an academic journal. 'It was a matter of destroying the silence of beholding', Baldwin suggested in a note written to his colleague Charles Harrison, 'with talk and with puzzles, and of forcing any and every piece of artistic 'work' out of its need for incorrigibility and into the form of an essay'.²⁴² The visual arts amplified the role of language, terminating in a practice that was less occupied with being something to look at, and more usually with being something to be read. The shift from a gallery as 'looking room' to 'reading room' was near complete.²⁴³ Art & Language took this transition to its furthest point, often cited as the endpoint of the early phase of their activities, with the installation work *Index 01* (1972).²⁴⁴ Eight metal filing cabinets, each containing six drawers of filed printed and typed correspondence and writings of the group, were placed equidistant to each other between walls papered with photostats listing each item and their indexical designations.²⁴⁵ The 'bland' presentation of the *Index* emphasized its functionality, conceiving of the 'spectator as reader and potential interlocutor'.²⁴⁶ What happens to the act of 'beholding' when these conceptual texts are included within books as opposed to as part of installations? For what purpose might the framing devices and environmental factors enacted within an exhibition space be transposed into the book? The concluding part of this chapter will consider the ways in which a small number of independent printmaker-poet presses explored the metaphysics of representative space and the metaphysics of the text – the setting and conditions from which the book transpires, the means by which the text is expressed, and how the book is altered by the reader/spectator.

²⁴² Michael Baldwin, letter to Charles Harrison, dated 1989, quoted in Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language*, p. 60.

²⁴³ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, 4th ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 64.

²⁴⁴ The work was shown earlier that year as 'Documenta Index' at documenta 5, in the Museum Friedericianum, Kassel, Germany, curated by Harald Szeemann. For a discussion of the importance of documenta 5, see Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, '1972: The Rise of the Star Curator', *Biennials, Triennials and Documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), pp. 19-42.

²⁴⁵ See Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language*, pp. 63-81.

²⁴⁶ Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language*, p. 67.

7. The Page and the Wall: Literature in an Expanded Field

In a 1975 manifesto published in Britain, ‘The New Art of Making Books’, Ulises Carrión contests that ‘the most beautiful and perfect book in the world is a book with only blank pages, in the same way that the most complete language is that which lies beyond all that the words of a man can say’.²⁴⁷ Keith Arnatt had made a similar rhetorical proposition in 1970 with his provocative piece *Is it Possible for Me to Do Nothing as My Contribution to this Exhibition?*, offered as a two page essay to the Idea Structures exhibition, as had Bob Law with his outlined, unprimed, unpainted group of dated canvases under the titles *Mister Paranoia* and *Nothing to be Afraid Of* (1969-1972).²⁴⁸ Adopting the ideational aesthetic of the era that execution is secondary to concept, Carrión’s notional search for ‘absolute whiteness’ is more dependent upon precisely what a book or text becomes if it obviates its essential legibility. According to Garrett Stewart, the exhibited ‘unreadable book’ becomes one of three things: ‘optical data transcript, contingent readymade, or, most often, reductive sculptural form’.²⁴⁹ Carrión, however, places an emphasis upon the ‘reading conditions’ of a given book object, subjecting every aspect – ‘the space’, ‘the language’, ‘structures’, ‘prose and poetry’, ‘the reading’, ‘what a book is’ – to scrutiny.²⁵⁰ If books become a conceptualised ‘container’ of a text, the manifesto suggests, the ‘new art’ demands that the text ‘emphasises’ or becomes an ‘organic part’ of that form.²⁵¹ An ‘abstract language’ was taken to mean ‘words [that] are not bound to any particular intention; that the word “rose” is neither the rose that I see nor the rose that a more or less fictional character claims to see. In the abstract language of the new art the word “rose” is the word “rose”. It means all the roses and it means none of them’.²⁵² Words cannot evade their capacity to mean something, but, as indicated

²⁴⁷ Ulises Carrión, ‘The new art of making books’, *Kontexts*, 6/7 (1975), n.p. Subsequently published by the Centre for Book Arts, University of West England, Bristol in 1975 and distributed to its members.

²⁴⁸ Keith Arnatt, ‘Is it Possible for Me to Do Nothing as My Contribution to this Exhibition?’, *Idea Structures*, exh. cat. (London: Camden Arts Centre, 1970); repr. in *Towards Another Picture: an anthology of writings by artists working in Britain 1945-1977*, ed. Andrew Brighton and Lynda Morris (Nottingham: Midlands Group Gallery, 1977), pp. 198. See Bob Law, ‘Bob Law in conversation with Richard Cork April 1974’, in *Bob Law Black Paintings 1965-70*, exh. cat. (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1974), n.p. and Anna Lovatt, ‘Drawing Degree Zero’, in *Bob Law: A Retrospective*, ed. by Richard Saltoun and Karsten Schubert (London: Ridinghouse: 2009), pp.14–24.

²⁴⁹ Garrett Stewart, *Bookwork: Medium to Object to Concept to Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 73.

²⁵⁰ Carrión, ‘The new art of making books’, *Kontexts*, n.p.

²⁵¹ Carrión, ‘The new art of making books’, *Kontexts*, n.p.

²⁵² Carrión, ‘The new art of making books’, *Kontexts*, n.p.

by Carrión, they can be relieved of intentionality. Carrión's solution as to how one might succeed in creating a neutralised language, in 'making a rose that is not my rose, nor his rose, but everybody's rose, i.e. nobody's rose' is to place language within a sequential structure or context, such as a book, so that 'it momentarily ceases being a rose and becomes essentially an element of the structure'.²⁵³ Language is inevitably an 'enigma', a 'problem', and, as Carrión posits, it is the book that 'hints at ways to solve it'.²⁵⁴

Although these statements echo the critical discourse surrounding concrete literature – 'of graphic space as a structural agent' – Carrión is less concerned with page as space on which to compose, and more affected by the book's temporal-spatial environment as a whole. 'A book is a sequence of spaces', the manifesto opens, but 'Each of these spaces is perceived at a different moment – a book is also a sequence of moments'.²⁵⁵ Contiguous to the spatio-temporal arena of the codex is the spatio-temporal realm of its reading: Carrión also proposes that the new art 'knows that books exist as objects in an exterior reality, subject to concrete conditions of perception, existence, exchange, consumption, use'.²⁵⁶ It is important to note that Carrión's sense of books emerging from this 'new art' was influenced by the interdisciplinary practices of a number of British independent printmaker presses, as opposed to the international exhibition circuit of conceptual art. His closest association was with the activities of one small press in particular, the short-lived Beau Geste Press, a 'community of duplicators, printers and artisans' engaged with the distribution and production of international Fluxus material from 1970 to 1974.²⁵⁷ Many of their publications broadened material horizons and methods of production or distribution through random incident, and included the animated Fluxus periodical *Schmuck* (1972-1976).²⁵⁸ It was Mayor's own interventional book *Framed Pieces* (1972), however, that came closest to confounding the physical confines of the book, using an alterable text block to counter the sanctity of the gallery space and the static object within the space. Blurring the distinction

²⁵³ Carrión, 'The new art of making books', *Kontexts*, n.p.

²⁵⁴ Carrión, 'The new art of making books', *Kontexts*, n.p.

²⁵⁵ Carrión, 'The new art of making books', *Kontexts*, n.p.

²⁵⁶ Carrión, 'The new art of making books', *Kontexts*, n.p.

²⁵⁷ Founded in Devon in 1970 by Mexican artists Felipe Ehrenberg and Martha Hellion, the British artist and art historian David Mayor, the British cartoonist Chris Welch, and his partner Madeleine Gallard. For an overview of the Press, its international influence and the books published by Carrión, see Donna Conwell, 'Beau Geste Press', *Getty Research Journal*, 2 (2010), 183-192.

²⁵⁸ To contextualize *Schmuck* see Wolfgang Görschacher, *Little Magazine Profiles: The Little Magazines in Great Britain 1939-1993* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 1993), pp. 143, 148-9.

between exhibition and exhibition catalogue, readers were encouraged to physically intercede, directed to cut up a series of texts from within the book and to hang them within their own personal space in a specific order using the string provided, or to intervene in a cognitive sense, by recreating an impression of the ‘show’ with their imagination.²⁵⁹

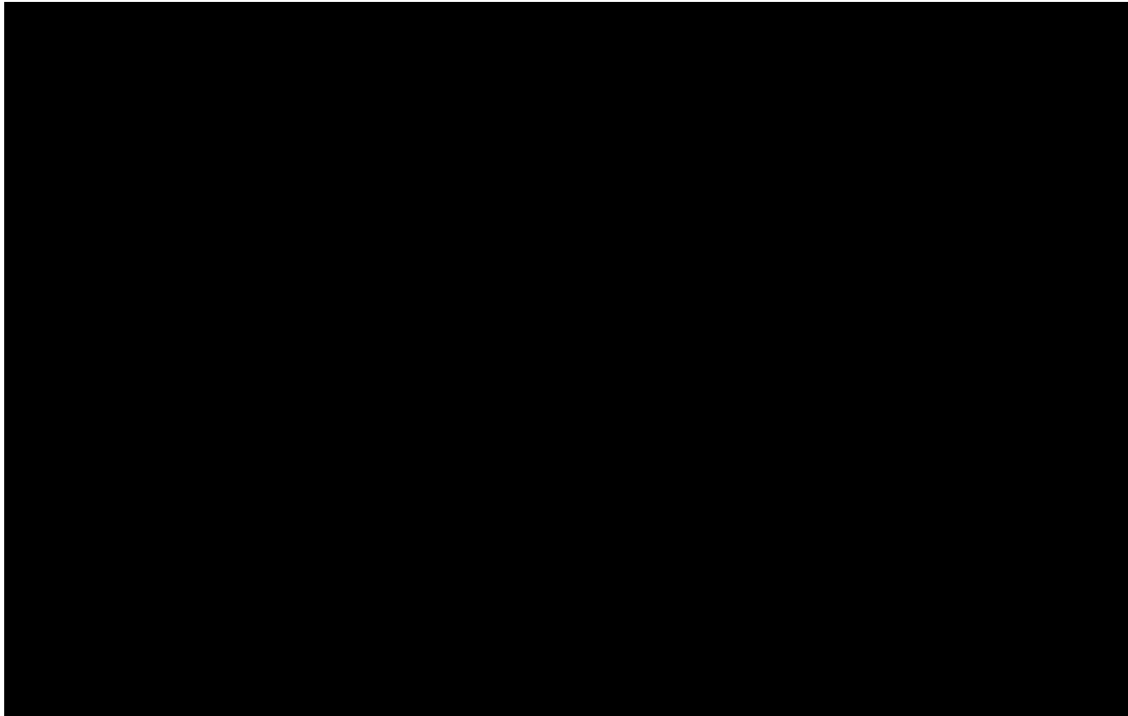


Fig. 52. Ken Campbell, *terror terror* (London: North East London Polytechnic, 1976-77), n.p., The Ken Campbell Collection 1975-2003, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.

A contemporary of Mayor's, the British poet, typographer and printmaker Ken Campbell, produced a number of books of similar concern, conceiving his projects as mediating points between the textual space and the exhibition space, but also, most importantly, as embedded in the site of production.²⁶⁰ Campbell produced absorbing, elaborate books that may ‘not fall within any identifiable category within British abstract art’, but, as Julian Freeman concedes, ‘they may be seen as “of” it’.²⁶¹ Published in the same year as Carrión's manifesto, Campbell's first complete book *A few ways through the window* (1975) demonstrates a number of

²⁵⁹ David Mayor, *Framed Pieces* (Cullompton, Devon: Beau Geste Press, 1972), Beau Geste Press Archive TGA VB.G.PXV.

²⁶⁰ With thanks to Elizabeth Fairman at the Yale Center for British Art, Yale University, for introducing me to the extensive archive of Campbell material at the Center.

²⁶¹ Julian Freeman, ‘To admire Ken Campbell's finished books...’ in *A few ways through the window: An exhibition of books, related prints and sculpture by Ken Campbell* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1990), n.p.

preoccupations that were to prefigure his methodology in later work: the opening out of perspective, the collusion of the eye, the fading in and out of mental impressions, our capacity to register letterforms, the function of illustration, the caprice of creation. The slim, octavo perfect-bound book was 'printed and made' by Ken Campbell and Dennis Mariner in the 'typo/graphic room' of the Art and Design department of the North East London Polytechnic in spring 1975.²⁶² A numbered sequence of 25 poems are printed in parallel with a sequence of images, alternating between lithographic printing of images by Mariner on the smooth side of the poster paper and letterpress on the reverse rough side of the paper by Campbell. Here, words follow what Johanna Drucker has described as the 'ordered regimen of the letterpress' in their adherence to literary convention, printed in univers type alongside or separate to the images in the book.²⁶³ However, the windows fastened shut, slanting ajar, flung wide open in Campbell's lithographically printed photographs, as well as the increasingly abstract images of fractal constellations, attest to a more elaborate, multilayered relationship between text and image.

Campbell had come across the narrow, shuttered windows in a small house in France, fixing his camera lens upon the strange thresholds that stretched between tall, narrow glass panes that opened inward and wooden shutters that opened outward. Entranced by 'their different intercessions of appearance and reflection in the visual plane', Campbell drew connections with the opening out at the hinges of one's mind and allowing 'random phenomena' to enter, with a 'shutting down towards the end of the book' as the day too begins to wane.²⁶⁴ The sheets are folded in the Chinese style, folded at the fore-edge, and this also forms openings that gape as lacunae between sheets and between poems. This attention paid to the liminal interstices between the realised and the unrealised, between fixity and fluidity, between conception and chance, informed Campbell's second book, in which he applied language directly to his studio environment. In *Terror Terror* (1977), produced at the North East London Polytechnic with

²⁶² Ken Campbell, *A few ways through the window* (London: Campbell and Mariner, 1975), 54 pp. In an edition of 50 and its dimensions are 241 x 184mm. New Haven, Yale Center for British Art Rare Books & Manuscripts [YCBA], The Ken Campbell Collection 1975-2003 [KN], N7433.4 C35 F38 1975.

²⁶³ Johanna Drucker, 'Ken Campbell: The Word to the Book to *The Word Returned*' *The Word Returned: Artists' Books by Ken Campbell* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1996), n.p.

²⁶⁴ Ken Campbell, 'An artist's books: *A few ways through the window*', <<http://www.brokenrules.co.uk/afew.html>> [accessed 23 March 2016].

Dennis Mariner, the location and means of creation took centre-stage.²⁶⁵ For Campbell, the printing room 'became a theatre – the wall, the machinery, the maker and the supporting cast all played the book while figuring in its frame'.²⁶⁶ Pinning individual words to large sheets of white paper attached to the walls of the printing room, Campbell contrived them into stanzas by rearranging each word along a series of horizontal lines of cotton thread, then replicating them photographically within the pages of the book to act 'as a window to the camera lens, making a wall be a page'.²⁶⁷ Campbell introduces ambiguity into the reading relationship through his careful control of the camera, whereby a number of elements intrude upon the reading experience. On the left-hand pages the poems are reproduced squarely as if typeset on a page, whereas on the right-hand pages each image of the poems is taken at an acute angle of forty-five degrees or more, presenting the viewpoint of a possible creator or spectator within the space (Fig. 52). The reader is made aware of each word as a counter to be placed, confronted with the prevalent shadowing around the edges of the paper that persists through the monochrome exposure of the photographs, as well as the figures of the artist and assistants in the course of assembling the scene. Moreover, almost every double-page spread features an element or component of the printing machinery, the most frequent participant the left and right-hand sides of the AM125 office offset duplicator (Fig. 53). The machine is part of Campbell's 'cast', playing an active role in the production of the sheets of vocabulary, as well as a ruminative presence emerging from the margins of the page. The two metal knobs at the end of the printing cylinders protrude from the machine like eyes, a benign witness to the generative production of the poetry taking shape across the walls of the printing room. It also adds another line of sight in a complex visual plane conceived by the meeting of the camera with the wall, the artist with composition, the reader with language.

²⁶⁵ Ken Campbell, *terror terror* (London: North East London Polytechnic, 1976-77), YCBA KC N7433.4 C35 T47 1977.

²⁶⁶ Ken Campbell, 'An artist's books: Terror Terror', <<http://www.brokenrules.co.uk/terror.html>> [accessed 22 March 2016]

²⁶⁷ Campbell, 'An artist's books: Terror Terror', <<http://www.brokenrules.co.uk/terror.html>> [accessed 22 March 2016].



Fig. 53. Ken Campbell, *terror terror* (London: North East London Polytechnic, 1976-77), n.p., The Ken Campbell Collection 1975-2003, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.

A number of antecedent installation works had explored a similar application of literary and visual grammars to the surfaces of a constructed enclosure: Allan Kaprow's *Words* (1962) confined the spectator within an 'environment' in which circulating invitees could write and attach word contributions to the walls and partitions, Sol Le Witt conceived of a 'total drawing environment' in 1969, enhanced by his sense that the wall, like the page is 'an absolute space'; Marcel Broodthaers devised a plywood recreation of his Brussels living room, *La Salle Blanche* (1975), decorated with the stenciled substantive vocabulary of art criticism.²⁶⁸ The spectator is immersed within the scene; asked to read, participate, write; forced to trace lines; invited to make judgments and to dismiss phraseology. To what extent can this same viewer engage with a book that aims to replicate or represent a similarly immersive experience? The poems of *terror terror* were prefaced as 'invitations to jump in the lake...', as if they are entreaties to relinquish one's attachment to being outside looking in, to plunge beneath the surface. The poems are sharp and violent, stories of sacrificial deaths, tortuous journeys through darkening woods, sexual encounters, and dreamlike worlds battling the elements, and unknown symbols – 'jade pictogram'

²⁶⁸ For art 'environments' and the New York scene see Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

– present themselves and fade. Campbell's poetry, in its numerous allusions to his artistic process, makes some veiled attempts to reinforce a reader's awareness of the situation created, referencing 'black ink', 'your writing / on the wall', 'the words the machines / focused and there still', referring to himself as 'a typographer, manipulator / of rules two or three only'. Tasked with that phenomenological 'jump', the atypical means of formatting in this publication does prove challenging to a reader – not only is one required to look beyond the material fact of the language presented, but also to navigate the uneven arrangement across a surface that is at once both page and wall. Campbell's works are palimpsests: the message is the sum of the technical circumstances surrounding its making, the material conditions of the object and the continual revision of self-expression, contained within and controlled by the scope of the book. Marcia Reed characterizes *terror terror* as a 'punk book with rough style and tough demeanour', a book fuelled by a 'rebellious attitude to literature'.²⁶⁹ Perhaps this tone of aggression reaches its most divisive expression in the splicing of image and text towards the end of the book, as Campbell begins to make more explicit his invasive hand on the page. Whereas the cutting up of language and the rearranging of the studio scene formed the assemblage depicted in the book, the integrity of the page itself begins to disintegrate, with torn scraps of paper, passages scrawled in marker pen and pasted literary extracts printed as part of the overall composition. This cycle of writing and replication, 'of trial-error-retrial at every stage', however, offers a more generative model of creativity, as opposed to a destructive act, as the book is concerned with the iterative nature of each of these processes and with a challenge to the existing relationship between language and surfaces, triangulating the wall, the page and the photograph.²⁷⁰ Campbell is not merely transparent about the methods of printing and assembly – the people, tools and materials involved – but also about the volatility of his own creative process. As a visual narrative that follows the shaping of a literary narrative, all of the provisional choices, material agitations, and reworked passages are admitted onto its pages. It is an account continually interrupted by its commitment to reliably record.

²⁶⁹ Marcia Reed, quoted in Campbell, 'An Artists' Books: Terror Terror', <<http://www.brokenrules.co.uk/terror.html>> [accessed 22 March 2016]

²⁷⁰ Julian Freeman, 'To admire Ken Campbell's finished books...' in Ken Campbell, *A few ways through the window: An exhibition of books, related prints and sculpture by Ken Campbell*, exh. cat. (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1990), n.p.

Campbell's use of photography marked a departure from the static observation of objects or deadpan documentary style of earlier conceptual examples, problematising the institution of the photograph as information and pointing to a more self-conscious record of its own production. This was not unique to Campbell, works such as John Hilliard's *Camera Recording its Own Condition (7 Apertures, 10 Speeds, 2 Mirrors)* (1971) make photography both the subject and medium of the work, illustrating the inadequacy of the single image to convey reality; Sue Arrowsmith's contact sheet arrangements of photographs in *Without title/4 cameras* (1974) reinforce scenic contiguity; Ian Breakwell's extensive photographic diary projects, such as the *Continuous Diary* (1965-1984) and *The Walking Man Diary* (1975-1978) record the 'side events of daily life' to unearth a sense of 'personal time'.²⁷¹ More divisively, works such as these marked a departure from language as the sole driver of a narrative, combining with or even reverting to the structural devices of sequencing and cessation. Recourse to such effects was paramount in the work of Campbell's fellow book artist Telfer Stokes, whose aim was the 'exploration of the book form to structure visual narrative'.²⁷² The first three books published under his London-based Weproductions imprint, *Passage* (1972), *Foolscrap* (1973) and *Spaces* (1974), are limited in their use of language, only depicting words or text when constitutive of the montage, favouring a narrative that unfolds through self-contained passages of interconnected images.²⁷³ Separate chains of events are contrived almost entirely through a directive choice of photographs, playfully inserting visual echoes between each section, and, much like a flipbook, are arranged to cumulative effect. Stokes turned his lens on carefully selected objects open to interpretation, on surfaces subject to transfiguration, on spaces vulnerable to deterioration. *Foolscrap*, for example, consists of a number of progressive series – 'Islands Dressing' takes place across fifteen double page spreads, in which a quantity of round, dark seeds have been used to form the numbers 1001 across a thick, fibrous piece of paper. These have been photographed and reproduced on the recto side. As we turn each page, the seeds develop further, swelling in size, sprouting shoots and bursting into a

²⁷¹ Ian Breakwell, *Continuous Diary 1965-1978/Circus* (Glasgow: Scottish Arts Council and Third Eye Centre, 1978), n.p.

²⁷² Telfer Stokes, 'Weproductions', <<http://www.weproductions.com>> [accessed 25 March 2016]. Clive Phillpott maintained that Stokes was 'British artist who has achieved most with the book form' in 'Leaves of Art: Book Art in Britain', *British Book News* (April 1977), 271-73 (p. 273).

²⁷³ Stokes zooms in and out on images of newsprint, watermarks, stamps, seals, diagram labels, handwritten captions, titles, and occasionally superimposes phrases to highlight visual puns.

chaotic tangle of leafy sprigs. The sequence ends over the final page with the impression made by the root system on the underside of the paper, recalling the sequence of close-shot rubbings over the initial pages. A further two cumulative sequences follow: one in which the instructional manual diagram of a Sanyo portable television has been fed through a Kodak film camera, cropping the image at incremental points and featuring different projections on the screen as the pages flip, and the other a strange *trompe l'oeil* sequence of a Kodak film reel of screens within screens, whereby photographs of a Doherty Photo monitor, on which a photographic lens is trained, depicts images of a residential landscape on another smaller monitor alongside a spliced printed text (Fig. 54). The flip-book format of *Foolscrap* mimics the speed with which these frames would move in filmic animation, presenting a stop-start stuttering of the narrative between each mounting sequence of frames.

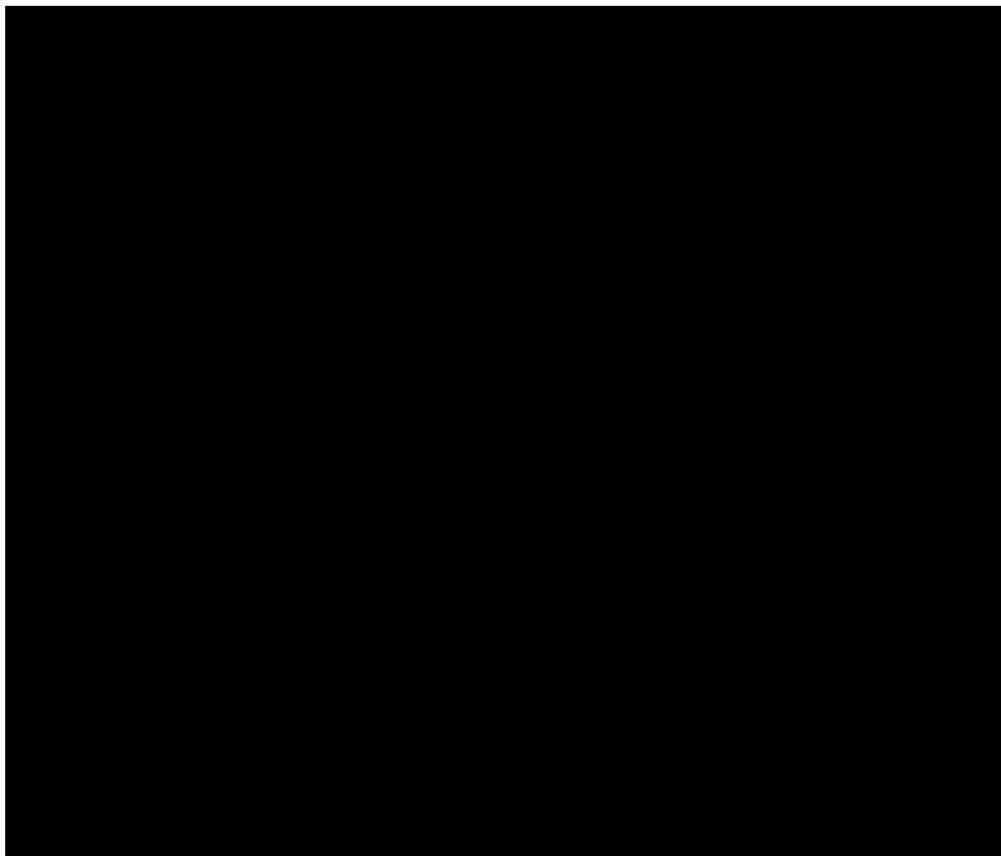


Fig. 54. Telfor Stokes, *Foolscrap* (London: Weproductions, 1973), n.p.

Books by practitioners such as Campbell and Stokes inculcated a mode of reading conducted in visual terms, a thought process regulated by arrangement, connection, selection, elimination, remediation. By the 1970s, a number of discussions on visual literacy had begun to

gather critical ground, primarily in the education sector.²⁷⁴ In 1965, the term ‘graphicacy’ was proposed as a fourth mode of communication, alongside literacy, numeracy and oracy, by W. G. Balchin and A. M. Coleman, to describe the need for instructing students to communicate through visual means.²⁷⁵ In 1972 a study into the teaching of reading in a number of London schools concluded that ‘the shift to non-print means of communication – the television, the telephone, and even the largely visual modern humour – reduced the felt need to read and write’.²⁷⁶ Subsequently, the National Union of Students called for a ‘critical survey of current theory and practice’ of reading in 1973, suggesting that ‘standards of reading have declined in recent years’ for reasons of social disadvantage and unsatisfactory governmental backing, but also due to the popular consumption of non-literary media.²⁷⁷ This imbalance was addressed by Donis A. Dondis in his influential *Primer of Visual Literacy* (1973), which argued that the technological revolution in modern print media had culminated in an inversion of the Gutenberg primacy of the printed word, in which ‘The visual dominates; the verbal augments’.²⁷⁸ Such discourses posed a penetrating ultimatum to the central literary mode inhabiting the form of the book, the novel. Presented with a challenge far greater than its cession to formal values as an object, the abiding appeal of the book as idea now adapted to ‘a growing fascination with the novel as *idea*’.²⁷⁹ The book faced a ‘crisis’ of conscience as the novel: what possibilities lay ahead for a literary construct that had been so persistently remodelled?

²⁷⁴ Eric Newton, ‘Teaching the Elements of Visual Literacy’, *The Guardian*, 8 January 1960, p. 7.

²⁷⁵ Balchin, W. G. V. and A. M. Coleman, ‘Graphicacy should be the fourth ace in the pack’, *Times Educational Supplement* (5 November 1965), p. 947.

²⁷⁶ John Fairhall, ‘Better teaching needed’, *The Guardian*, 5 December 1972, p. 6.

²⁷⁷ John Fairhall, ‘NUT calls for reading methods study’, *The Guardian*, 7 March 1973, p. 8.

²⁷⁸ Donis A. Dondis, *Primer of Visual Literacy* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 1974), p. 7.

²⁷⁹ Malcolm Bradbury, ‘Introduction’, *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), pp. 7-22 (p. 11).

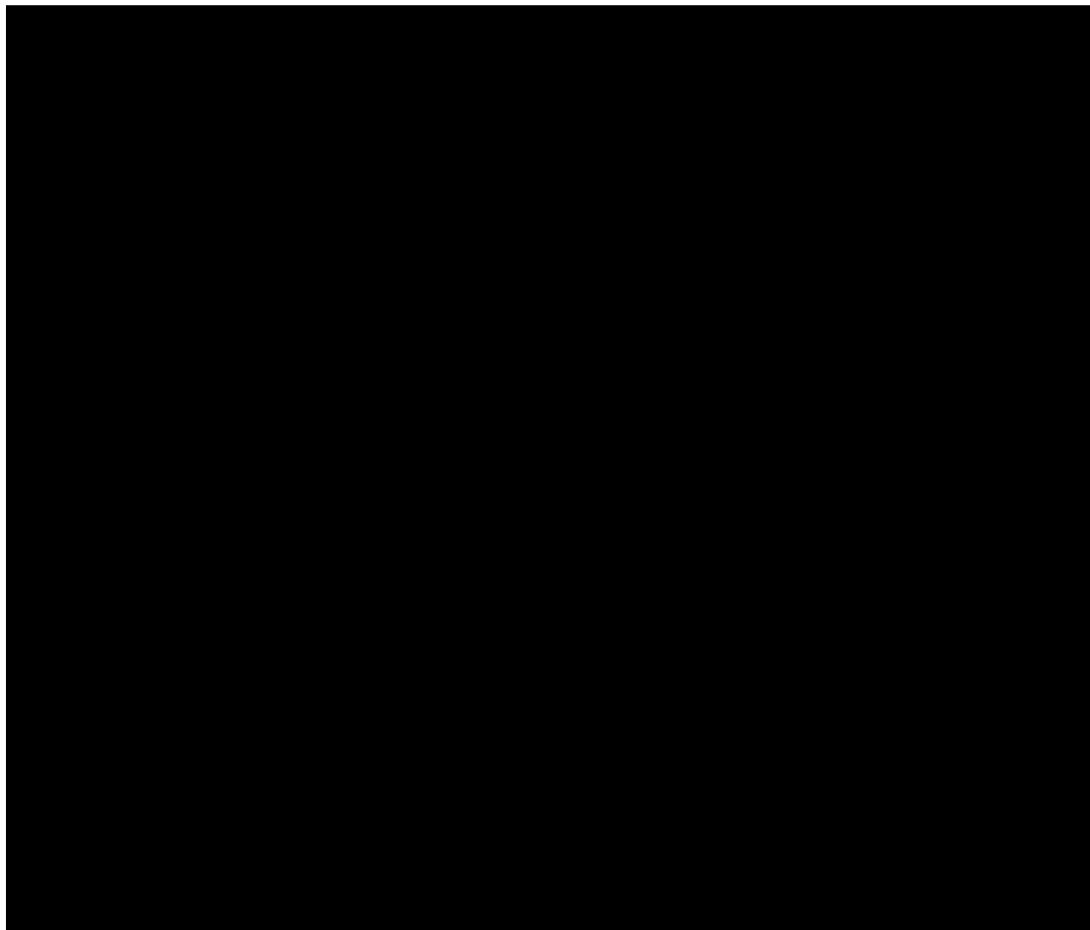


Fig. 55. Telfor Stokes, *Foolschap* (London: Weproductions, 1973), n.p.

Chapter Four

‘Seeing comes before words’: New Frames of Perception on Page and Screen in John Berger, Christine Brooke-Rose and B.S. Johnson

‘The only objectivity we can reach is achieved, first of all, by an examination of our self as lens, as camera, as recorder, as mirror’
(Anaïs Nin, *The Novel of the Future*, 1968)

1. ‘A foghorn in a fog’: John Berger and New Ways of Seeing

In the early weeks of 1972, each Saturday night shortly after 10pm, the image of the art critic and novelist John Berger was beamed into homes across the country. Considered ‘an important event’ in the history of British television and cultural criticism, the four-part documentary series *Ways of Seeing* posed a fundamental break with received knowledge and expectations of art.¹ In the opening moments of the first programme, Berger, with his back to his viewers, takes a Stanley knife to Sandro Botticelli’s ‘Venus and Mars’ (c.1485), cleanly carving a square around the face of Venus, peeling it away from the canvas and removing it from the gilt frame (Fig. 56). As the camera shifts to reveal the many print reproductions of the same cropped image he has made of the face of Venus, rolling across presses into books, newspapers, calendars, flyers, Berger’s voiceover announces that in ‘the second half of the twentieth-century, we see these paintings as nobody saw them before’.² With the invention of the camera, and then the film camera, it is ‘not only what we see, but how we see’ which has changed. The first programme in the series was the most direct elaboration of this idea. The convention of perspective, unique to European art, had made ‘the eye the centre of the visible world’,

¹ Adrian Mitchell, ‘Patchen was a revolutionary pacifist...’, *The Guardian*, 1 February 1972, p. 10. For further analysis of *Ways of Seeing* see Peter Fuller, *Seeing Berger: A Revaluation* (London: Writers & Readers, 1980); Geoff Dyer, ‘Ways of Seeing’, in *Ways of Telling* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), pp. 95-110.

² *Ways of Seeing, with John Berger*, BBC 2, 8 January 1972, 10.05pm.

but now it was 'no longer so easy to think of appearances always travelling regularly to a single centre'.³ The eye was no longer offered appearances as 'a beam from a lighthouse', but reacted to refractions across multiple planes; the camera was a 'mechanical eye' that put viewpoint in flux, travelling across time and space, in and around objects, recording movements in complex combinations. The matter of greater import to Berger, however, was that the camera was also a device of replication, which now made images, even iconic paintings, reproducible, 'available in any size, anywhere, for any purpose'.⁴

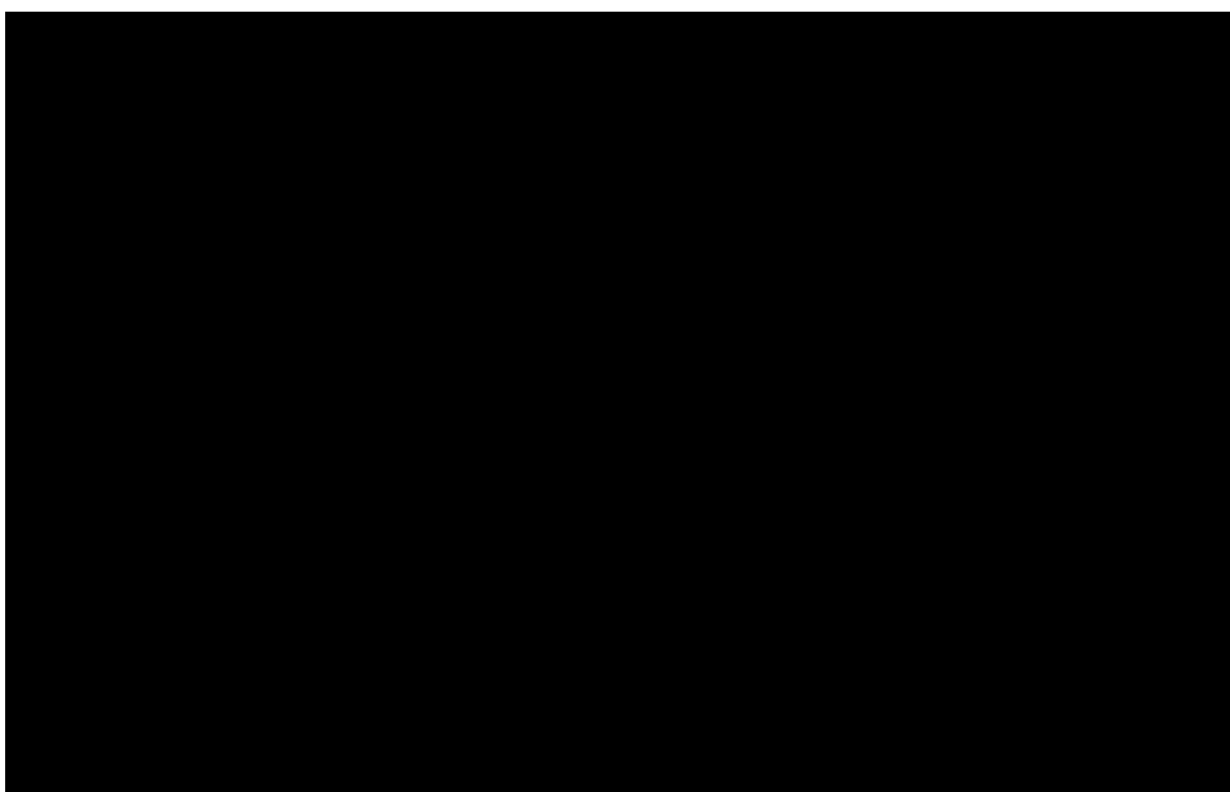


Fig. 56. *Ways of Seeing, with John Berger*, BBC 2, 8 January 1972, *Youtube* [accessed 12 January 2015]
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pDE4VX_9Kk>

Drawing upon the 1939 thesis set out by Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', which was first published in English translation in 1968, Berger demonstrated much more emphatically than his source text the ways in which modern technology

³ *Ways of Seeing, with John Berger*, BBC 2, 8 January 1972, 10.05pm.

⁴ *Ways of Seeing, with John Berger*, BBC 2, 8 January 1972, 10.05pm.. For an excellent overview of Berger's relationship to cinema see Joshua Sperling, 'John Berger and the Cinema', *On John Berger: Telling Stories*, ed. by Ralf Hertel and David Malcolm (Leiden: Brill Rodolphi, 2016), pp. 293-320.

had eroded the authority of art.⁵ Every image could now ‘be seen in a million different places at the same time’ and was subject to the many methods of ‘manipulation’ of the camera and film camera. Referring to Bruegel’s painting ‘The Procession to Calvary’ (1602) as an example, Berger talks the audience through the possible editorial decisions to be made in the representation of a painting on page or screen, cropping and selecting details, imposing a narrative sequence, overlaying music or commentary, all of which negate the comprehensive, simultaneous effect of the painting. The more radical aspect of Berger’s project, supported by the instruction of his director Mike Dibb, was a Marxist revaluation of authenticity, through an insistence upon the inclusion of ‘other experiences’ when considering any work of art or indeed any image. Berger was recognised as the ‘intended antidote’ to the more conservative approach of earlier art historical studies or documentaries, such as Kenneth Clark’s celebrated series *Civilisation* (1969).⁶ In critical studies of the period the two documentary programmes and the two personalities are often cast as diametrically opposed, an attitude that began with the critic Peter Fuller’s shrewd observation of the series as ‘Berger’s Anti-Clark Lecture’.⁷ Clark’s programme, one of the first television documentaries made in colour, was offered from the learned perspective of the scholar and studiously avoided political, social, ideological or economic bearings upon art, instead offering an erudite art historical narrative that was largely comprised of solitary men of genius.⁸ *Ways of Seeing* took issue with a mode of art appreciation that accorded gravitas to the connoisseur, prized the use of a closed academic language and upheld the market-driven ‘false mystery’ and ‘false religiosity of art’, instead widening the critical discourse to present mistrust of such assumptions.⁹ Staring directly into the camera, casually dressed and tousle-haired, Berger’s palpable enthusiasm for his subjects – painting, photography, advertisements, and moving images of all kinds – is often edged with a modicum of doubt (Fig. 57). Pointing at the audience, Berger asserts that he has opened a ‘dialogue’ but that television prohibits the audience a

⁵ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Fontana, 1968), pp. 214–218.

⁶ John Adkins Richardson, ‘Review: Seeing Berger: A Revaluation of *Ways of Seeing*’, *Leonardo*, 16.1 (1983), 66. Commissioned by David Attenborough, *Civilisation* consisted of thirteen fifty-two minute long episodes screened on BBC 2 from January 1969.

⁷ Peter Fuller, ‘Berger’s Anti-Clark Lecture’, *Seven Days*, February 1972, n.p.

⁸ Less well known is that Berger worked on a number of occasions with the producers of *Civilisation* and the commission for *Ways of Seeing* came from Stephen Hearst who had overseen *Civilisation*. See Juliette Kristensen, ‘Interview: Making *Ways of Seeing*: A Conversation with Mike Dibb and Richard Hollis’, *Journal of Visual Culture*, 11.2 (2012), 181–195.

⁹ *Ways of Seeing*, with John Berger, BBC 2, 8 January 1972, 10.05pm. The following three programmes were broadcast on 15, 22 and 29 January 1972, and the series was repeated on 4, 11, 18, and 25 October 1972.

means of reply. The remarks which close the first episode, one reviewer noted, might as well have been printed as ‘a health hazard warning on every television set’: ‘You are receiving images which are arranged. I hope you will consider what I have arranged, but be skeptical of it’.¹⁰

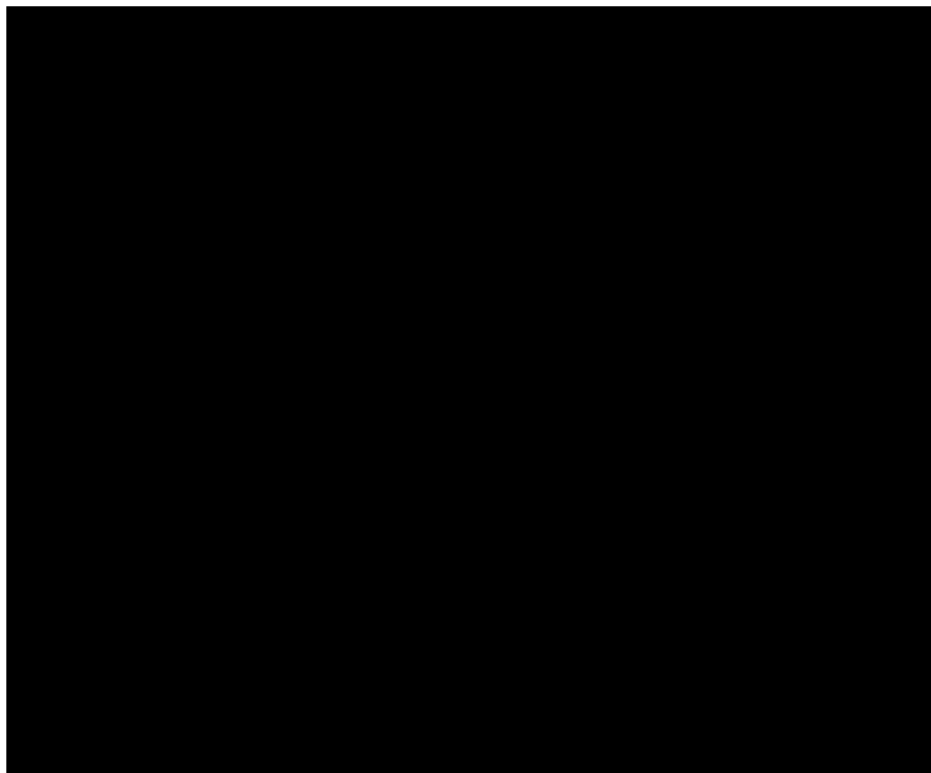


Fig. 57. *Ways of Seeing*, with John Berger, BBC 2, 8 January 1972, *Youtube* [accessed 12 January 2015] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pDE4VX_9Kk>

However skeptical, Berger understood images as independent agents to be assembled within a system of meaning. Modern reproduction had forced images to ‘hold their own’ against the surrounding field of information, printed next to blocks of text, commercial notices, other images, or even when switching between television channels and driving past billboards.¹¹ As the reproduction of images can be used by anybody, anywhere, for their own purposes, Berger argued that images can therefore be read or perceived in the same way that language can be read or spoken. ‘Images can be used like words’, he claimed, and the book *Ways of Seeing* (1972), which was published in the same year as the broadcast in a collaborative project with Mike Dibb, the collage artist Sven Blomberg, the script consultant Chris Fox and the graphic designer Richard Hollis, substantiated this claim by

¹⁰ Mary Holland, ‘Debatable Forum’, *The Observer*, 9 January 1972, p. 30.

¹¹ *Ways of Seeing*, with John Berger, BBC 2, 8 January 1972, 10.05pm.

publishing three pictorial essays.¹² As noted in Berger's 'Note to the Reader', each of these 'purely pictorial essays' placed uncaptioned images in progressive sequence to 'raise as many questions as the verbal essays' on the topics of the female form in commercial and fine art and the 'various contradictory aspects of the tradition of the oil painting' (Figs 58 and 59).¹³ The five contributors to the book were united in their insistence upon visual literacy, a notion that had been popularised in post-war art and design education, described by the Society of Industrial Artists in 1967 as an essential instrument of thought, 'almost as important as the handling of figures or of words'.¹⁴ *Ways of Seeing* triangulated a number of key developments in attitudes towards visual culture that had been in the critical ascendancy since the 1960s; Marshall McLuhan and his emphasis upon medium over content, Guy Debord's spectacular transactions of modern capital, and second wave feminism's challenges to women's role in society, epitomized by studies such as Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) and Eva Figes' *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970); all of which accentuated the acts of looking, seeing, reading, perceiving, as axiomatic in their attention to the social and aesthetic details of an object, screen, body, text.¹⁵

¹² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972); chapters 2, 4 and 6.

¹³ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 5.

¹⁴ Neville March Hunnings et al., 'More by Design', *Times Literary Supplement* [TLS], 3142 (20 July 1967), 639.

¹⁵ McLuhan's well-known aphorism 'the medium is the message' was in Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 1964); Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) was published in English translation in 1970; Figes is a commentator on the female nude in the second episode of *Ways of Seeing*, BBC 2, 15 January 1972, 10.05pm.



Fig. 58. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972), p. 41.

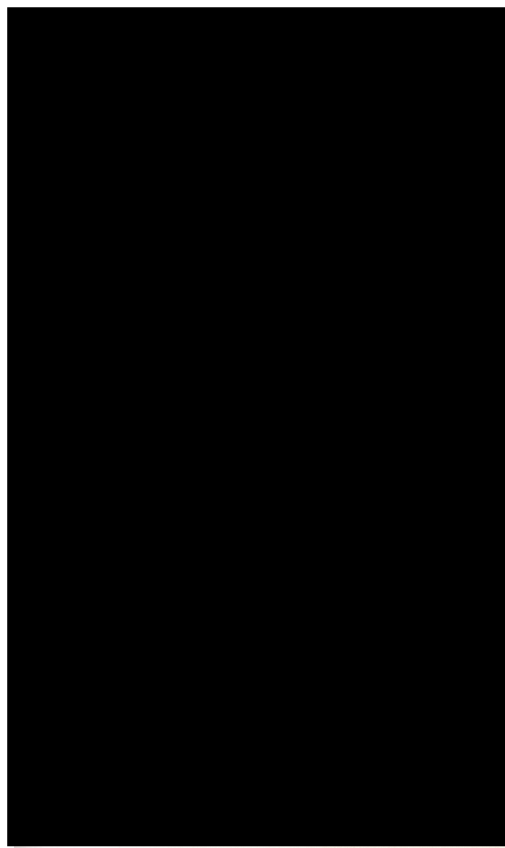


Fig. 59. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972), p. 43.

‘Whatever I perceive or imagine, amazes me with its particularity’, Berger soliloquized in his prize-winning novel of the same year, *G.*¹⁶ Although his activities as a broadcaster had piqued his sensitivity to modes of visual persuasion, as principally an art critic and novelist his ideas concerning precision in the transmittal of the realities of individual experience found greater depth of personal expression in his writing. Set at the turn of the nineteenth-century, Berger’s fourth novel is a non-linear portrayal of the life of Anglo-Italian serial seducer G., which spurns sequential narrative in favour of enacting a life lived in the intensity of the isolated moment, between historical events, political entanglements, sexual conquests and disparate territories. Formed of unattached tableaux that reveal little concern for what has come before or what lies ahead, it is perhaps most remarkable for the sporadic passages of authorial reflection on the difficulty of relating the ‘uniqueness of each event’, which constitutes the ‘magnificent impossibility’ met by the novelist at the beginning of the 1970s. For Berger, the solution is to approach narrative as a ‘geometrician’, adopting a ‘method which searches for co-ordinates extensively in space, rather than consequentially in time’, deriving

¹⁶ John Berger, *G.* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972), p. 136.

interdependences from a multiplicity of viewpoints that would reach a more elaborate image of reality.¹⁷ 'I see fields where others see chapters': Berger's mistrust of the framing devices of realist fiction placed him firmly within a minority of writers who were working against the historically prescriptive ways in which a story may be told. Shot through with digressions and anecdotes from the life of the author, the possibility that all may 'disperse so widely that it will become incoherent' is a possibility to be held in suspension.¹⁸ This chapter will consider the extent to which Berger's assertion 'seeing comes before words' was reinforced or challenged by novelists of the period, revolving chiefly around Christine Brooke-Rose and her contemporaries. For Brooke-Rose, 'the pleasure of recognition', advanced by most novels, was to be supplanted by the 'pleasure or puzzlement of discovery'.¹⁹ How did seeing become a metaphor for a new kind of 'puzzlement' in narrative? A number of valuable studies have accounted for the 'graphic surface' in the novel of this period, contesting the expedience of this 'second mode of signification' when considering new modes of representation.²⁰ Although typographical experiment and quasi-pictorial methods feature in the novels under discussion, the emphasis here will be upon the ways in which the reader was increasingly understood as a catalytic agent of sight.

2. 'Shifting Polygons': Forms Getting in the Way of Sense

Of the short stories included in Christine Brooke-Rose's 1970 collection *Go When You See the Green Man Walking*, one had previously been published as a duet in an earlier anthology of short stories, *A Coin Has Two Sides: A collection of double stories on the theme of love* (1967), edited by the poet James Turner. 'Medium Loser' and 'Small Winner' were written as answers to Turner's 'experiment', which, as he explained in his introduction, was simple: 'For each author to create a love situation, in two stories.

¹⁷ Berger, G., p. 137. Berger's insights are indebted to his analysis of Cubism: see John Berger, *The Moment of Cubism and Other Essays* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969).

¹⁸ Berger, G., p. 77.

¹⁹ Christine Brooke-Rose, *Invisible Author* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), p. 1.

²⁰ Glynn White, *Reading the Graphic Surface: The Presence of the Book in Prose Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 206.

The situation from the man's side and from the woman's'.²¹ In this way, Turner suggests, the author may 'provide the understanding because only she or he could see, by creating the situation originally, the two main characters in the round, separate and together'.²² No matter how quizzical Turner may have been of the veracity of each of the accounts, or of the possibility of emotional union, his editorial attitude remained the assumed equation between two voices in the creation of one picture of love: a relationship 'in the round'.²³ This figure of speech is of particular note when considering Brooke-Rose's contribution, and especially the first story of her duet, 'The Medium Loser', in which the discourse of mathematics permeates personal relationships, arranging and then repeatedly rearranging the bonds that exist between characters to shatter the notion that any relationship may be understood 'in the round'. Brooke-Rose refracts the doubling of Turner's brief, of one-plus-one or of self-plus-other, to construct a dialogue of proliferating dialogues: even the couple notes that their dialogue takes place at the level of conversation and at the level of 'pseudo-conversation', a discourse aware of its own efforts to evade the more problematic aspects of their relationship.²⁴ Although 'The Medium Loser' is told from the perspective of the male lover, while the 'Small Winner' is told from his female lover's perspective, fidelities and infidelities abound in the lovers' attitudes to truth, language, gesture, arithmetic, imagination, and to one another, creating an indeterminate verbal atmosphere written in three different languages.

The story, presented as a single narrative in *Go When You See the Green Man Walking*, begins in this mode, with an unknown horizon that only multiplies in its mystery: 'Henry the Navigator the Infanta sails all night, watching himself inside the murmuring calculation of total emptiness'.²⁵ This image, evocative of an age in which discoverers pushed beyond the dark edges of the known physical world, reemerges throughout the narrative, informing moments of withdrawal, miscommunication or indifference between the couple, framing their relationship in both physical and metaphysical terms. Their cross-purposes, expressed throughout in Brooke-Rose's sharp dialogue, exist as structures, figurative obstacles to be 'waded through' and in some way counteracted. Set in dynamic social

²¹ James Turner, 'Introduction', in *A Coin Has Two Sides: A collection of double stories on the theme of love*, ed. by James Turner (London: Cassell & Company Ltd, 1967), pp. 1-3 (p. 2).

²² Turner, 'Introduction', *A Coin Has Two Sides*, p. 2.

²³ Turner, 'Introduction', *A Coin Has Two Sides*, p. 2.

²⁴ Christine Brooke-Rose, 'Medium Loser and Small Winner', in *Go When You See the Green Man Walking* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970), pp. 131-165 (p. 141).

²⁵ Brooke-Rose, 'Medium Loser and Small Winner', p.131.

settings, first a corporate party and then a holiday resort, the couple is forced to navigate their adulterous relationship within a network of social obligations and then in isolation. 'Equations', 'polygons' and 'magnetic fields' intrude upon the space between the couple, obstacles largely put in place by the animated conversationalist Quinta and observed by the reticent Basil: 'she...shapes her words with gestures of a smooth circular kind, or rectilinear, nervous and emphatic, pushing the air between us until I feel faint with absorbing her strained enthusiasms'.²⁶ These 'enthusiasms' largely lie with an imaginary realm, a fascination for 'ideal numbers, words and things'.²⁷ Quinta delights in 'inventing stories', animating the space that exists around her, but for Basil this imagination has no application beyond herself: she merely 'invent[s] things to enthuse about'; 'enthusiasms and stories about people which express only yourself'.²⁸ To some extent, Basil is right: her enthusiasm for 'ideal numbers', numbers that 'divide prime numbers which by definition have no dividers but themselves and unity', expresses a degree of oneness with the world, a formational integrity that she keeps 'separate' from the 'full life of transfinite numbers' she leads with her husband.²⁹

The attempt to pinpoint particulars is an especial source of vexation for Quinta, who cannot seem to understand Basil's intensifying demand to 'define your terms'; he is ill at ease with her 'generalising, analysing, labeling, inventing stories'.³⁰ For him, it is merely a 'frilly display' adopted in social situations.³¹ However, in spite of himself, it is always Basil who 'wades through equations' in an attempt to join her, the 'persistence however small persists'.³² This sentiment is arguably echoed by the reader, who too 'wades through words to reach' a point at which the accumulation of details builds an aggregate of their relationship and of the direction of the narrative.³³ The characters are themselves protean, their names refashioned as one among many possible monikers as often as their moves between conversations in the dining-room or at the beach: 'Quinta', 'Quinta-la-blonde-aux-blanches-mains'; 'Quinta-la-brune'; 'Basil-the-boss'; 'Felix, who probably bears the name of Joaquín, or João, or even perhaps Julho de Janeiro'.³⁴ It later transpires that Basil's other mistresses have also

²⁶ Brooke-Rose, 'Medium Loser and Small Winner', p.134.

²⁷ Brooke-Rose, 'Medium Loser and Small Winner', p.139.

²⁸ Brooke-Rose, 'Medium Loser and Small Winner', p.144.

²⁹ Brooke-Rose, 'Medium Loser and Small Winner', p.137.

³⁰ Brooke-Rose, 'Medium Loser and Small Winner', p.144.

³¹ Brooke-Rose, 'Medium Loser and Small Winner', p.139.

³² Brooke-Rose, 'Medium Loser and Small Winner', p.140.

³³ Brooke-Rose, 'Medium Loser and Small Winner', p.145.

³⁴ Brooke-Rose, 'Medium Loser and Small Winner', pp. 132, 138, 147.

been referred to as Quinta: ‘And what of Quinta-la-brune? Quinta-la-rousse?’³⁵ A certain degree of effort is required of the reader in the careful analysis of the narrative, in which other voices intrude upon the ‘shifting polygons’ of the central dialogue between the couple, in which the lovers themselves hold the authenticity of their words and actions to account, and in which the dialogue is partly expressed in French and Portuguese at the holiday resort in the second part of the story. Arguably, the frustration experienced by Quinta in her effort to respond in these languages mimic the reader’s own attempt to fully comprehend the subtleties of the narrative. Of relevance here in our understanding of Brooke-Rose’s intentions is the reference made in both parts of the story to the nineteenth-century Brazilian novelist Machado de Assis, and his witty, revelatory book *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1880), translated as *Epitaph of a Small Winner*.³⁶ Quinta is clearly indebted to this work of imaginary autobiography, as by inference is Brooke-Rose, using it to orient herself within the Portuguese language.³⁷ It is also a talisman through which she may overturn the assumption that a life, that love, that a story, may be recounted in its entirety, in much the same way as Machado de Assis’s volume of numerous vignettes seeks to prove. Quinta harnesses a ‘verbal anarchy’, a conceptual realm understood beyond the obstacles placed before her by words, which ultimately leaves her washed up on her own shoreline:

I have moved out of the particular, out of the routes de Saragosse, Herr General, Felix of the tapped nose and Joao, Fatima, Lolita and the large elephant O casino lady who has seen life and Irrigation perhaps and Nigel, Fenella of the flaxen hair, Jules, Joaquim, Basil-the-boss, Quinta-la-blond-aux-blanches-mains that conjure up black sails on far horizons, out of the non-existent isotopes and ideal numbers that divide the indivisible, out of trying to imagine myself a medium-man who has no name or number and merely acquires my vices with which I destroy Crank who says you display your enthusiasms like frilly underwear to those who treat you with every discourtesy and pay you back with the same sullen indifference you give to me.

I am alone, my sandy hair unloosed on the dark sand and hear the sea crashing inside the caverns under the high rock. The moon sails up towards the stars at the lightning speed of years between nothing and nothing. I lie on the wet sand, between two days, two worlds, lifted by my self-love into the fifth perspective, gently deposited on a southern tip near where the statue of Henry the Navigator the Infanta in his stone plumed biretta sails all night, watching himself and listening to the murmuring calculations of total emptiness.³⁸

³⁵ Brooke-Rose, ‘Medium Loser and Small Winner’, p. 138.

³⁶ Machado de Assis, *Epitaph of a Small Winner*, trans. by William L. Grossman (New York: Noonday Press, 1952). First published as *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (Rio de Janeiro: Revista Brasileira, 1880).

³⁷ Brooke-Rose, ‘Medium Loser and Small Winner’, pp. 158-9.

³⁸ Brooke-Rose, ‘Medium Loser and Small Winner’, p. 164.

Significantly, a refrain marks the first part of the story, expressed throughout as an audible aside by Quinta: 'I preferred it abstract'. The first time she 'murmurs' this phrase it is as a retort to her lover's efforts to clarify the meaning of her tone, the second when he is naming his previous mistresses, and the third when they are pushing each other on their terms of relationship.³⁹ He recalls having heard her 'murmur' the phrase before, though he is uncertain where, when or whether he heard it expressed precisely that way at all: 'Or so I think I hear for she has murmured the phrase before, unheard or half-heard perhaps in hotel rooms and heard now for the first time or reconstructed retrospectively'.⁴⁰ The 'abstract' for Quinta is the space that opens to her imagination, the gaps in apprehension in which she would prefer to insert her own forms, as a gestural realm in which she may 'envelop' or 'clothe' her words with her own meaning. This refrain emphasises Quinta's need to supercede her immediate physical circumference, but it is also a signal to the reader that this story will not behave in straight lines or with the clean divisibility of arithmetic. Stories, for Quinta, are 'as true as a straight isotrope'.⁴¹ The 'isotropic', defined as something that exhibits 'equal physical properties or actions in all directions', cannot retain one 'true' direction. The story mirrors Quinta's wariness, acknowledging a 'dialogue scattered over various places times agglomerating only in respect'.⁴²

Many of the reviews of *Go When You See the Green Man Walking* tended to focus upon the visual aspects of Brooke-Rose's narratives as overly simplistic or bombastic, describing the collection as 'simply a recurring, shifting series of images', written from 'a weird angle', and in a style 'much concerned with visual inventory'.⁴³ In her 1970 review of *Go When You See the Green Man Walking*, Claire Tomalin compared 'this sort of writing', by which she means a writing that challenges the conventions of realist narrative, to abstraction in the visual arts:

The trouble with this sort of writing is that, while it is often aesthetically pleasing, as an abstract painting may be, and the product of a great deal of care and intellectual effort, the

³⁹ Brooke-Rose, 'Medium Loser and Small Winner', pp. 132, 138, 144.

⁴⁰ Brooke-Rose, 'Medium Loser and Small Winner', p.132.

⁴¹ Brooke-Rose, 'Medium Loser and Small Winner', p. 135.

⁴² Brooke-Rose, 'Medium Loser and Small Winner', p. 138; 'isotropic, adj.' in *Oxford English Dictionary* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/100194?redirectedFrom=isotropic#eid>> [accessed 23 September 2015]

⁴³ Douglas Eadie, 'Starting with Details', *Scotsman*; L.T., 'Red rubber gloves become macabre', *Hampstead & Highgate Express*, 29 January 1971; Christopher Wordsworth, 'Still breathing', *The Guardian*, 26 November 1970, p. 14.

final effect is impoverished: the pleasure it gives is less than the work that went into it. Stories, unlike paintings, cannot easily become completely abstract, but there is a special category of humanity that inhabits the *nouveau roman* world: travellers, the mad, ill and isolated; foreigners or unhappy lovers who find communication difficult and Eros cold.⁴⁴

Tomalin's condescension about abstraction is barely veiled; 'aesthetically pleasing' but of scant intellectual gratification to anyone but the author or artist, resulting in what she can only describe as a 'thin verbal atmosphere'.⁴⁵ As Tomalin rightly proposes, stories 'cannot easily become completely abstract', composed of a more demonstrative vocabulary than that of non-figurative painting, but the qualities that bring Brooke-Rose's stories close to becoming 'abstract' are those mystifying aspects which have emerged from the *nouveau roman* school. As 'one of the very few writers to ally herself with the French *nouveaux* romanciers', Brooke-Rose was in Tomalin's view an Anglophone exponent of the belief that 'traditional realist fiction is finished'.⁴⁶ In its place, then, was a new literary approach that intended to expose 'realism' as a set of conventions like any other and to redefine the proper territory for narrative. This new approach was made manifest by the occupants of this peculiar fictional sphere, with the sylphs and shadows of bleak territories, suspect deeds, and unfamiliar manners that act as 'pivots' in the narratives. The feature for which Brooke-Rose is accorded praise is the way in which she 'manages her effects beautifully', which suggests a transparency of method that is double-edged: the emphasis upon these 'effects' and the properties of language, ('the shape of a sentence, the recurring patterns of words, the verbal jokes and ironies'), is 'aesthetically pleasing' but remains of little substance. This results in a narrative that is 'impoverished', 'cold' and 'difficult', an application of a style and method, as opposed to allusive, purposeful or universal. In Tomalin's view, 'ghosts are the most suitable denizens of this thin verbal atmosphere'; it is as if the obliquity of the aesthetic programme has produced a collection so 'foreign' to a literary sensibility that it has been penned by 'the ghost of Samuel Beckett'.⁴⁷ However, the distinction Tomalin offers between pleasure and intellectual effort is a superficial one, as it does not fully attend to Brooke-Rose's pedagogical project. The meaning of 'abstract' for Tomalin and for Brooke-Rose is apparently quite different: for Tomalin the circumvention of established literary norms is destined to be esoteric, whereas for Brooke-Rose,

⁴⁴ Claire Tomalin, 'in a ghostly world', *The Observer*, 29 November 1970, p. 30

⁴⁵ Tomalin, 'in a ghostly world', p. 30.

⁴⁶ Tomalin, 'in a ghostly world', p. 30.

⁴⁷ Tomalin, 'in a ghostly world', p. 30.

such flexibility offers a possible opening-out of the representational space between ‘telling’ and ‘showing’.⁴⁸ This ‘old quarrel’, Brooke-Rose suggests, ‘goes back as far as Henry James’, but it has now been ‘taken to far greater extremes’.⁴⁹ The more ‘abstract’ aspects of Brooke-Rose’s stories were built upon the critical prejudice that ‘this sort of writing’ sought to disrupt.

3. Appearance for Appearance: The Rise of the Anti-Novel

In one of her earliest critical reviews, written for John Lehmann’s *The London Magazine* in December 1958, Brooke-Rose began to stake out a territory for new literary work that confounded most critical outlines. These literary works, which Brooke-Rose deemed ‘necessary to the development of the novel or play’ and ‘indispensable to our knowledge of the form’, were to be contrasted with the mode traditionally associated with the novel, social realism, placed in opposition to the works of authors ‘whose main concern is to tell a story about persons recognizable as human beings in recognizable situations’.⁵⁰ The ‘anti-novel’ was defined as an act of literary radicalism, in both form and content, which would ‘turn the form inside out, hold it up, perhaps, to ridicule, and give it a thorough beating, or at least an airing’.⁵¹ It jettisoned the linchpins of nineteenth-century fiction: character, plot and the representation of ‘reality’. A form often considered to exist ‘outside the history of the novel proper’, the lineage conceived by Brooke-Rose of the ‘anti-novel’ was by no means straight or cumulative; as a diffuse category it ‘eludes period’, ‘eludes labels’ and ‘belongs to no school’.⁵² She offered a reading list of challenging proportions: ‘*Don Quixote*, Furetière’s *Le Roman Bourgeois*, *Tristram Shandy*, Hoffman’s *Kater Murr*, *Epitaph of a Small Winner* by Machado de Assis, Gide’s *Les Faux Monnayeurs*, Irzykowski’s *Paluba*, Thornton Wilder’s *The Skin of Our Teeth*’.⁵³ ‘And now’, claims Brooke-Rose, ‘we have Beckett’ as the foremost modern example of the ‘anti-novel’, as his work addressed manifold aspects of the breed’s ambition: the ‘self-mocking purpose’; the ‘desire to break forms’; the ‘dwelling

⁴⁸ Christine Brooke-Rose [unsigned], ‘The Nouveau Roman’, *TLS*, 3519 (7 August 1969), 881-82 (p. 882).

⁴⁹ Brooke-Rose [unsigned], ‘The Nouveau Roman’, 882.

⁵⁰ Christine Brooke-Rose, ‘Samuel Beckett and the Anti-Novel’, *The London Magazine*, 5 (December 1958), 38-46 (p. 38).

⁵¹ Brooke-Rose, ‘Samuel Beckett and the Anti-Novel’, 38.

⁵² Brooke-Rose, ‘Samuel Beckett and the Anti-Novel’, 38-39.

⁵³ Brooke-Rose, ‘Samuel Beckett and the Anti-Novel’, 38.

of every detail of a situation or gesture'; 'lucid but long intricate periods'; the 'mathematical style'; the 'carefully mundane language to describe either incredible things in an ordinary context or, more usually, ordinary things in an incredible context'.⁵⁴

The yardstick by which Brooke-Rose measured a reader's receptivity to the 'anti-novel' was not the cumulative wisdom of this literary genealogy in mind, but Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759). She asserted in 1957 that '*Tristram Shandy* is, in fact, an anti-novel, the beginning and the end of the novel in one'.⁵⁵ This was her first published critical use of the term 'anti-novel', and it is crucial to note that Brooke-Rose used it not to describe a phenomenon that was the inverse or adversary of the novel, as may be reasonably surmised from the prefix anti-, but to signal the expanded consciousness with which and through which the novel could now operate.⁵⁶ For Brooke-Rose, *Tristram Shandy* 'contained the germ of the anti-novel' and was 'highly relevant today' for many reasons: overthrowing linear plot in favour of the free association of time, place and memory, doing away with the sanctity of the page to introduce new graphic elements, and, perhaps most importantly, introducing self-awareness and the self-defeating digressions of an unreliable narrator.⁵⁷ She was not the only writer to acknowledge the prescience of Sterne: Henri Fluchère's lauded 1962 critical study of Sterne was translated into English in 1965; Anthony Burgess frequently named himself a disciple of Sterne; and B. S. Johnson, a fellow London-based novelist, often placed his work in dialogue with Sterne and with *Tristram Shandy* in particular.⁵⁸ Brooke-Rose was of the belief that a reader's attitude towards *Tristram Shandy* revealed a great deal about an individual's approach to literature: 'I sometimes secretly divide people into those who enjoy *Tristram Shandy* and those who cannot stand it – not, I hasten to add, as a criterion of superiority one way or the other, but simply as a fact from which other

⁵⁴ Brooke-Rose, 'Samuel Beckett and the Anti-Novel', 39-40.

⁵⁵ Christine Brooke-Rose, 'The Art of Individual Fiction', *TLS*, 2868 (15 February 1957), 98. Reinforced two decades later by David Lodge, *The Novelist at a Crossroads and Other Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1977).

⁵⁶ Sterne appeared in Brooke-Rose's discussions of postmodernism. See *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative & Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 339-363. *Shandy* is also a character in her novel *Textermination* (1997).

⁵⁷ Christine Brooke-Rose, 'The real as unreal: Robbe-Grillet', in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, pp. 291-310 (p. 291).

⁵⁸ Henri Fluchère, *Laurence Sterne: From Tristram to Yorick*, trans. by Barbara Bray (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1965); Anthony Burgess noted that Johnson was 'original' in the same way as *Tristram Shandy* in 'Poetry for a Tiny Room', *Yorkshire Post*, 20 May 1963, p. 6; B.S. Johnson delivered a lecture at Belfast University in 1965 entitled 'Succussions of the Intercostal and Abdominal Muscles', its title appropriated from *Tristram Shandy* and his 1973 introduction to *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* quotes from *Tristram Shandy*. Jonathan Coe explored the connections in "'Great spunky unflincher": Laurence Sterne, B. S. Johnson and me', 2004 Laurence Sterne Memorial Lecture, King's Manor, York, 11 June 2004 <<http://www.laurenceternetrust.org.uk/exhibition.php?id=74>> [accessed 12 January 2015].

facts often follow; such as, for instance, that of having little patience with Beckett either'.⁵⁹ The implication here, suggested by the demanding nature of texts by Sterne and Beckett, was that there were two tendencies: either a readership fell towards a narrative discourse based upon a nineteenth-century notion of the 'truth of representation' or a narrative discourse which sought to transgress and subvert the conventions of these 'classical structures'.⁶⁰

The Sterne/Beckett nexus offered a critical point of reference to which Brooke-Rose returned three years later, in her first published piece to explore the further evolution of the 'anti-novel', this time in the form of new French writing.⁶¹ For Brooke-Rose, the term 'anti-novel' was 'best applied' to literary works that performed a subversion of norms, creating 'a novel in which the author *as author* is constantly mocking and destroying his chosen form – a classical example being Sterne's "Tristram Shandy," a modern one Beckett's "Watt"'.⁶² However, as Brooke-Rose outlined in the same article on the 1961 British tour of three French authors, Marguerite Duras, Nathalie Sarraute, and Alain Robbe-Grillet, by the 1960s the sense of the 'anti-novel', or rather the '*anti-roman*', had shifted to address the theoretical demands of the new French novelists (Fig. 60).⁶³ The writers of the *nouveau roman*, the new novel, Duras, Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet, and others such as Michel Butor and Claude Simon, were more concerned with the 'elimination of the author' rather than the performance of one, and therefore sought to eradicate all traces of authorial intervention such as plot, morals, customs or characterisation.⁶⁴ Each very different in tone, politics and preoccupation, they nonetheless shared the common aim of evading expression of the author's personality, values or preferences, in an effort to place greater value on the involvement of the reader in the creation of the narrative. As Brooke-Rose later claimed, the 'point' of the anti-novel was 'to force the reader to read actively, not passively', so as to address the "representational" *impasse* that the novel was thought to have reached.⁶⁵ In his introduction to one of the earliest new novels, Nathalie Sarraute's debut *Portrait d'un inconnu* (1948), Jean-Paul Sartre had put the term '*anti-roman*' back into modern circulation, having

⁵⁹ Brooke-Rose, 'Samuel Beckett and the Anti-Novel', p. 38.

⁶⁰ See Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, pp. 311-338.

⁶¹ Christine Brooke-Rose, 'The Vanishing Author', *The Observer*, 12 February 1961, p. 26.

⁶² Brooke-Rose, 'The Vanishing Author', p. 26.

⁶³ Brooke-Rose, 'The Vanishing Author', p. 26. The U.K. tour was organized by the British publisher of the three authors, John Calder of Calder & Boyars. See John Calder, *Pursuit: The Uncensored Memoirs of John Calder* (London: Alma Books, 2016).

⁶⁴ Brooke-Rose, 'The Vanishing Author', p. 26.

⁶⁵ Brooke-Rose, 'Dinner with M. Carnejoix', *The Observer*, 8 March 1964, p. 27; Brooke-Rose, 'The Vanishing Author', p. 26.

appropriated it from Charles Sorel's 'anti-roman' in *Le Berger extravagant* (1633). Sartre uses it to describe 'entirely negative works', such as Sarraute's and those of Evelyn Waugh, Vladimir Nabakov and André Gide, which 'maintain the appearance and outlines of the ordinary novel', and yet 'make use of the novel in order to challenge the novel, to destroy it before our very eyes while seeming to construct it'.⁶⁶ Sarraute had exposed a 'wall of inauthenticity' that had long held the novel together: the human as 'character', the 'moral commonplace' (or the vantage point of a narrator) and the framework of 'art' (or the novel).⁶⁷ Her novel follows the obsessive surveillance of an elderly man and his unmarried daughter undertaken by a middle-aged neighbour. The events of the novel are represented in their many psychological permutations, provoked by numerous physical catalysts, calling into question what constitutes human subjectivity. Primarily concerned with the ways in which external factors influence the discourse that takes place between characters, it probes the degree to which conversations can also take place at a level beneath discourse or consciousness, what Brooke-Rose referred to as 'subconversations'.⁶⁸ Sartre employed an analogy from art historical discourse to stress the magnitude of Sarraute's achievement and to align the aims of the 'anti-novel' with the same revolt in visual representation: 'to create a type of fiction that will compare with the great compositions of Dostoievsky and Meredith much as Miro's canvas, "The Assassination of Painting," compares with the pictures of Rembrandt and Rubens'.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Preface', in Nathalie Sarraute, *Portrait of a Man Unknown* (New York: George Braziller Inc., 1958), pp. vii-xiv (pp. vii-viii).

⁶⁷ Sartre, 'Preface', *Portrait of a Man Unknown*, pp. vii-viii. Sarraute later corroborated these views in *L'Ère de soupçon* (1956), in which she maintained that the so-called formalists were the true realists, looking at the world in new ways and evolving forms closer to their experience of the world. This was published in English as *Tropisms and the age of suspicion*, trans. by Barbara Wright (London: John Calder, 1963).

⁶⁸ Brooke-Rose, 'Transgressions', *Rhetoric of the Unreal*, p. 323. Brooke-Rose also refers to this phenomenon in 'The Vanishing Author', p. 26.

⁶⁹ Sartre, 'Preface', *Portrait of a Man Unknown*, p. viii.

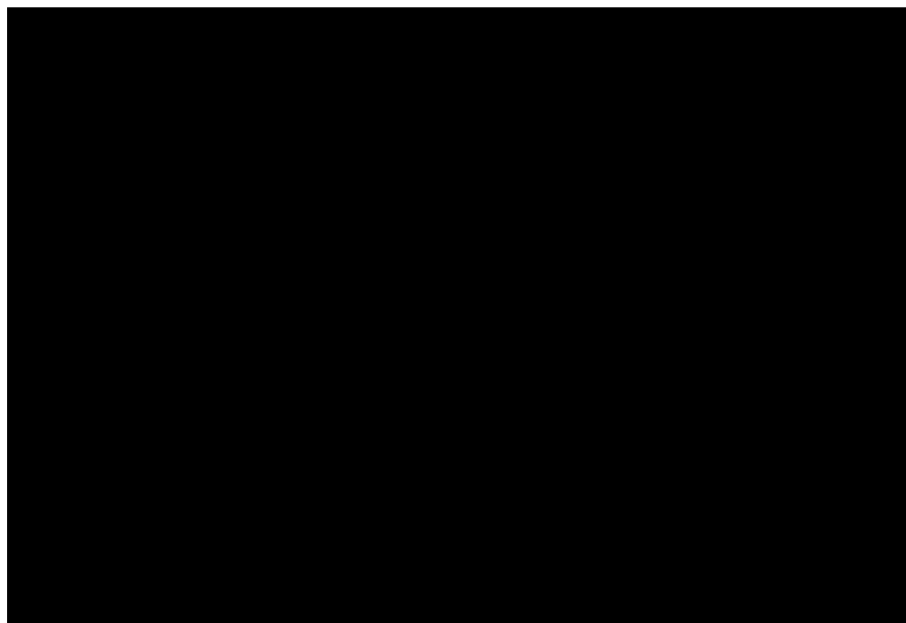


Fig. 60. Christine Brooke-Rose, 'The Vanishing Author', *The Observer*, 12 February 1961, p. 26.

The dismantling of form, content and message into an assemblage of evocative shapes and symbols proved to be a useful analogy for the British critics of the new novelists. For some, the difficulty of interpretation was comparable to that faced with extreme modalities of abstraction in the visual arts, with frequent reference to 'pattern' and geometrical principles. For Mary Cosh, the avoidance of the expected, straightforward 'shape' was a cause for censure: 'I prefer writing with shape, square if necessary, and if this is the way The Novel is falling apart, you can count me out here and now'.⁷⁰ For others, such as Jeremy Brooks, the self-reflexivity of the phenomenon was of greater reprove, in line with the self-aggrandizement of new expressive art: 'Like any group of angry young action painters they have allowed a dense smog of unwieldy abstractions to obscure the difference between the talented and the untalented practitioners amongst them, so that the very real value of some of their experiments has, by elevation into a creed, lost much of its virtue'.⁷¹ Brooke-Rose's admiration for the ambition of the francophone writers to expand the remit of the novel – 'not a theory, it is an exploration' – was not shared by many of her fellow British commentators or critics.⁷² She later enumerated these common objections to the new novel in an unsigned review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, recording that it was frequently charged with 'obscurity', 'excessive formalism', and

⁷⁰ Mary Cosh, 'Short and Soft', *Glasgow Herald*, 22 October 1966, p. 9.

⁷¹ Jeremy Brooks, 'When is novel?', *The Spectator*, 11 January 1963, p. 49.

⁷² Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'Entretien Claude Sarraute/Alain Robbe-Grillet', *Le Monde*, 13 May 1961, p. 9.

that ‘*chosisme*’, attention to objects, ‘equals inhumanism’.⁷³ Heather Reyes has elucidated this tangle of ‘“Fixions”’ and ‘factions’ on both sides of the Channel, claiming that the experiments of the *nouveau romanciers* were met with ‘a mixture of petulance, xenophobia, and sheer unwillingness to countenance the “different”’.⁷⁴ This ‘total misunderstanding’, Brooke-Rose contended, was the result of placing two negatives, the ‘ignorance’ of the progress made across the channel and the resulting ‘smug parochialism of mind’, against a positive, the reluctance of the British ‘to go in much for “movements”, “schools” and “philosophies”’.⁷⁵ The ‘new uncommitted school’ of the *nouveau roman* had first been introduced to a British audience in 1957, the year that the term was coined, with the announcement that the ‘new realism as it appears in the works of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute or Michel Butor proceeds from the disintegration of the contemporary French novel under the pressure of depressing historical circumstances’.⁷⁶ The language of withdrawal and dissolution became a common figurative strain in early appraisals of this ‘theoretical, abstract commitment’ in fiction, ‘abstract’, supposedly, for the degree of its detraction from earlier prose models and unwillingness to engage with the pressing issues of post-war society.⁷⁷ Brooke-Rose was also attracted by metaphors of exaction and withdrawal, entitling her 1961 report ‘The Vanishing Author’ and discussing the aspects of ‘elimination’, ‘rejection’ and ‘limitation’ in the prose of Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet, an approach which pre-empted the themes set out in Roland Barthes’ celebrated 1967 essay ‘The Death of the Author’.⁷⁸

However, for Brooke-Rose and a select number of British literary scholars, such as her close friend Frank Kermode, the evacuation of certain guiding elements in the new novel did not necessarily result in a narrative divested of meaning.⁷⁹ In her 1961 review of the translation of Robbe-Grillet’s fourth novel, *Jealousy* (*La Jalousie*, 1959), the ‘point’ for Brooke-Rose was that he ‘set out to destroy the “significances” (moral, psychological, metaphysical, social, etc.) with which man has

⁷³ Brooke-Rose [unsigned], ‘The Nouveau Roman’, p. 881.

⁷⁴ Heather Reyes, ‘The British and their “Fixions” the French and their Factions’, in *Utterly Other Discourse: The Texts of Christine Brooke-Rose*, ed. Ellen G. Friedman and Richard Martin (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), pp. 52-63 (p. 52).

⁷⁵ Brooke-Rose [unsigned], ‘The Nouveau Roman’, p. 881.

⁷⁶ Oliver Todd, ‘France: Engagement Dégagé’, *TLS*, 2894 (16 August 1957), 500.

⁷⁷ Todd, ‘France: Engagement Dégagé’, 500.

⁷⁸ Christine Brooke-Rose, ‘The Vanishing Author’, p. 26. Roland Barthes’ essay was first published in the American journal *Aspen*, 5-6 (1967), and subsequently published in his book *Image-Music-Text* (1977). It was first published in French in the journal *Manteia*, 5 (1968). Brooke-Rose titles her final critical book *Invisible Author*.

⁷⁹ See Frank Kermode, ‘The House of Fiction’, *The Partisan Review*, 3.1 (Winter 1963), 61-82.

invested the outside world, to cleanse language of what he calls “the myth of depth” or the humanist affirmation that the world is man’.⁸⁰ As Robbe-Grillet put it in his 1956 essay, ‘The Future of the Novel’, ‘the world is neither significant nor absurd. It *is*, quite simply’, renouncing the metaphysical ‘trap’ encountered by the kind of writer who attempted to ‘capture the universe to hand it over to society’.⁸¹ The history of the novel, Robbe-Grillet proposed, was based on this myth, and, as Brooke-Rose later elucidated, Robbe-Grillet was ‘reasserting the validity of appearance simply as appearance’.⁸² Published for the first time in English in 1965, ‘A Future for the Novel’, and the collection from which it originated *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, is a monument within European late modernism, contending that a ‘freedom of observation’ was what would free the novel from its ‘state of stagnation’.⁸³ Readers would have to disassociate themselves from the peripheral distractions of culture, which had created a ‘camouflage’ of emotional, ethical or psychological attachments to objects in the world. For Robbe-Grillet, the word ‘literary’ had become a pejorative term, signaling a network of customs, ‘like a screen or grid’, which distracts the attentions of the reader as ‘bits of different coloured glass’, fracturing ‘our field of vision into tiny assimilable facets’.⁸⁴ By contrast, the reader should remain free to make their own connections within these syntactical networks, and remain free of the pressure to draw discrete clauses or images together into a tight completed pattern of singular relevance. The free observation of a text would establish objects and subjects ‘first of all by their *presence*’, which would continue to prevail over whatever explanatory theory that may try to enclose them in a system of references.⁸⁵ As objects ‘renounce their pseudo-mystery’ so will characters ‘suggest many possible interpretations’ and ‘accommodate all kinds of comment’, in order to maintain an ‘indifference to these “potentialities”’. This would take shape in their complex, often repetitious, interrelations across time and space.⁸⁶

For Brooke-Rose it presented an uncanny quality in narrative; in the same way as ‘the nothingness of all our unchosen beings’ were ‘made as real and as trivial as our existent ones’ by Beckett, so here the nothingness of all of our unchosen narratives, characters, objects, scenes,

⁸⁰ Christine Brooke-Rose, ‘Book Reviews’, *The London Magazine*, 8.2 (February 1961), 74–6 (p. 74).

⁸¹ Alain Robbe-Grillet, ‘A Future for the Novel’, in *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), pp. 15–24 (pp. 23–4).

⁸² Brooke-Rose, ‘The real as unreal: Robbe-Grillet’, p. 293.

⁸³ Robbe-Grillet, ‘A Future for the Novel’, pp. 23–24.

⁸⁴ Robbe-Grillet, ‘A Future for the Novel’, p. 19.

⁸⁵ Robbe-Grillet, ‘A Future for the Novel’, p. 21.

⁸⁶ Robbe-Grillet, ‘A Future for the Novel’, pp. 21–22.

viewpoints, are made ‘as real and as trivial’ as those before our eyes.⁸⁷ As Brooke-Rose’s literary career matured along with the dawning of the 1960s, following the publication of her poetry pamphlet *Gold* (1954) by Hand & Flower Press, as well as a quartet of satirical novels (1957-1961) and her first scholarly work *The Grammar of Metaphor* (1958) by Secker & Warburg, Brooke-Rose’s connection to the new novel became the single most definitive characteristic in the eyes of her British readership.⁸⁸ She is often credited as having written some of the earliest critical essays on the phenomenon of the *nouveau roman* in English, for mainstream publications such as *The Observer*, *The London Magazine*, *The Sunday Times* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, and is also recognized as the reviewer of note of the few acknowledged British counterparts or Francophiles, such as Kay Dick, Rayner Heppenstall, and Ann Quin.⁸⁹ Although a number of these reviews come from the privileged position of a French speaker, she largely reviewed translations and later wrote reportage pieces such as her ‘Letters from Paris’ series for *The Spectator*, becoming an Anglophone point of access for the literary and theoretical advancements made by the movement.⁹⁰ She took it upon herself to combat popular skepticism by writing about what this new literature offered to the experience of reading, providing helpful analogies to allay concerns of miscomprehension:

We all know that jaded feeling when people and things seem too familiar and we long for *something to happen*. Then we go on a journey, change our usual surroundings. People and things suddenly acquire a new intensity, appear more ‘real’. This is exactly what the so-called ‘New’ novelists from France are trying to do: by getting away from over-familiar ways of creating a fictional world, they are making us relearn to live each moment for itself so that – as on holiday – it is sufficient for people and things merely to be, without reference to something happening.⁹¹

Brooke-Rose here embraces the strangeness of the *nouveau roman* in its employ of new distancing techniques, of a reading relationship often out of time, space and mind with that of the narrator and author. As ‘on holiday’, the reader is not only a visitor in a foreign landscape, but also becomes

⁸⁷ Brooke-Rose, ‘Samuel Beckett and the Anti-Novel’, p. 46.

⁸⁸ The quartet is as follows: *The Languages of Love* (1957); *The Sycamore Tree* (1958); *The Dear Deceit* (1960); *The Middlemen: A Satire* (1961).

⁸⁹ Christine Brooke-Rose, ‘Mon Ami’ [Review of Kay Dick’s *Pierrot*], *The Sunday Times*, 1 January 1961, p. 21; Christine Brooke-Rose, ‘Out of the Past’ [Review of Ann Quin’s *Berg et al.*], *The Spectator*, 7094 (12 June 1964), 802.

⁹⁰ Rayner Heppenstall’s *The Fourfold Tradition: Notes on the French and English Literatures, with some Ethnological and Historical asides* (New York: New Directions, 1961) was a collection of essays attesting to the reciprocity between French and British literature; Christine Brooke-Rose, ‘Viewpoint’ *TLJ*, 3717 (1 June 1973), 2.

⁹¹ Christine Brooke-Rose, ‘Review of *The Inquisitory* by Robert Pinget and *Degrees* by Michel Butor’, *The Sunday Times*, [undated], Austin, Texas, Harry Ransom Center [HRC], The Christine Brooke-Rose Papers TXRC98-A40 [CBR], Galley Folder, Galley Proof [all unnumbered].

foreign to oneself, outside of a familiar climate, environment or community in which one may solidly orient oneself. The 'point', Brooke-Rose contended, was 'to force the reader to read actively instead of passively'.⁹² There would no longer be an insistence upon the 'efficacy of words', but upon an acceptance of the possibilities offered by the 'opaque'.⁹³ Although Philip Toynbee was not wholly convinced by the methods used to effect their purpose, he conceded in a contemporaneous feature that the new novelists' efforts to rewrite the rules of narrative lend an 'obscure significance' to events.⁹⁴ The *nouveau roman* 'is a novel [...] which tries to create something new not so much by addition to the familiar methods of fiction as by subtraction from them. There is an attempt here to encompass *less* than the conventional novel attempts, and to reveal more by this act of deliberate abnegation'.⁹⁵

4. Visual Counterpoints and Variables in *Out*

The effort of subtraction and the inclusion of gaps, silences, and sights averted, to 'reveal more' by way of this 'deliberate abnegation', is of paramount importance to the demands placed upon literature by the new novel. Brooke-Rose inserted herself most determinedly into this discourse with her novel *Out* (1964), a book for which she was subsequently understood as the author of 'the only English version of the anti-novel'.⁹⁶ Considered by critics as 'the watershed in her development', Brooke-Rose thought of *Out* as the first and last of her novels to come under the 'direct influence' of Alain Robbe-Grillet, initiating the moment she 'went experimental'.⁹⁷ *Out* offers more than the quasi-scientific observation of phenomena, as it endeavours to scintillate reality through the refraction of time and space across multiplying lenses. Brooke-Rose's attitude to looking, first exemplified by this novel, precipitated a change in her approach to literary work and to the work necessitated by the literary text,

⁹² Christine Brooke-Rose, 'New Novels', [undated] HRC CBR Galley Folder, Galley Proof [unnumbered].

⁹³ Christine Brooke-Rose, 'Dynamic Gradients', *The London Magazine*, 4.12 (March 1965), 89-96 (p. 92).

⁹⁴ Philip Toynbee, 'Enter the Anti-Novel', *The Observer*, 22 November 1959, p. 22.

⁹⁵ Toynbee, 'Enter the Anti-Novel', p. 22. See also his reviews of Robbe-Grillet's novels *Le Voyeur*, in 'The Art of Omission' *The Observer*, 1 March 1959, p. 18 and of *La Jalousie*, in 'Art Sans Everything', *The Observer*, 20 November 1960, p. 27; Ronald Hayman, 'Realism and experiment are not antithetical', *The Novel Today: 1967-1975* (Harlow: Longman Group Ltd. 1976), pp. 5-12 (p. 11).

⁹⁶ Myrna Blumberg, 'Out's out – it's in to be anti', *The Guardian*, 7 November 1964, p. 6.

⁹⁷ Christine Brooke-Rose, 'A Conversation with Christine Brooke-Rose', in *Utterly Other Discourse*, pp. 29-37 (pp. 29-30).

in which individuated discourses become instruments of observation.⁹⁸ The novel was written in the wake of a period of serious illness in the early 1960s and subsequent acquaintance with Robbe-Grillet's novel *La Jalousie* during her long period of convalescence in 1962. The removal of her kidney and the ensuing complications for her health resulted in what Brooke-Rose perceived as a rift between her former sense of self and her creative life: 'something much more important' than any literary or academic influence, 'a sense of being in touch with something else'.⁹⁹



Fig. 61. Christine Brooke-Rose, *Out* (London: Michael Joseph, 1964), p. 5.

Out is composed of indeterminate narrative coordinates: the novel takes place in an uncertain future in an undisclosed location somewhere in 'Afro-Eurasia', following an unspecified disaster referred to as 'the displacement'.¹⁰⁰ It is prefaced with copies of what appear to be identity cards or

⁹⁸ For reflection on her use of 'discourses' see Christine Brooke-Rose, 'Ill Wit and Good Humour: Women's Comedy and the Canon', *Comparative Criticism*, 10 (1988), 121-38 (p. 129).

⁹⁹ Brooke-Rose, 'A Conversation with Christine Brooke-Rose', p. 29.

¹⁰⁰ Christine Brooke-Rose, *Out* (London: Michael Joseph, 1964), p. 119.

records, referring their owners to medical treatment, the 'labour exchange' or 'resettlement' camps (Fig. 61). Filtered through the mind of a sick 'colourless' man, it becomes apparent that this catastrophe has resulted in a socio-political landscape that has changed beyond recognition. Racial barriers have been inverted, new geo-political blocks created and a feudal system reigns, due to the prevalence of a mysterious radiation sickness to which all races except the white communities (now referred to as the 'colourless') are immune. The vulnerability of the 'colourless' to the disease, akin to radiation poisoning by which a high degree of chemical mutation takes place in the body, has made them an unreliable source of labour. Presided over by the privileged Asswati elite of African ethnicity, the 'colourless' of the region must subsist on meagre rations, poor pay, scarcity of employment and poor living conditions in their 'Settlements'. The male protagonist is unemployed, and must report everyday to the 'Labour Exchange' for state benefits in the form of 'dole-pills', until his wife's wealthy employer, Mrs. Mgulu, tries to organize work for him within her own household. In addition to this atmosphere of uncertainty, the reader is met with a protagonist who is also on the point of mental and physical disintegration. He remains anonymous and pronoun-less throughout the novel, a consciousness and a body that barely recognizes itself. As described on the dust jacket, 'he lacks all sense of identity, and can retain a grip on reality only through the revolving patterns of concrete detail and vague memories of abstract formulae and probably invented past incidents'.

Related entirely in the present tense, our attention is held by a narrative composed of subtle variations of successively returning moments. It is unclear which version of events is the version of events, as occasions such as bungled jobs for Mrs. Mgulu's managing agent Mr. Swaminathan or interviews with the head gardener take place multiple times in different ways. Singular images or instants are repeated with minor variations, such as the congealing bowl of gruel or the apparatus of the chemistry lab, to create narrative moments of focalising intensity. It is impossible to know whether events or images are singular or generative, successive or progressive. The memories of past occurrences, the dim recognition of a dialogue before him, or the visions of an inhospitable future form his present, and it is for this reason that Mrs. Mgulu finally recommends he undergo a course of 'psychoscopy'. At this point it is made clear that the 'displacement' also caused a cognitive shift, as well as demographic disruption, giving rise to a new psychoanalytic practice known as 'psychoscopy'. New machines, 'psychosopes' have been devised and are capable of generating 'biograms',

which a vision of reality is crafted: the illusion of real time narration, the hesitations of a self-interrogating narrative, the references to the 'frame' around scenes. Four lines of the novel are even printed upside down, in order to mirror the effort on the part of the protagonist to read a letter from across the table.¹⁰⁴ The reader is given due preparation for this inverted reading and the feat of comprehension required, as the protagonist himself acknowledges the eye's act of 'decipherment' necessary to read the letter, further amplifying the existence of the illusionistic device (Fig. 62).¹⁰⁵ The accuracy of sight is always challenged with the suggestion that surface detail can only reveal so much, indicating that even if one is witness to an event or a scene it is never witnessed in all of its minute detail; although the 'eyelids are the right colour', beneath the skin the replication of cells and the distension of the spleen indicates the spread of the disease.¹⁰⁶ The novel ends with no clear resolution; as the protagonist stares into the bonfire of his making in Mrs. Mgulu's garden he is consumed by the 'huge consciousness of light': "under the eyelids a golden triangle, a yellow shower, circles of orange and the head goes leaden, grey in a hundred and sixty microseconds, three million two hundred and thirty one thousand six hundred and forty two years one hundred and seventy three days point nine. And a billion more besides".¹⁰⁷ Any sense of measurable time and space seems to move away from him; eyes close against the immediate glare, the first beats of the metronome are unreliable and arithmetical values are drawn out into their corresponding words to offer the Beckettian conclusion that 'we are merely marking time and time is nothing, nothing'.¹⁰⁸ Physical matter inevitably turns to ash before our eyes, however brilliant the end.

Emphasis was placed by the *nouveau roman* upon the visual as the privileged means of apprehending reality, and revelation was central to its effects: its relationship to Husserl's axiom that consciousness must be consciousness of something was well rehearsed in the discourse of the movement.¹⁰⁹ Attempts made by phenomenologists to be precise about what we see when we see had given rise to the opinion that the new novel was 'more a way of looking than a way of writing'.¹¹⁰ Brooke-Rose had made the same claim four years previously, suggesting that there could no longer be

¹⁰⁴ Brooke-Rose, *Out*, p. 56.

¹⁰⁵ Brooke-Rose, *Out*, p. 55.

¹⁰⁶ Brooke-Rose, *Out*, p. 15.

¹⁰⁷ Brooke-Rose, *Out*, p. 196.

¹⁰⁸ Brooke-Rose, *Out*, p. 196.

¹⁰⁹ Brooke-Rose, 'The Nouveau Roman', p. 881.

¹¹⁰ Anon, 'The New and the Novel' *TLS*, 3318 (30 Sept 1965), 847-48.

any ‘doubt at all that both [Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute] are seriously and skillfully evolving a new way of looking’.¹¹¹ This ‘new way of looking’ was a requirement of both author and reader; in effect, the novelists place the characters and action at ‘a point equidistant between author and reader’. Brooke-Rose erects a view of the new novel as a literature of cinematic vision, comparable to Jean-Luc Godard’s separation between audience and screen, describing a literary construct that was ‘like a game watched’.¹¹² As Robbe-Grillet had outlined in his seminal book of essays, the cinema had presented new challenges to narrative and to the nature of literary representation. In ‘A Future for the Novel’, the cinema, ‘another heir of the psychological and naturalistic tradition’, tended to take as its sole purpose the ‘transposition of a story into images’.¹¹³ When faced with the filmed narrative, ‘one sees the chair, the movement of the hand, the shape of the bars’, and these ‘fragments of crude reality’ strike us as significant, but this significance remains a separate or additional stage in our apprehension. These objects or gestures are ‘essential and irreducible to vague intellectual concepts’ for the fact of their physical appearance on the screen.¹¹⁴ By 1963, Robbe-Grillet would put this more explicitly in the essay ‘Time and Description in Fiction Today’, suggesting that the ‘cinematographic image would show at once, in a few seconds projection what literature verily tries to represent in some dozens of pages’.¹¹⁵

Brooke-Rose rarely discussed or wrote about film or television, often expressing a dislike for the distractions of the screen.¹¹⁶ However, she is alert to the potency of the medium and to the growing transference of its elements within the novel. Careful to acknowledge the extra-visual properties of Robbe-Grillet’s fictional worlds, she notes a scope beyond the immediately visual, as ‘the analogies’ that exist between his narrative moments are also ‘occasionally non-visual’.¹¹⁷ Sound, separate to the ‘lignes’, ‘spirales’ and ‘arabesques’ of snow (outside) and dust (inside), also provides the ‘link’ between moments; the ‘staccato sound’ of heels on the pavement clatter but they cannot be

¹¹¹ Brooke-Rose, ‘The Vanishing Author’, p. 26.

¹¹² Brooke-Rose, ‘The Vanishing Author’, p. 26. Cf. Bruce Morrisette, *Novel and Film: Essays in Two Genres* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 157-164.

¹¹³ Robbe-Grillet, ‘A Future for the Novel’, pp. 21-22.

¹¹⁴ Robbe-Grillet, ‘A Future for the Novel’, pp. 21-22.

¹¹⁵ Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel*, p. 145.

¹¹⁶ Her short story ‘The Troglodyte’ describes the intrusion of the ‘familiar dead window’ of an unwanted television set, in *Go When You See the Green Man Walking*, pp. 32-42. For the only essay in which she analyses television, see ‘Mediamix: Shall we ever make Europe?’ in *Near Encounters: Festschrift for Richard Martin*, ed. Hanjo Berressem and Bernd Herzogenrath (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1995), pp. 27-43. Her uncertainty when faced with the camera also pervaded her few on-screen performances: see ‘Programme 16: The Yorkshire Ripper, Melvyn Bragg, Christine Brooke-Rose’, *Bookmark*, BBC2, London 7 May 1987.

¹¹⁷ Brooke-Rose, ‘The real as unreal: Robbe-Grillet’, p. 300.

heard inside the house, the doors that slam with sudden force and the shrieks that rise 'higher and higher in pitch'.¹¹⁸ These are all aural patterns that return and repeat themselves, overlaying images in a filmic manner, such as the coiling of the snow or the apparition of footsteps or the sudden swerve inside the frames of photographs. Brooke-Rose admires this multidimensional quality, a narrative space constructed of sounds, shapes and words, betraying sympathy for that which lies beyond the confines of the page. Links, symphonic clauses, subsidiary themes, patterns and movements all take place instantaneously to contrive his process built on visual and aural analogy, elements which were to suffuse her own subsequent works of fiction.¹¹⁹ And yet, aside from the filmic directives of camera exposure, angle, lighting or the monochromatic intensity often adopted by these new experimental French filmmakers, such as Alain Resnais, François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, it was the 'significance given by the frame' that was of greatest importance to Brooke-Rose.¹²⁰ The 'significance of selection' is divisive; a 'combination of reality being framed rather than any other; and that implies, like any picture, at least a minimal degree of composition'.¹²¹ Robbe-Grillet's 'elaborate formalism' was itself a framing device, by which he was able to organise the elements of his scene, often to an obsessive degree, within and without these shifting frames of reference, lending artistic magnitude 'both to imply and to state is in itself without significance'.¹²² Discussing Robbe-Grillet's 'in/out play of shapes', she makes the crucial point that his explorations in perspective cannot be likened in strict terms to the abstract canvas, as the act of framing must be agglutinative and inconstant, shifting as opposed to static. His writing is 'like an abstract painting in motion' in terms of its multiple kinetic possibilities, what Brooke-Rose refers to as 'visual counterpointing'.¹²³ Robbe-Grillet is not 'playing a complex moving game of noughts and crosses with his circles, curves, squares and intercrossing lines', pushing phrases, scenes and objects like counters around in arbitrary formulae to build a kind

¹¹⁸ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *In the Labyrinth*, trans. by Christine Brooke-Rose (London: Calder & Boyars, 1967), p. 47.

¹¹⁹ Brooke-Rose, 'The real as unreal: Robbe-Grillet', pp. 298-304.

¹²⁰ Christine Brooke-Rose, 'The Baroque Imagination of Robbe-Grillet', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 11.4 (1965-6), 405-423 (p. 409).

¹²¹ Brooke-Rose, 'The Baroque Imagination of Robbe-Grillet', p. 409.

¹²² Brooke-Rose, 'The Baroque Imagination of Robbe-Grillet', p. 410.

¹²³ Brooke-Rose, 'Dynamic Gradients', p. 92. Also reiterated in Brooke-Rose, 'The real as unreal: Robbe-Grillet', p. 300.

of visual collage, but encouraging these elements to multiply and mesh to build an impression which holds closer or truer to the inconsistencies of reality.¹²⁴

Exceptional in her knowledge of the advancements made by the French literary avant-garde, Brooke-Rose was not however the only British novelist alert to the potential of an ‘analogical process’ of cuts, swerves, digressions and multi-perspectival montage as more closely representative of the chaos of contemporary life. A loose circle of ‘overtly anti-realist novelists’ operating under the aegis of Beckett, Joyce and the *nouveau roman*, including Brooke-Rose, Brigid Brophy, B. S. Johnson, Ann Quin and Alan Burns, were marginalized by the literary mainstream for their innovative approaches to form and controversial subject matter.¹²⁵ Threatened by the notion that the novel had been ‘in eclipse’ since the late 1940s, leading to a fashion for announcing its obsolescence, ‘exhaustion’ and ‘death’, these novelists sought a solution to this impasse outside of the conventions promoted by the popular novel.¹²⁶ Modern culture was believed to be morphing into ‘an audio-visual era in which the cathode-ray tube replaces the printed page’, a gap that was in part addressed by a fashion for literary adaptation in cinema.¹²⁷ As key instruments in the switch to a predominantly visual method of explanation, television and film had led to a contraction in everyday communication, with messages increasingly disseminated in sharper, snappier, more performative ways, even arguably ‘destroying our appetite for subtlety of colour’.¹²⁸ Discussions abounded on the evolving role of the novel met with the rise of screen culture – periodicals such as *Sight and Sound*, *Cinim* and *Movie* discussed the French ‘cine-novel’ and the writings of critics such as Keith Cohen, Stephen Heath and Bruce Morrisette later plumbed the depths of the connections between film and print – but none were expressed with greater critical acidity than that of novelist and filmmaker B. S. Johnson.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ For Brooke-Rose on realism and representation see ‘Illusions of Anti-Realism’, in *Stories, Theories and Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 204-222.

¹²⁵ Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995); for an overview of the ‘British experimental novel’ see Francis Booth, *The British Experimental Novel 1940-1980* (London: Lulu, 2012).

¹²⁶ Anon., ‘Novels in Eclipse’, *The Times*, 22 August 1950, p. 5; See John Barth, ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’, *Atlantic Monthly* (August 1967), 29-34; Ronald Sukenick, *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories* (New York: Dial Press, 1969); Allan Massie, *The Novel Today: A Critical Guide to the British Novel 1970-1989* (London: Longman, 1990).

¹²⁷ Hugh Williamson, ‘The Future of the Book IV: The Book of the Future’, *TLS*, 3582 (23 October 1970), 1215-16 (p. 1215).

¹²⁸ John William Mills Willett, ‘The Other Revolution’, *TLS*, 3436 (4 January 1968), 13-14.

¹²⁹ See Keith Cohen, *Film and Fiction: The Dynamics of Exchange* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Bruce Morrisette, *Novel and Film: Essays in Two Genres* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Robert Scholes, ‘Narration and Narrativity in Film’, *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 1.111 (August 1976), 291.

Johnson echoed Brion Gysin's famous 1959 adage that 'Writing is fifty years behind painting' by suggesting that the visual arts, as well as music, had already run the course of its many conceptual leaps, while writing remained tethered to 'the neo-Dickensian novel' as if '*Ulysses* had never happened'.¹³⁰ The 'stultifyingly philistine [...] book culture of this country', Johnson suggested, had produced few novelists aware of or willing to grapple with the formal challenges laid down by James Joyce and his admiration for the cinema.¹³¹ Achieving 'something very close to the multiplicity and simultaneity of natural experience', Johnson selected Brooke-Rose's *Out* as one of a pitifully small number of contemporary novels that achieved an aesthetic speculativeness in their challenge to the mainstream conception that 'a novel must tell a story'.¹³² For Johnson, telling stories was the deliberate falsification of experience, as the act of extracting a story from life was only feasible through a process of 'strict selection'.¹³³ Foremost among his reasons for the relative 'exhaustion' of the novel, defined as a nineteenth-century literary form which by the early 1970s had become 'anachronistic, invalid, irrelevant and perverse', was the imaginative potential of film.¹³⁴ Fictionality, for Johnson, was nothing but 'shabby chicanery', and film offered the possibility of greater immediacy and visual impact, prompting the assertion in 1965: 'I consider film to offer potentially the widest scope to a writer as pure form'.¹³⁵ The word 'pure' merits consideration, as it hints at a belief in the existence of a pre-discursive reality, a 'truth' conceivable when visibly set apart from the machinations of narrative. This attitude to representation, Johnson surmised as he was about to embark on his filmmaking career, could be explored through a greater diversity of means on the screen as opposed to the page or book. The concept of truth became Johnson's authorial talisman, an injunction leveled at himself and others to be transparent about the techniques of artistic craft and to admit life's 'myriad of ends untied, untidily'.¹³⁶ Engaged with widening expectations of both film and print, Johnson's work poses the question: what is the limit point of representation?

¹³⁰ B. S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), p. 15.

¹³¹ Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young*, p. 29.

¹³² B. S. Johnson, 'Views/Reviews: "Telling stories is telling lies"', *Vogue*, 123.13 (1966), 18. Johnson also named Samuel Beckett, Maureen Duffy, Ann Quin and Rayner Heppenstall. Brooke-Rose did not return the favour, denying Johnson's work was in any way 'experimental': Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, p. 358.

¹³³ Johnson, 'Views/Reviews: "Telling stories is telling lies"', 18.

¹³⁴ Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?*, p. 14.

¹³⁵ B. S. Johnson, 'Holes, Syllabics, and the Succussions of the Intercostal and Abdominal Muscles', in *Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson*, ed. by Jonathan Coe, Julia Jordan and Philip Tew (London: Picador, 2013), pp. 386-397 (p. 387).

¹³⁶ See Julia Jordan, 'Introduction: Avant-Garde Possibilities – B. S. Johnson and the Sixties Generation', in *B.S. Johnson and Post-War Literature: Possibilities of the Avant-Garde*, ed. by Martin Ryle and Julia Jordan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 1-16.

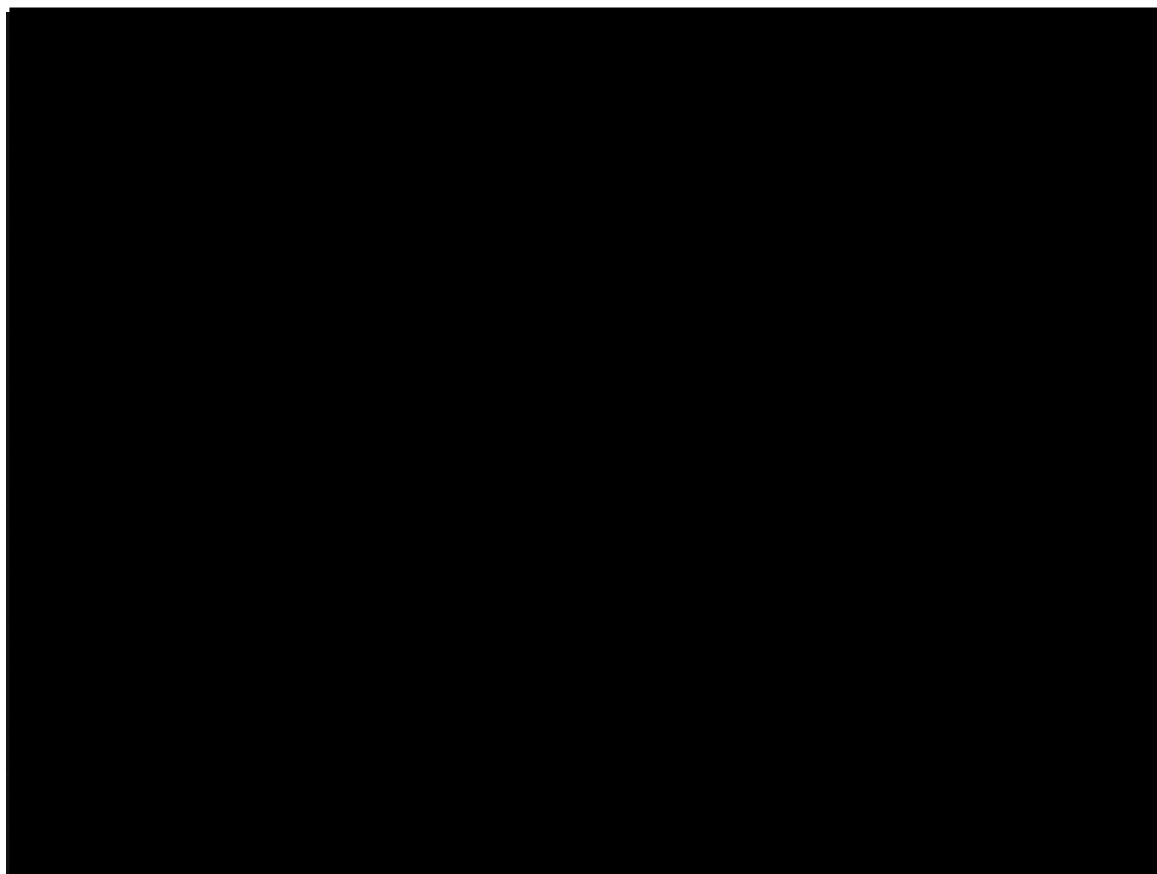


Fig. 63. *You're Human Like the Rest of Them*, dir. by B.S. Johnson, perf. William Hoyland (British Film Institute, 1967, dur. 00.16.20) 00.00.07 [on DVD]

5. '(wrote) (filmed)': B.S. Johnson and the Novelist as Filmmaker

In 1966, following several abortive screenwriting attempts for commercial projects and a proposed adaptation of his debut novel *Travelling People* (1963), Johnson heard of a public grant for young filmmakers.¹³⁷ In a letter to the Director of the British Film Institute (BFI), Stanley Reed, in application to the newly reinstated Experimental Film Fund, Johnson intimated that film offered the writer an enabling creative scope no longer attainable within the parameters of the novel: 'I long to have the chance to do real work in the cinema, on however small a scale, as like Robbe-Grillet I feel the medium to be potentially more satisfactory than the novel'.¹³⁸ Invited to submit an idea for a

¹³⁷ Johnson's commissioned screenplay for a film of the World Cup was rejected and he was briefly engaged in 1965 on Irving Sandler's *The Savage Canary*. See Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B. S. Johnson*, (London: Picador, 2004), p. 263. Johnson also penned a 'film vehicle for Cassius Clay', a violent fictional film; 'Typed Film Proposals', London, British Library [BL], B. S. Johnson Archive [BSA], ADD MS 89001/8/11.

¹³⁸ B. S. Johnson, letter to Stanley Reed, 9 August 1966, quoted in Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 214.

short film by the head of the production board, Bruce Beresford, and subsequently awarded a grant to realise the project, Johnson set to work on his first short feature *You're Human Like the Rest of Them* (1967).¹³⁹ As an adapted version of an earlier work for theatre, taking as its focus the musings of a young, disillusioned schoolteacher, the film crafted an energetic, opinionated dialogue enhanced by the cuts at the end of every line-end.¹⁴⁰ This piece set the precedent in Johnson's film work for experimentation with language. All of his films, from the non-fictional documentaries to the avant-gardist shorts, placed a question over the status of language in film at the centre of their contrivances, using subtitles, depictions of texts, or metafictional statements intended to shatter the cinematic suspension of disbelief. This perhaps was to be expected, as Johnson had already gained a reputation for frustrating critical frameworks by working across numerous genres of writing and subjecting language to a variety of typographical techniques in his efforts as a novelist. By the time his film career began in 1966, Johnson had published three novels, *Travelling People* (1963), *Albert Angelo* (1964) and *Trawl* (1966), all of which explored graphic layouts and narrative disorientation, designed in order to break what he perceived as the fundamental sophistry of the conventional linear novel. In *Albert Angelo* this belief had broken through the intricately crafted episodic narrative as a capitalised outburst by the author himself – ' – OH, FUCK ALL THIS LYING'.¹⁴¹ This radical gesture at the conclusion of the third section gathers ground in the fourth section of the novel, 'Disintegration', as a sustained invective by the author against 'falsifying in telling stories'.

It was in *Albert Angelo*, Johnson maintained, that he 'discovered' the novelist and 'voice' he had always intended to cultivate, and in which he 'broke through the English disease of the objective correlative to speak directly if solipsistically in the novel form'.¹⁴² The novel, split into five parts, follows the fortunes of Albert Angelo, a trained architect leading an itinerant life as a supply teacher divided between several demanding state schools in North London, indicating Johnson's discomfort with traditional novelistic plot: memories of Angelo's failed love affair with a young woman known as Jenny frequently interrupt the narrative; one lesson is recounted in two parallel columns of text to display the classroom racket alongside Angelo's interior monologue; and most famously, two

¹³⁹ *You're Human Like the Rest of Them*, BFI (1967), 17 min.

¹⁴⁰ A short verse play written in lines of ten syllables and commissioned by Jeremy Brookes of the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1964. Johnson originally wanted to cut at the end of every syllable, 'but this proved unwatchable'; see Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, pp. 228-229.

¹⁴¹ B. S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, (London: Constable, 1964), p. 163.

¹⁴² B. S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?*, p. 22.

rectangular holes ('future-seeing holes') cut through the bottom of the recto pages 147 and 149 reveal an imminent violent development in advance.¹⁴³ Johnson's commitment to literary transparency extends beyond formal mimesis, however, to do away with all of the fictive components, or the 'lies', of his tale. Restyled details, such as the names of characters or locations modeled on real acquaintances or places, would only detract from Johnson's intention to be as transparent as possible: 'to tell the truth about me about my experience about my truth about my truth to reality about sitting here writing looking out across Claremont Square trying to say something about the writing and nothing being an answer to the loneliness to the lack of loving'.¹⁴⁴ Following the success of his short film *You're Human Like the Rest of Them*, which had received positive reviews as the result of a National Theatre programme of innovative short films, Johnson recognised the potential the form offered to his novel.¹⁴⁵ From 1967-1971 he worked on a number of screenplay drafts of *Albert Angelo*, a project that would almost span his filmmaking career.¹⁴⁶ Submitting the 'film treatment' of his novel to his agent, Robin Dalton, he appended a prefatory statement to clarify his intentions:

What I'm trying to get at is a nearer representation of the totality of experience:

That is: not only a representation of speech and action
= word and image

BUT added to these a representation of 'THOUGHT'
= inner reality, inner experience

Therefore WORD plus IMAGE plus 'THOUGHT'

The camera WILL be moving in every shot: because this is nearer to the facts of human perception [scrawled: not when you're not moving]

The WORD will be relied on to an extent not common in films: but will not dominate.¹⁴⁷

In the novel, Johnson identifies the 'great temptation for a writer to impose his own pattern' on the complexity of life and the complexity of self, conceding that such an 'arbitrary pattern' can only falsify

¹⁴³ Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, pp. 149, 151.

¹⁴⁴ Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, pp. 167-68.

¹⁴⁵ Press cuttings kept by B. S. Johnson included: Ian Wright, 'Short Films', *The Guardian*, 4 July 1967, p. 5; Anon., 'Talented Bunch of Five...', *The Evening Standard*, 6 July 1967, p. 8; Derek Prouse, 'Savage Eye in Africa', *The Sunday Times*, 2 July 1967, p. 25; Anon., 'The Metrical Movie', *The Times*, 4 July 1967, p. 10.

¹⁴⁶ See Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 307. Johnson submitted the screenplay to John Terry of the National Film Finance Corporation in 1971.

¹⁴⁷ B. S. Johnson, '*Albert Angelo: Screenplay from his own novel [Final draft]*', BL BSA ADD Ms.89001/3/1/15/3, p. 1. Sent to Robin Dalton Associates, London.

in its dismissal of the randomness and ‘the moment-to-moment fragmentariness of life’.¹⁴⁸ The chaotic matter of life ought to be echoed in the technique of the telling, in the attempt to get ‘nearer’ in its truth to reality: ‘a collage made of the fragments of my own life, the poor odds and sods, the bric-à-brac, a thing composed of’.¹⁴⁹ This famously reached its apogee in Johnson’s most formally experimental novel *The Unfortunates* (1969), a book composed of twenty-seven loose, unbound sections, housed within a box, which could be shuffled and reordered at will.¹⁵⁰ In film, as outlined in his directorial notes above, the only way anything close to a representation of experience was to be achieved would be through an enmeshed approach, admitting the roving and unpredictable movements of individual consciousness to the body of a film that acknowledged the machinations of its own closely worked formal integrity. In his efforts to represent ‘one of the major themes of the film: the relation of past and present, the power of the past to impinge upon the present’, select sequences would ‘be cut very fast, interchangeably between past and present’, ‘flash references’ to Jenny would be ‘interspersed throughout scenes’, and ‘stills’ would be used to illustrate the point that Angelo is ‘trying to fix things’, to halt time.¹⁵¹ Moreover, in an effort to further align ‘WORD plus IMAGE plus THOUGHT’, Johnson reimagined the section of his novel recounted in columns with the introduction of subtitles. These would overlay the images of the schoolroom, and perhaps even issue from Albert’s head, in order to illustrate Albert’s interior monologue.¹⁵² Unfortunately, these techniques were deemed by Stanley Reed to be ‘too much for a popular audience to take’, when coupled with ‘a story they will find frustrating and a defeat [sic] ending’, and the proposed film did not receive funding from the BFI.¹⁵³ As a riposte to their reasoning for rejecting his ‘art-house film’, Johnson claimed that the mainstream acceptance of ‘non-representational painting’ was proof that ‘this direction is the way things are going’ for all cultural forms.¹⁵⁴ Literature and film, Johnson suggested, would be forced to catch up.

¹⁴⁸ Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, p. 169.

¹⁴⁹ Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, p. 169.

¹⁵⁰ B. S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates* (London: Panther with Secker & Warburg, 1969).

¹⁵¹ Johnson, ‘*Albert Angelo: Screenplay*’, BL BSA ADD Ms.89001/3/1/15/3, p. 9.

¹⁵² Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, pp. 63-99. See Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, pp. 242-43.

¹⁵³ Stanley Reed, memorandum to Bruce Beresford, 20 December 1967, BL BS ADD Ms.89001/3/1/15/3, p. 1. Johnson had received £300 from the BFI’s development fund to work on the screenplay.

¹⁵⁴ B. S. Johnson, letter to Stanley Reed, 4 January 1968, quoted in Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, pp. 249-50.

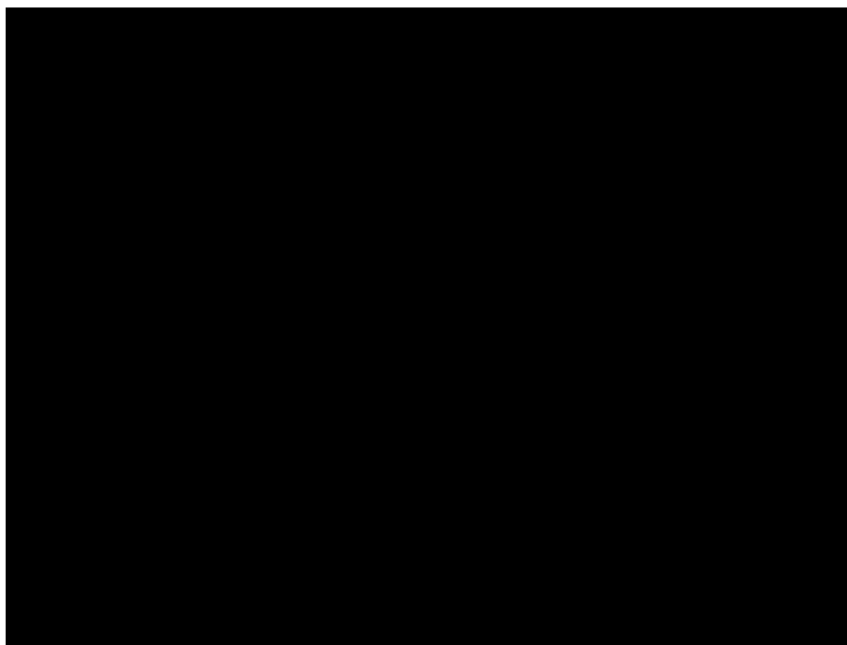


Fig. 64. *Paradigm*, dir. by B. S. Johnson, perf. William Hoyland (British Film Institute, 1969, dur. 00.08.26), 00:01:49 [on DVD].

This episode did not dissuade Johnson from his highbrow cinematic tastes, but left him with an aesthetic quandary: what would he be prepared to forfeit in order to communicate effectively with an audience? To continue to work with non-representational modes would be to continue to break the perceived contract between auteur and audience. Johnson, however, felt a greater responsibility to language: ‘My point in doing cinema at all is to restore language to a par with images’, Johnson wrote to Zulfikar Ghose in 1968.¹⁵⁵ The notion that language had to be recuperated from a world that no longer trusted in its relevance became a constant tone throughout this period, foregrounded most prominently by his film *Paradigm* (1969). How to devise a language that can only be understood through a process of reconciliation with images on the screen? *Paradigm* set itself this task. Shot over three days, between 18-20 January 1969, at Eyeline Studios in London, an early version of the film had been drafted in Paris, either in December 1967 or January 1968.¹⁵⁶ Johnson described the film as itself a ‘paradigm’ in his proposal to the BFI Production Board, intended to exemplify ‘one view of the writer’s condition’ – and ‘by extension the human condition’ – that ‘the older you get the less you have to say and the more difficulty you have in saying it’.¹⁵⁷ The writer in his youth is energetic, full of

¹⁵⁵ B. S. Johnson, letter to Zulfikar Ghose, 2 February 1968, in *The B. S. Johnson – Zulfikar Ghose Correspondence*, ed. by Vanessa Guignery (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), p. 298.

¹⁵⁶ Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 260.

¹⁵⁷ B. S. Johnson, ‘Notes on Paradigm’, ‘Working Papers for Paradigm (1967-1969)’, BL BSA Add MS 89001/3/1/16/2-3.

ideas and spurred by the urge to share them, whereas old age induces hesitation, uncertainty and eventually the inability to express oneself at all. *Paradigm*, David Quantick asserts, is a film ‘which tries to convey a point of view about the impossibility of conveying a point of view’, but the effort of conveyance is also made an effort of comprehensibility, as Johnson avoids the use of words – or at least intelligible words – in favour of a fabricated language.¹⁵⁸

Johnson and his frequent collaborator the actor William Hoyland worked jointly on the invention of their “‘language” to use as a basis for the speech’, which appears to draw on a number of recognizable aural properties and shifts in register.¹⁵⁹ Hoyland later recalled the many private rehearsals that took place ‘every working day for two or three hours’ in Johnson’s home on Myddelton Square over the course of a few weeks at the end of 1968, during which time Johnson wrote the script in English, or rather drew together ‘three pre-existing texts’, and then both translated it into their invented tongue for Hoyland to commit to memory.¹⁶⁰ The life of one man is divided into five distinct scenes, all of which are overlaid by an unrelenting electronic tone and take place in front of a blue backdrop of soft, shifting clouds. As the actor ages, aided by heavy make up and indicated by changes in posture and costume, he ascends the mound of coloured ‘rostra’ placed at the centre of the scene and the background tone rises in pitch. First, as a naked youth he relishes telling what appears to be a joke, at ease with all of his physical and mental powers of articulation; gesticulating, pausing, imitating voices, and enunciating every syllable (Fig. 64). By the third stage and middle age, he has ‘some difficulty in beginning to speak, several hesitancies, false starts’, but finally produces ‘one perfectly formed and modulated sentence’, for which he clearly feels some sense of quiet pride (Fig. 65).¹⁶¹ As he reaches the final stage, he is drained of any inclination to speak, and it is left to the rapid zoom shots of the camera to effect the assault by life upon one’s desire or ability to communicate.

¹⁵⁸ David Quantick, ‘Paradigm’, in *You’re Human Like the Rest of Them: The Films of B. S. Johnson* (London: British Film Institute, 2013), pp. 10–12 (p. 11).

¹⁵⁹ B. S. Johnson, letter to Bronka Ricquier, 8 Jan 1968, ‘Working Papers for Paradigm (1967–1969)’, BL BSA Add MS 89001/3/1/16/3.

¹⁶⁰ The concluding passage of ‘Stage One’ is a reformulation of a joke from Johnson’s *Albert Angelo*; see Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 262.

¹⁶¹ Johnson, ‘Notes on Paradigm’, BL BSA Add MS 89001/3/1/16/2–3, p. 1.

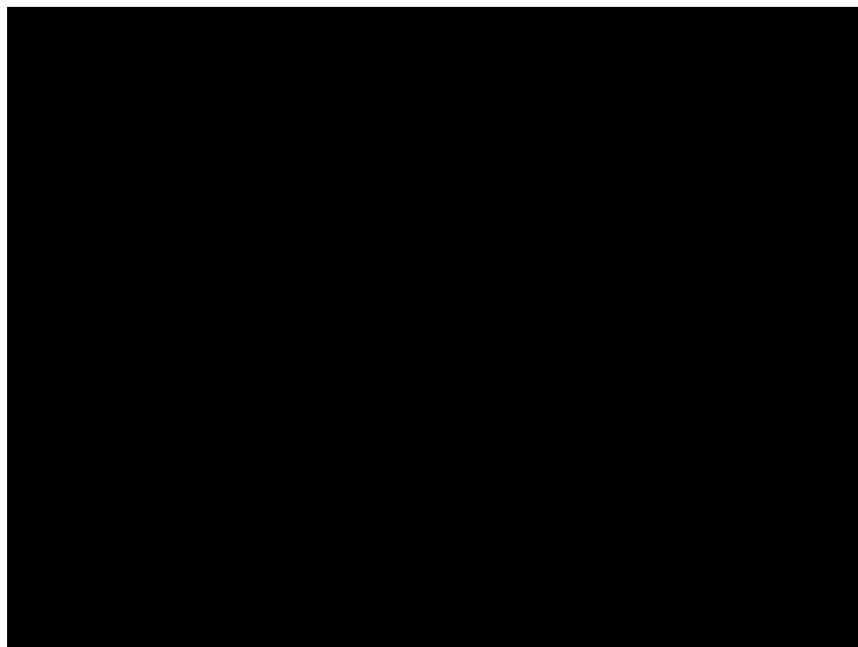


Fig. 65. *Paradigm*, dir. by B. S. Johnson, perf. William Hoyland (British Film Institute, 1969, dur. 00.08.26), 00:06:21 [on DVD].

Although it does sound as if Hoyland is speaking gibberish at the beginning of the film, the elaborately crafted vernacular adhered to many of the structural conventions of language. As the script itself reveals, there are exclamations, quotations, imperatives, questions, stresses, and, as with any language, it upholds the constraints and intervals imposed by punctuation: ‘Shub shub shub shub unt se raw clom, ah, unt se raw clom, bub struth te rak con, ansti bub nanchen fo bints len tar schlusen, che quen day quen – don quen, te rak con, day humry ist tin fo ta bints – bunt sto roosty diurns day gerzunders, day sto rin day coley, tanolight day squinder...’¹⁶² This first scene is prefaced by a scrolling title sequence that announces in fifteen languages that this is an ‘International Version’ of the film, seemingly forewarning the viewer of the osmotic nature of the utterances to be encountered on screen. Johnson gave directions for the intended delivery of Hoyland’s opening speech in his production notes:

Cut straight after title into the middle of a very fast, almost fevered speech: lucid, eloquent, emotional, but under control: it is, however, in no known language: not gibberish in the sense that it does not appear to be nonsense, but rather a foreign language: the same non-language to be used throughout the film.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Johnson, ‘Stage One’, in ‘Working Papers for *Paradigm* (1967-1969)’, BL BSA Add MS 89001/3/1/16/3.

¹⁶³ B. S. Johnson, ‘*Paradigm* – working notes’, in ‘Working Papers for *Paradigm* (1967-1969)’, BL BSA Add MS 89001/3/1/16/2.

Although this ‘non-language’ was intended as a universalizing device, a language approximate to all language, it failed to resonate with audiences. The film had a disastrous premiere at the Oberhausen Film Festival in 1969, at which it was booed by a young politicized audience for its esoteric claims, received near unanimous reprove from the journalists present and was even considered by the head of the judging panel, Walerian Borowczyk, as the worst short film he’d ever seen.¹⁶⁴ Johnson’s own financial backer, Bronka Ricquier the head of Elisabeth Films, quickly dissolved her working relationship with Johnson and refused to act on behalf of his film in any further capacity.¹⁶⁵ Johnson was left utterly disillusioned with his treatment by the film industry, expressing frustration in his letter of reply to Ricquier: ‘the ludicrously wide differences and lack of standards I find more prevalent and damaging in the film world than in any other art’.¹⁶⁶ He was not part of the underground filmmaking community in London, from whom he would presumably have found creative support at this time. It appears he never attended the meetings or screenings in London hosted by Better Books or The Arts Lab, or conversed with those who formed Cinema 65 and later the London Film-maker’s Co-op (LFMC).¹⁶⁷ If he had, he may have taken some encouragement from the community of academics, writers and filmmakers that regularly gathered for discussion, and the viewings of experimental films by practitioners such as Jeff Keen, Chris Marker and Stephen Dwoskin.¹⁶⁸ This was a community that operated on entirely separate terms from the mainstream film industry, privileging new modes of working that were later described as ‘structural film’, ‘abstract film’, and ‘free cinema’.¹⁶⁹ Co-founding his own company Filmfront, with Bruce Beresford, Don Levy, David Muir, Richard Saunders and Barry Tomblin, Johnson felt he was launching a ‘fight for the very existence of a creative cinema in this country’.¹⁷⁰ British film was still viewed as ‘literature with pictures added’, he protested, and ‘must find film expression for film ideas’.¹⁷¹ The fight, however, was fast becoming a losing one, with

¹⁶⁴ Quantick, ‘Paradigm’, p. 11.

¹⁶⁵ See Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, pp. 264-5.

¹⁶⁶ B. S. Johnson, letter to Bronka Ricquier, 6 May 1969, BL BSA Add MS 89001/3/1/16/2.

¹⁶⁷ Patti Gaal-Holmes, ‘Visionary, Mythopoeia and Diary Films’, *A History of 1970s Experimental Film: Britain's Decade of Diversity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 98-128 (pp. 120-121).

¹⁶⁸ For discussions of the LFMC and Arts Lab see David Curtis, *Experimental Cinema: A Fifty Year Evolution* (London: Studio Vista, 1971); Margaret Dickinson, *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film Making in Britain 1945-90* (London: British Film Institute, 1999); Joy I. Payne, *Reel Rebels: The London Film-Maker's Co-operative 1966 to 1996* (London: Authorhouse, 2015); A. L. Rees, *History of Experimental Film and Video* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).

¹⁶⁹ See Stephen Dwoskin, *Film is...* (London: Peter Owen, 1975); Peter Gidal, *Structural Film Anthology* (London: British Film Institute, 1976); Malcolm Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond* (London: Studio Vista, 1977).

¹⁷⁰ B. S. Johnson et al, ‘Film Front’, BL BS ADD MS 89001/8/11, pp. 1-2, (p. 1).

¹⁷¹ Johnson et al, ‘Film Front’, p. 1.

Filmfront failing to gather sufficient traction or backing, and in 1971 Johnson could only see an industry choked by frivolity, commercially driven production companies and ‘moneymen’.¹⁷² His bleak short film *Poem* (1971) corresponds with this feeling: a series of associated shots of urban decay are met with a reading by Hoyland of the fourth part of Samuel Beckett’s *Quatre Poèmes* (Fig. 66). Both *Paradigm* and *Poem* are the most explicit statements made by Johnson for the elevation of cinema to that of high art, an assertion he so desperately wanted to be able to prove, and yet he felt he remained unable to say of a British film, ‘This is our cinematic equivalent of a Moore, a Bacon, a Beckett’.¹⁷³

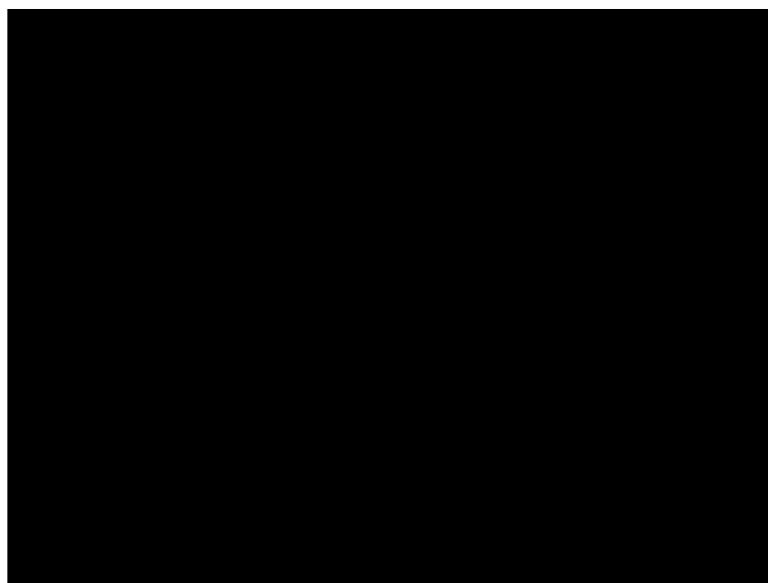


Fig. 66. *Poem*, dir. by B. S. Johnson, perf. William Hoyland (British Film Institute, 1971, dur. 00.01.05) 00.00.12 [on DVD]

Paradigm mourns the lost efficacy of language. In the final years of his life Johnson’s work persisted with this theme. It appears he felt this could be best achieved through the novel, making his exit from filmmaking in 1971 and to once again discredit the artifice of fiction. He drafted narratives that explored the fringes of comprehensibility: *House Mother Normal* (1971) replicates the failing grasp on language of eight elderly occupants in an old people’s home and their carer; *Christie Mahy’s Own Double Entry* (1973) adopts phrases and customs from the novels of the past; the fragmented account of the life of Johnson’s mother in *See the Old Lady Decently* (1975) included blanks to be filled in by the reader. Where Johnson eulogizes the failed construct that is the novel – seeming in his final,

¹⁷² B. S. Johnson, ‘Soho Square’, *Film and Television Technician* (August 1971), repr. as ‘Soho Square [On British Cinema]’ in *Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson*, ed. by Jonathan Coe, Julia Jordan and Philip Tew (London: Picador, 2013), pp. 442–444, (p. 443).

¹⁷³ Johnson, ‘Soho Square’, p. 444.

posthumously published book *See the Old Lady Decently* to have reached the end point of his patience – Brooke-Rose preferred to vitalize the notion of the ‘text’. The novels following *Out, Such* (1966) and *Between* (1968), had employed similar strategies of varifocalism, using the discourses of astrophysics and optical instruments in *Such* as a metaphor for emotional and psychological detachment, and jostling together ten different languages alongside the ‘lunatic, empty speech-making’ jargon of different social, political, and academic congresses in *Between*.¹⁷⁴ Her next novel, *Thru* (1975), however, took the difficulty of literary perception to its furthest reaches, bearing the marks of the new critical theory of her adopted home, Paris, in which the geometric contiguities of the new novel were superceded by a generative ‘text’ that is cognizant of its own, often arithmetical, limitations. Johnson turned the mirror on himself, so that the reader might be made aware of the assumed imperfections of the form in which he chose to work and his efforts to account for them; Brooke-Rose angled the mirror away towards her writing, exposing a multiplicity of possible readings to view, laying the canonical structures of language bare, bringing derivations and digressions to light. The diagrammatic episodes interspersed throughout more conventionally crafted passages of dialogue or narrative, in which punctuation, letters, words, phrases, stanzas and signs are positioned across negative space to devise a textual range that is in virtuosic operation outside of the horizontal axis of the page, reveal that, in the ‘text’, there is more than one way of looking. The rebuke levelled by reviewer Francis Hope of her ‘resplendently unreadable’ literary style, could in fact be considered precisely the kind of challenge Brooke-Rose hoped to level against the British literary establishment.¹⁷⁵

6. Brooke-Rose, *Thru* and ‘the glass wall of language’¹⁷⁶

‘Doubt in the validity of appearance has of course become endemic, indeed, epidemic in our time,’ Brooke-Rose wrote in 1965 and repeated in 1981.¹⁷⁷ For Brooke-Rose this degree of separation began with the technicolour chirpiness of wartime cinematic newsreels, which only served to expose

¹⁷⁴ Brooke-Rose also radically omits the verb ‘to be’ in *Between* (London: Michael Joseph, 1968). This lipogram preceded the better-known lipogram of George Perec’s *La Disparition* (1969), in his omission of the letter ‘e’.

¹⁷⁵ Francis Hope, ‘I, Julian’, *New Statesman*, 13 November 1964, pp. 741–42 (p. 742).

¹⁷⁶ ‘She will never let us forget the glass wall of language we pretend isn’t there’, Frank Kermode, Letter to Michael Schmidt, 11 February 1996, HRC CBR Accession 2, box 4, fol. 11, p. 1.

¹⁷⁷ Brooke-Rose, ‘The Baroque Imagination of Robbe-Grillet’, p. 407; Brooke-Rose, ‘The real as unreal: Robbe-Grillet’, p. 293.

the gulf between propagandist illusion and cold reality: ‘The gap is especially flagrant with the unreal newsreels, ludicrously cheerful and irrelevant when everything is going so badly’.¹⁷⁸ Brooke-Rose’s sense for the visual properties of language arguably began to take shape as an intelligence typist during World War II. Following two years of office work in wartime Liverpool, Brooke-Rose joined the British Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) in 1941 at the age of only eighteen. Training near Gloucester, teaching German to ‘bomb disposal boys’ across Northern England and Scotland, and attending Cadet School in Loughborough, she was eventually recruited, due to her mastery of German, to the British Government’s Code and Cipher School (GC&CS) at Bletchley Park.¹⁷⁹ The redbrick estate in Buckinghamshire was the site of the United Kingdom’s main decryption facility, where the ciphers and codes of several Axis countries were cracked, most importantly those generated by the German Enigma and Lorenz machines. Providing crucial assistance to the Allied success, the work done by scientists, theorists, philologists, and mathematicians at Bletchley stemmed from Alan Turing’s code-breaking computer, COLOSSUS. She regards these years as formative, often describing Bletchley Park as her ‘first training of the mind,’ her ‘first university’.¹⁸⁰ What appears to be most indelibly printed on her remembrances of this time, as indirectly recounted in her ‘autobiographical novel with a difference’ *Remake* (1996), are the ‘star-designs done in coloured strings and pins’ that multiplied across the walls of the Fusion Room, Hut 3.¹⁸¹ In its earliest drafts *Remake* is a conventional first person autobiography, but it shifted during its second revision to channel Brooke-Rose’s own life experience through a third-person fiction, in order to expose the ‘variable geometry’ of memory.¹⁸² She adds a strikethrough to every ‘I’ or ‘me’ in her second manuscript, slowly excising – much like the pen strokes of the cryptographers’ emended teleprints in Hut 6 – her existence within her own private history.¹⁸³ Tess (Brooke-Rose’s doppelgänger) begins to see language as formed of strings of interrelated code, analogues of meaning, ‘items,’ which cross and mesh to build a ‘vast powerhouse of knowledge’.¹⁸⁴ Dealing each day with the vast number of index-cards that rattled out frequencies and call-signs, each detailing information about pilots, units, names,

¹⁷⁸ Brooke-Rose, *Remake* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1996), p. 108.

¹⁷⁹ Brooke-Rose, *Remake*, pp. 81-102.

¹⁸⁰ Brooke-Rose, *Remake*, p. 107; also see Brooke-Rose in David Seed, ‘Christine Brooke-Rose’, *Textual Practice*, ed. Terence Hawkes, 7.2 (1993), 66-74.

¹⁸¹ Brooke-Rose, *Remake*, pp. 81-102. p. 105.

¹⁸² Brooke-Rose, *Remake*, p. 165.

¹⁸³ Brooke-Rose, ‘*Remake*: Early Drafts’, HRC CBR Accession 2, Box 1, Folder 5.

¹⁸⁴ Brooke-Rose, *Remake*, p. 107.

movements, daily aircraft departures, fuel supplies, operational orders, she forms an appreciation for the maze-like quality of language.¹⁸⁵ However, she ‘can’t bear not to grasp the whole’, and so builds her ‘own stars with pins and coloured strings all over the map on the wall’.¹⁸⁶ The same method becomes true of Tess’s poetic efforts at this time, described as a ‘particular knowledge’ that ‘comes out of the air, intercepted, decrypted, translated, transmitted, [...] listening to a silent voice, capturing, translating hazy notions and sharp impulses into words and rhythms’.¹⁸⁷ Although she was not translating these signals into physical signs, she was repositioning the fragments to elaborate their potential meaning, the reverberations of which were often felt at the line of combat. For Tess, language is material, to be grasped, held, turned in the hand, altered and repositioned on a surface.

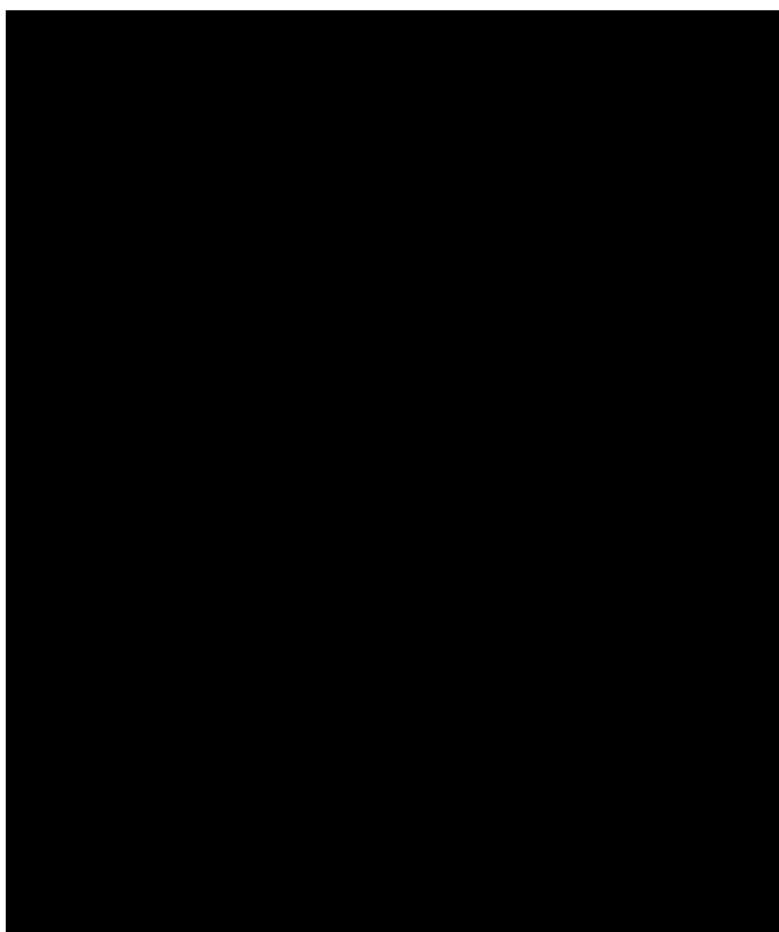


Fig. 67. Christine Brooke-Rose, *Thru* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975), p. 6.

Brooke-Rose often spoke of her relationship to the physical properties of language, reaching its most frequent articulation while writing and promoting *Thru*. As Brooke-Rose explained in a late

¹⁸⁵ Brooke-Rose, ‘Original holograph ms. of *Remake* in 2 volumes’, vol. 2, HRC CBR Accession 2, box 1, fol. 2.

¹⁸⁶ Brooke-Rose, *Remake*, p. 115.

¹⁸⁷ Brooke-Rose, *Remake*, p. 107.

essay, denying the influence of Joyce on her protean attitude to language, ‘If I was thinking of anyone in this opening it was [...] Yeats’ “I made it out of a mouthful of air,” which to me had always suggested intercepting words, dragging them down through the brain and onto paper to form a text’.¹⁸⁸ The typographical experiments in *Thru* were praised in graphic design circles, even featuring on the cover of *Eye Magazine*.¹⁸⁹ She had been made aware of a number of writers who also engaged with the more overtly typographic aspects of writing, primarily through her career as a reviewer for British publications: Raymond Roussel, Maurice Roche and Phillipe Sollers had all featured on her critical radar. In Roussel she discovered stories so ‘intricate’ in their conception and expression – often pushed to an absurd degree, such as the use of ‘single, double, treble, quadruple and quintuple brackets within single, double, etc. brackets’ in the long poem *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique* – that they ‘interlocked like Chinese boxes’.¹⁹⁰ In Roche’s novels *Compact* (1966) and *Circle* (1972) she discovered texts that sought the poetic origins of the novel, in the admittance of multiple modes of communication; ‘bars of music, phrases and sections in other languages, mirror text, rebuses, anagrams, runes, hieroglyphs, signs from the *Guide Michelin*, from an electroencephalogram, from Arabic’; but also texts which channeled ‘a contemporary original source, a *poésie concrète*’ in their rigorous spatial arrangement.¹⁹¹ From Sollers she also took into consideration the way language could be ‘treated as a material thing’, self-enumerating, self-regarding and performing its own ‘erotic postures, mathematical perfections, revolutionary quotations, mathematical symbols and poetic stances’.¹⁹² More than all of these separate contemporaneous leads, however, lay a lasting admiration for the iconic poetic work of Stéphane Mallarmé, and in particular for his 1897 poem *Un coup de dés*. Her first critical publication, written while an undergraduate at Oxford, was an essay for a French literary review that explored the use of symbolism and syntax in Gerard Manley Hopkins and Mallarmé.¹⁹³ Mallarmé’s poetry is interpreted as ‘crystalline’, in which every word and every linguistic structure its infinitely perfectible, containing its idea as well as its many associations. It exhibits

¹⁸⁸ Christine Brooke-Rose, ‘Is Self-Reflexivity Mere?’, *Quarterly West* (Winter 1996-7), 230-65 (p.232), repr. in *Invisible Author* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2002), pp. 63-108.

¹⁸⁹ Brooke-Rose, *Thru* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975), p. 6, which featured on the cover of *Eye Magazine*, 30 (Winter 1998).

¹⁹⁰ Christine Brooke-Rose, ‘Roussel’s Surrealism’ [A review of Rayner Heppenstall’s critical study *French Surrealism: Raymond Roussel and the reprinting of Roussel’s Impressions of Africa: a novel*] *Encounter*, 10.10 [Rejected] (1966), HRC CBR Galley Folder, Galley Proof.

¹⁹¹ Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, p. 335.

¹⁹² Christine Brooke-Rose, ‘French Fiction: the long revolution’, *The Times*, 3 August 1968, p. 18.

¹⁹³ Christine Brooke-Rose, ‘La syntaxe et le symbolisme dans la poésie de Hopkins’, *Europe*, 25.17 (1947), 30-39.

l'extase de la méthode' (ecstasy in the method) in both symbolic and spatial terms: 'tout est cristal, azur, glaciers, givre, neige, cygnes, blancheur, absence (de fleurs, d'ombre, de feu, de lit, de solitude) [...] negation, stérilité'.¹⁹⁴ As each word is appreciated as both fact and idea, each word becomes its own passage from 'concret à l'abstrait', the concrete to the abstract', which builds 'une logique syntaxique toute personnelle', a highly personal syntactical logic.¹⁹⁵

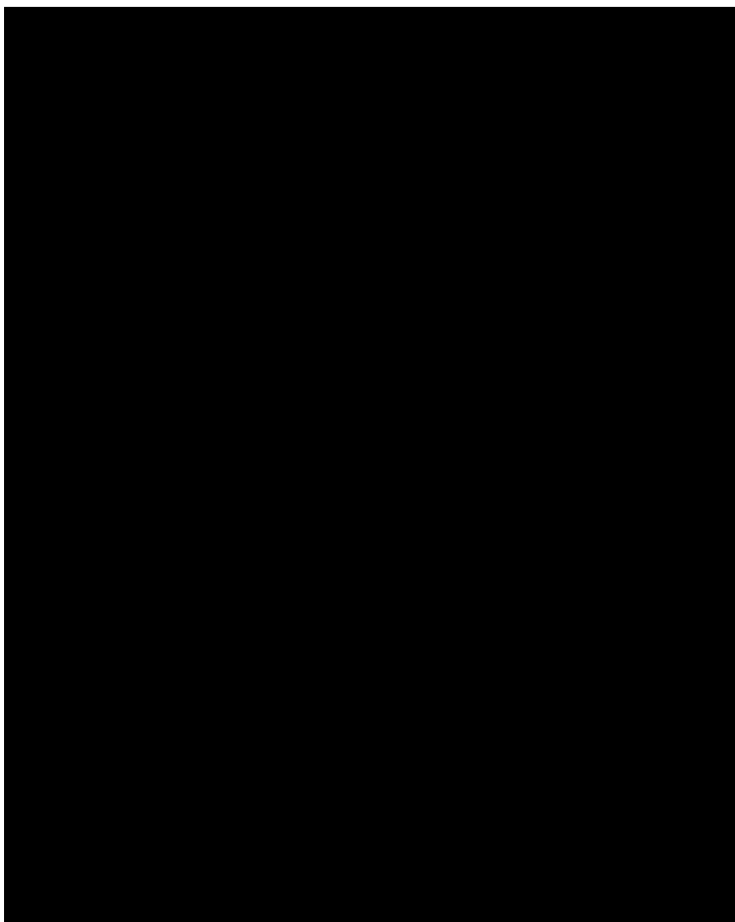


Fig. 68. Christine Brooke-Rose, '*Textermination* [*Thru*]', HRC CBR box 8, fol. 7 – box 9, fol. 5, notebook 1, p. 1.

During the period in which she was drafting *Thru*, Mallarmé's influence was undeniably present: 'I was mad about Mallarmé at the time', Brooke-Rose confessed to Lorna Sage in 2002.¹⁹⁶ The early manuscript drafts of the novel, drafted from 1969-1972 under the provisional title *Textermination*, are handwritten in French-ruled Messenger notebooks, enabling placement of geometric precision across the space of a page divided into narrow rows and columns (Fig. 68).¹⁹⁷ When it came to the typescript, Brooke-Rose scribbled directives, arrows and dotted lines to replicate, and to stress

¹⁹⁴ Brooke-Rose, 'La syntaxe et le symbolisme dans la poésie de Hopkins', 35-36.

¹⁹⁵ Brooke-Rose, 'La syntaxe et le symbolisme dans la poésie de Hopkins', 33.

¹⁹⁶ Brooke-Rose, *Invisible Author*, p. 173.

¹⁹⁷ Christine Brooke-Rose, '*Textermination* [*Thru*]', HRC CBR box 8, fol. 7 – box 9, fol. 5, 4 notebooks.

to her editor, the accuracy of arrangement in space substantiated by the graph-like paper of her manuscripts.¹⁹⁸ Brian McHale classified *Thru* under the subtitle ‘concrete prose’, along with other works of ‘shaped typography’, such as Michel Butor’s *Mobile* (1962), Raymond Federman’s *Double or Nothing* (1971), and Ronald Sukenick’s *Long Talking Bad Conditions Blues* (1979).¹⁹⁹ Brooke-Rose set out substantial objections to McHale, however, detailing her hostility towards his willingness to ‘interpret the typographic tricks as “mere” iconicity’.²⁰⁰ *Thru*, she suggested, goes far beyond the dialectic so commonly assumed of visual prose; on the one side the mimetic intimation of an object or process known in the world and on the other the resultant emphasis upon the physical properties of letterforms on the page: ‘By reducing me to “mere” iconicity, Brian is simply saying that I’m doing what has always existed, from mediaeval iconography via George Herbert, Lewis Carroll, Apollinaire, the Surrealists generally, Dylan Thomas and so on into Postmodernism. It is of very little interest except as an obvious joke’.²⁰¹ Mallarmé, here absent, exemplified a contrary approach: the arena of the printed page has its own self-regarding systems of generation – parataxis, syntax, semantics – as opposed to the looser, infinite spatial arrangements available to graphic marks on a blank page. She believed this curtailment of her complex theoretical programme at work in *Thru* was a symptom of most of her recent critical appraisals: ‘Both Roger Fowler and Terence Hawkes did this to me in their little Methuen books’, Brooke-Rose remonstrated, referencing their insistence upon ‘the physical substance of the text’.²⁰² It was of great consequence that she did not continue to be characterised as a ‘confessed graphomaniac’, as an attitude she believed would only overshadow the inclusion of theoretical discourses as the engineer of her aesthetic approach.²⁰³ Although McHale provided a subtler reading, in his suggestion that her diagram ‘functions as the *allegory of a concept*, as well as icon of an object or process’, by which he means it is cognizant of its existence as an idea and as an image, Brooke-Rose contends that the ‘whole point of the iconicity in THRU is that it is deconstructed’, as it

¹⁹⁸ Christine Brooke-Rose, ‘*Thru*: typescript with holograph corrections and notes to printer [1975]’, HRC CBR box 9, fols 5-7.

¹⁹⁹ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 184-86.

²⁰⁰ Christine Brooke-Rose, letter to Julian Merrillyn, dated 14 November 1986, HRC CBR box 18, fol. 7, pp. 1-2 (p. 1)

²⁰¹ Brooke-Rose, letter to Julian Merrillyn, dated 14 November 1986, p. 1

²⁰² Brooke-Rose, letter to Julian Merrillyn, dated 14 November 1986, p. 1. Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 149; Roger Fowler, *Linguistics and the Novel* (London: Methuen 1977), p. 67.

²⁰³ Brooke-Rose, letter to Richard Martin, 8 October 1985, HRC CBR box 19, fol. 1, p. 1. Ihab Hassan appropriated this epithet from *Amalgamemnon* (1984) for his article ‘Revellusionary Punorama’, *The New York Times Book Review*, 91 (8 September 1985), 20.

is both ‘about and against traditional notions of representation’.²⁰⁴ These moments are concentrated most heavily at the beginning and end of the novel, when Brooke-Rose sets up the novel’s principle logic of the rear-view mirror, ‘le rétro viseur’ (Fig. 69).²⁰⁵ In her letter to McHale, Brooke-Rose went on to clarify the ways in which figures such as ‘the letters printed as a rectangle’ to “represent” first the driving mirror of the opening’ return in many different forms, with no one version having precedence over the other: rectangles in a timetable, the tables of a classroom, ‘the insides of student minds’, which then later multiply beyond the scope of the classroom to become ‘a “time tablet”’ to invoke the Ten Commandments, as well as ‘Lacan’s “Dieu le Pere” or “Phallus” or transcendent signifier’.²⁰⁶ Moreover, the fragmentation of the rectangles invokes the cracks that split the tablets inscribed with the Commandments, and, as Brooke-Rose makes plain, these cracks ‘can also represent the destruction of iconicity’.²⁰⁷ The novel is not noteworthy for isolated moments of ‘iconic communion’ but for its animation, as a series of output signals that return again and again, always with slight adjustments to either the visual emphases, letter formations, or intertextual allusions.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁴ Christine Brooke-Rose, letter to Julian Merrillyn, n.d. c.1986, HRC CBR box 18, fol. 7, p. 1.

²⁰⁵ Brooke-Rose, *Thru*, p. 1.

²⁰⁶ Christine Brooke-Rose, letter to Julian Merrillyn, 14 November 1986, HRC CBR box 18, fol. 7, p. 1.

²⁰⁷ Christine Brooke-Rose, letter to Julian Merrillyn, [n.d. c.1986], HRC CBR box 18 fol. 7, p. 1.

²⁰⁸ Brian McHale later conceded their ‘double, triple, multiple duty’: quoted in Julian Merrillyn, letter to Brooke-Rose, 27 November 1986, HRC CBR box 18, fol. 7, p. 1.

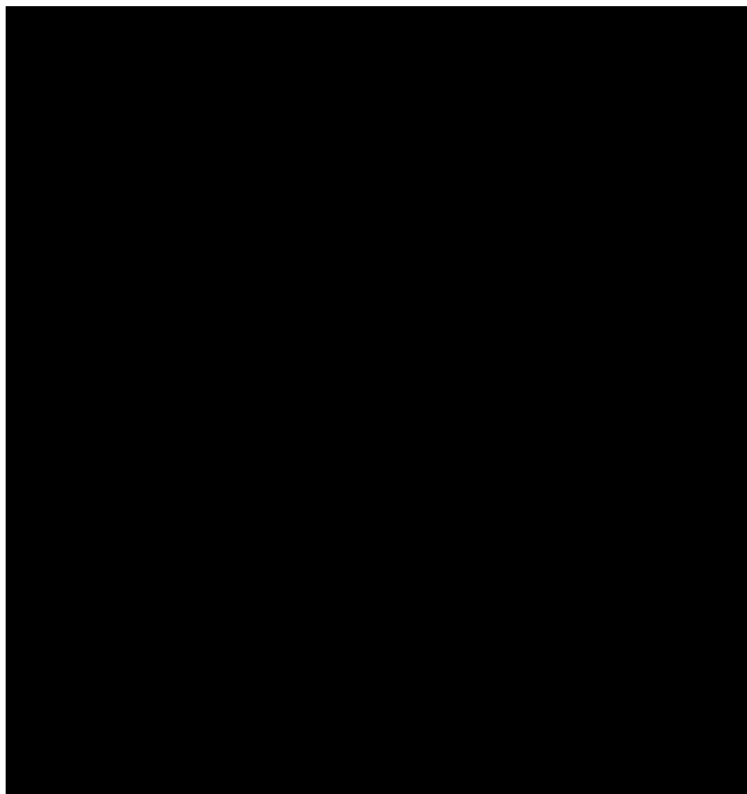


Fig. 69. Christine Brooke-Rose, *Thru* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975), p. 1.

Announcing 'language is my material now' in 1976, she compared her authorial process to that of 'a painter who enjoys putting different colours on his canvas'.²⁰⁹ On occasion a painter herself, there is sensitivity to this rather modest description of painterly effort.²¹⁰ Brooke-Rose's phrase 'putting different colours' points to a less orthodox painterly method than that of verisimilitude, presenting a painter informed by the perceptive eye as opposed to one schooled in set principles of composition. The correlation she draws does not compare language to the actual materials of art, such as paint, clay, steel or other mediums, but to 'colour', a visual experience. Brooke-Rose's attitude to literary invention does not function with the same gestural emphasis as brushstrokes across a canvas, which one would take to mean a loosening of the graphic conventions of print or the eschewal of spatio-temporal linearity, but exists, like colour, across a relative perceptual spectrum.

The difficulty presented by words is that they have individual 'referents', tied to discrete meanings and

²⁰⁹ Christine Brooke-Rose, 'An Interview with Christine Brooke-Rose', *Contemporary Literature*, 17.1 (1976), 1-23 (p. 10). Comparisons are also made in Brooke-Rose, 'Putting on the Style', *The Observer*, 7 January 1962, p. 22; Brooke-Rose, 'Women in their own Write: A Novel Theory: John Hall interviews Christine Brooke-Rose', *Women's Guardian*, (c.1971), n.p.

²¹⁰ There is little evidence of Brooke-Rose's own work as a painter, other than references made in letters and sketches at the margins of manuscripts. Brooke-Rose describes falling ill after painting in 'freezing fog' in Letter to Eva Hesse, 2 January 1976, HRC CBR box 19, fol. 3, pp. 1-2 (p. 2).

contexts, and therefore cannot attain the same degree of expressive freedom as ‘colour and shape and sound’.²¹¹ Then, the attempt to bring language closer to colour is an attempt to give language a greater opacity, a means by which it may acknowledge its inadequacies as well as its existence within wider frameworks of knowledge. For Brooke-Rose this opacity was introduced upon recognition of new theoretical discussions: she had begun work on her ‘very special sort of unreadable book’ in Paris in 1969 and finished it in 1972, during a period of particular internal upheaval at the Université de Vincennes Paris VIII.²¹² Deeply influenced by the courses she was teaching at the time in narratology, linguistics, post-structuralism and modern American literature, new theoretical concepts from Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Algirdas Julien Greimas and Julia Kristeva all found their way into the novel.²¹³ The narrative takes place in a creative writing department at an unsituated radical university, the many students of which bear witness to the love story that exists between their teacher Armel Santores and his ex-lover, Larissa Toren.²¹⁴ Each character is able to seize and direct the narrative down multiple courses, writing their own text in the classroom as well as outside of it, before the text itself usurps its mouthpieces to dictate the course of the narrative and the terms of expression, even annotating its own copy with comments as a teacher may do to the scripts of students. The complex levels of visual and intellectual engagement demanded from the reader led some critics to suggest it was ‘time to devise a new category’ by which such graphically and structurally innovative texts may be considered.²¹⁵ *Thru* ‘looks a bit like a novel’, the literary critic Michael Mason pointed out, but it was not ‘appropriate to speak of this work as a “narrative”’ as this ‘very highly patterned text’ brings the reading relationship into tension with narratival and novelistic conventions.²¹⁶ The ‘result’, he suggested, was that *Thru* ‘falls between being interesting as a visual arrangement and interesting as a new use of verbal text just as fatally as it does in *Tristram Shandy*’.²¹⁷ Corroborated by Julian Barnes, this fatalism had come to form the essence of the novel, and therefore the ‘implications of *Thru* [...]’

²¹¹ Brooke-Rose discusses this dilemma in relation to the painter Philip Hughes in *Invisible Author*, p. 186.

²¹² Brooke-Rose, ‘A Conversation’, in *Utterly Other Discourse*, p. 36.

²¹³ Seminar plans and course outlines can be found in Université de Paris VIII, Fonds Vincennes, Programmes d’enseignement des départements: Département d’anglo-américain, FVNP0158-176; FVNP0205-7; FVNS0034. She taught narratology, literary theory and anglophone literature from 1969-1988.

²¹⁴ Brooke-Rose later clarified the university was ‘probably [in] America and not Paris as some have biographically supposed’ in ‘Is Self-Reflexivity Mere?’, p. 230.

²¹⁵ Michael Mason, ‘Textual tensions’, *TLS*, 3826 (11 July 1975), 753

²¹⁶ Mason, ‘Textual tensions’, 753.

²¹⁷ Mason, ‘Textual tensions’, 753.

are clear': marking an end-point in the long history of the novel, it announced that 'the novel is dead, long live the text'.²¹⁸

It was at this time that the 'text' of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida entered common critical parlance in Britain. By the time *Thru* was published in 1975, Barthes and Derrida had only published a handful of articles in English or in British publications, but there had been significant introductions made to the British academy, in literary and philosophical reviews of their work by writers such as Terence Hawkes, Stephen Heath, David Lodge, Frank Kermode, and John Sturrock, and through public events such as 'French Month' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in March 1973. Malcolm Bradbury, in his study of the modern British novel, made efforts to define the 'Parisian point', as placing an emphasis upon both the materiality and subjectivity of language, that 'the book is indeed a text, a book of signs, a language open to the complexities of interpretation'.²¹⁹ The 'text' signaled, as it had done for Barthes, an expanded notion of a literary work, which was at once formed by the occasion of its existence as it was by the many multiple determinants of this existence. Attention was no longer focused upon the literary work as icon or the author as authoritative, but upon the interaction between text and reader; texts did not have meaning in isolation but had meaning conferred upon them through the shared process of interpretation. Roland Barthes' *S/Z* (1970) illustrated this point with the notion of the '*lisible*', a more 'classical' approach in which one reads passively, and the '*scriptible*', a text that makes the reader a co-creator – a creative freedom which was later developed in *Le plaisir du texte* (1973).²²⁰ It is an attitude that anticipates an active role in the formulation of the text from both author and reader; thus to interpret a text was 'not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it'.²²¹ The '*passage de l'oeuvre au texte*' referred to a critical activity that devoted itself to the disruption, as opposed to fulfillment, of hermeneutic codes, and in so doing presented a transformation of the object. Derrida was similarly committed to the rigorous analysis of literal meaning, while also committed to finding within and without that meaning the internal issues that

²¹⁸ Julian Barnes, 'Getting it just right', *Oxford Mail*, 10 July 1975, p. 7.

²¹⁹ Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993), p. 364.

²²⁰ The terms were sensitively translated in 1974 by Richard Miller as writerly/readerly; Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).

²²¹ Jonathan Culler, 'Viewpoint', *TLS*, 3705 (9 March 1973), 266. Culler's breakthrough study *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975) was published the same year as *Thru*.

may point to alternative or neglected interpretations. This opening out of possible responses by a reader was also to acknowledge the multivocal nature of the texts themselves. Derrida sought to expose the ‘phonocentrism’ of Western culture – the assumption that the written word is simply a record or ‘sign’ of the spoken word and therefore stands for a communicative objective.²²² Jonathan Culler, who was fast becoming the foremost intermediary between new French critical thought and the British readership, suggested that the body of Barthes’ and Derrida’s scholarship presented a new challenge to the British literary establishment and to literary theory in general: ‘The essence of literature is not representation, not a communicative transparency, but an opacity, a resistance to recuperation which exercises sensibility and intelligence’.²²³

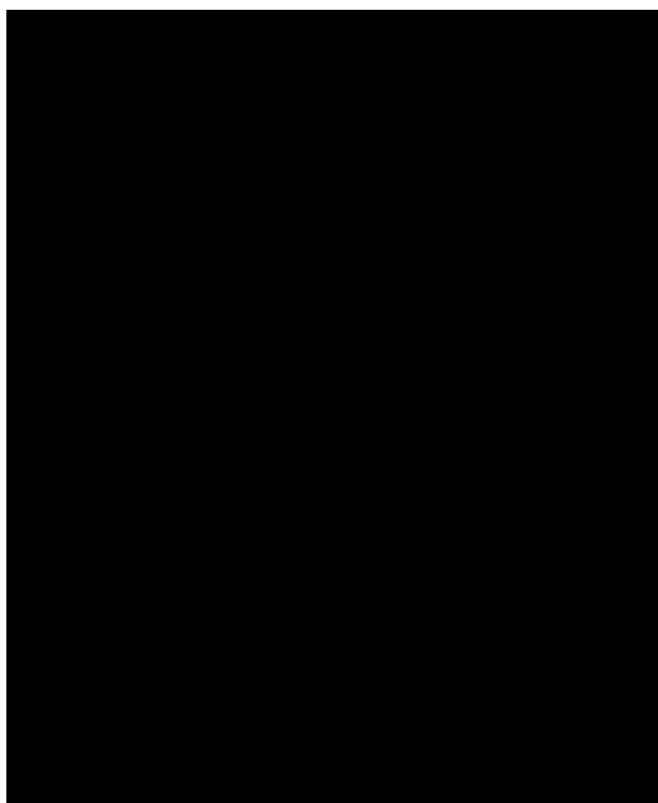


Fig. 70. Christine Brooke-Rose, *Thru* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975), p. 12.

²²² See Sean Gaston’s introduction to *Reading Derrida’s Of Grammatology* for a history of Derrida’s reception by his Anglophone audience, eds. Sean Gaston and Ian Maclachlan (London: Continuum, 2012), pp. xiii-xxvii. *De la grammatologie* (1967) was the first full-length work by Derrida to be translated, as *Of Grammatology* by Gayatri Spivak in 1976.

²²³ Jonathan Culler, ‘Towards a Theory of Non-Genre Literature’, *Surfiction: Fiction Now...And Tomorrow*, ed. Raymond Federman (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1975), pp. 255-262 (p. 258).

This valorization of opacity, of an ‘opaque’ and therefore obstructively difficult literature, was what *Thru* so radically upheld. As Brooke-Rose notes on many separate occasions, the ‘typographic roadblocks’ throughout her novel are not there to play to the “‘look-at-me” act’ or mimetic ‘showmanship’ of modernist experiment, but were there ‘to defamiliarise, to wake up the reader, to force him to read in unusual directions, to stop and think, to script the *texte scriptable* with me, to share and partake’.²²⁴ They were used as pedagogical points of resistance, and the reader must, like Brooke-Rose herself, become an ‘echo-chamber for allusions’, situated within the world like any other object, but ever-receptive to phonetic resonance, linguistic ‘cross-references, and ideogrammic short-cuts’.²²⁵ She enlisted the full repertoire of destabilizing devices, many of which subsequently came to define postmodernism: the constitution of a narrative from referential or mutually exclusive fragments; quotation from iconic or obscure literary texts; indecision or hesitation between alternative scenarios; self-contradiction or self-parody; semi-legibility or self-erasure; *trompe l’oeil* effects such as the sudden dismissal of characters, apparent truths or scenes; the use of neologisms, puns and portmanteau words. However, aside from these myriad devices the ‘spacing-out of the text’, along whatever axis or combination of axes, was what produced the fundamental rift between ‘the fictional world and the real-world object – the material book’, producing an ‘ontological hesitation’ in the reading experience.²²⁶ This concept of text had ‘been developed to focus attention on literature as surface’, one which had advanced beyond the provocation of William Burroughs’ ‘cut-ups’ and the insouciance of minimalism’s ‘disinterested’ gaze.²²⁷ ‘Surface’, in critical considerations of *Thru*, was recognized as another level of literary awareness, and also as a point of critical conflict.²²⁸ ‘Surface’ can be understood as three different elements: the glimpsed first impression; the physical page; the means of display – a pane of glass, a mirror, a screen.²²⁹ Brooke-Rose, however, proposes a penetrating fourth result: the ‘terror of a textual void’, the suggestion that language may mean nothing at all.²³⁰ The word used with the greatest frequency by reviewers to describe the experience of reading her novel was that

²²⁴ Brooke-Rose, ‘Is Self-Reflexivity Mere?’, p. 262.

²²⁵ Christine Brooke-Rose, *A ZBC of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 1.

²²⁶ Brian McHale, ‘I draw the line as a rule between one solar system and another’: The Postmodernism(s) of Christine Brooke-Rose in *Utterly Other Discourse*, pp. 192-213.

²²⁷ Culler, ‘Towards a Theory of Non-Genre Literature’, *Surfiction*, p. 258.

²²⁸ See Glyn White’s excellent reading of *Thru* in *Reading the Graphic Surface*, pp. 120-159.

²²⁹ Dermot Somers, ‘Now for the Good News’, *Evening Chronicle*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, ? July 1975; Peter Ackroyd, ‘Modernist?’, *The Spectator*, 7672 (12 July 1975), 20; Julian Barnes, ‘Getting it just right’, *Oxford Mail*, Thursday 10 July 1975, p. 7.

²³⁰ Brooke-Rose, *Rhetoric of the Unreal*, p. 50.

they were faced with an object that ‘glitters’. For the critic Valentine Cunningham, *Thru*’s surface is, expectably, all a-glitter’, while another notes its ‘glittering’ aspect.²³¹ To ‘glitter’ is to ‘shine with a brilliant but broken and tremulous light’ or to ‘emit bright fitful flashes of light’, disrupting a constancy or certainty of focus.²³² As Lorna Sage announced in 1975, the ‘new art of surfaces’ in the contemporary novel embraced this unpredictability, passing beyond a preoccupation with the graphic innovations typical of many postmodern texts into a new realm of ‘barely veiled hostility’ to the text or image, to the privileging of ‘otherness’.²³³ This point was readdressed by Christopher Butler in his 1980 synopsis of the contemporary transatlantic avant-garde, in which an attention to surface was understood as a defining feature of postmodernist prose. New writing had a tendency to reveal its linguistic procedures for its own sake, in all its virtuosity, in order to explore the correspondences and contradictions that existed within the language from which it was composed. These devices were no longer employed to be revelatory of the condition of the objects or subjects to which they referred, and therefore linguistic or formal procedures no longer demanded mimetic vindication: ‘The theory of literature thus becomes aesthetically interesting. Its medium and formal procedures become part of its content as abstraction did of painting’.²³⁴

Thru could be considered a climatic moment in the history of the British novel, if only for the division in critical opinion it elicited over its status as a novel at all.²³⁵ A number of concurrent novels had attempted similar radical dispensations with the integrity of narrative: the collage of ‘condensed novels’ that formed J. G. Ballard’s *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970); the intersecting and interruptive voices of Ann Quin’s *Passages* (1973) which results in a climatic request to be ‘left in peace with my own madness’; the unreliability and incomprehensibility of singular viewpoints in Gabriel Josipovici’s *The Present* (1975). A study by Raymond Federman, published in the same year as *Thru*, adduced the challenges posed by the non-representational novel. *Surfiction: Fiction Now...and Tomorrow* brought together European and American novelists and thinkers to ‘determine, define, analyse what is the

²³¹ Valentine Cunningham, ‘Text Appeal’, *New Statesman*, 25 July 1975, pp. 118-19; John Sturrock, ‘In the beginning’, *TLS*, 3373 (20 October 1966), 935.

²³² “glitter, v.” *Oxford English Dictionary Online* [accessed 29 October 2015].

²³³ Lorna Sage, ‘Black bugs on the page’, *The Observer*, 11 July 1975, p. 22.

²³⁴ Christopher Butler, *After the Wake: An Essay on the Contemporary Avant-Garde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 153. Ihab Hassan remarked in a letter to Brooke-Rose that Butler had expressed an admiration for Brooke-Rose’s work. Hassan recommended that she ‘send him [Butler] something of yours some time’. Ihab Hassan, letter to Brooke-Rose, 20 February 1983, HRC CBR box 18, fol. 4, p. 1.

²³⁵ Mason, ‘Textual tensions’, 753; Francis King, ‘Failed Utopia’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 13 July 1975, p. ; Peter Ackroyd, ‘Modernist?’, 20.

present state of fiction'.²³⁶ Unlike other similar attempts, such as Bernard Bergonzi's *The Situation of the Novel* (1970; 1979), Federman's selection sought to pass beyond the clichés that surrounded contemporary transatlantic literary discourse, the primary target being 'that the novel is dead':

because real fiction happens, everyday, in the streets of our cities, in the spectacular hijacking of planes, on the Moon, in Vietnam, in China (when Nixon stands on the Great Wall of China), and of course on television (during the news broadcasts); that fiction has become useless and irrelevant because life has become much more interesting, much more incredible, much more dramatic than what the moribund novel can possibly offer. And one could go on saying that fiction is now impossible [...] because all the possibilities of fiction have been used up, exhausted, abused, and therefore, all that is left, to the one who still insists on writing fiction, is to repeat (page after page, *ad nauseum*) that there is nothing to write about, nothing with which to write.²³⁷

The way out of this rhetorical impasse, Federman suggested, was to encourage a 'digressive' approach within literature, by which form, content and language would become witness to its own complex machinations. No longer would literature adhere to Stendhal's description of the novel as a mirror walking down the road, 'fiction will not reproduce the effects of the mirror acting upon itself, but should exist in a 'perpetual state of redoubling itself'.²³⁸ It was this aspect to which Chris Vincent referred when he suggested *Thru* 'owes much to Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors*', by which the manifestation of self-regard is as important as the content, and which Brooke-Rose enumerates as 'the text is a text is a text'.²³⁹ However, this hall of mirrors effect did not mean, for Federman, that the future novel would 'only be "a novel of the novel"', but that it will 'create a kind of writing, a kind of discourse whose shape will be an interrogation, an endless interrogation of what it is doing while doing it, an endless denunciation of its fraudulence, of what *it* really is: an illusion (a fiction), just as life is an illusion (a fiction).²⁴⁰ In an interview published in 1976, shortly after *Thru*, Brooke-Rose made attempts to draw out the very subtle distinction that existed for her between novels that were writing about the writing of novels, with which 'a lot of people' were engaged and which had been described as the focus of newly conceived postmodernist activity, and novels that interrogated their own validity in the world: *Thru* [...] is not about the *writing* of fiction (except that

²³⁶ Federman, 'Prefatory Note', in *Surfiction*, pp. 1-3 (p. 1).

²³⁷ Federman, 'Surfiction – Four Propositions in the Form of an Introduction', in *Surfiction*, pp. 5-15 (pp. 5-6).

²³⁸ Federman, 'Surfiction – Four Propositions in the Form of an Introduction', in *Surfiction*, p. 11.

²³⁹ Chris Vincent, 'New Fiction', *Women's Review*, 12 (1968), 36-37 (p. 37).

²⁴⁰ Federman, 'Surfiction – Four Propositions in the Form of an Introduction', in *Surfiction*, p. 11.

it's about the construction of a text, if you like) it's about the fictionality of fiction'.²⁴¹ Whereas in earlier work Brooke-Rose had used allusion or lipograms to mark the inclusion of theoretical sub-layers within a narrative, *Thru* made theory spectacle.

Thru was conducted as a programme of retrieval, approximate to Johnson's aim for British cinema: to 'make the novel once again do what only the novel can do, with words on a page, not film images or a stage set and actors' talent, or musical instruments or beautiful bodies dancing or an immobile painting, which all do other things better than the novel can'.²⁴² Theory of the novel, Brooke-Rose felt, had closed in on 'abstract narrative models', rendering 'invisible [...] the language in which these structures are clothed, the actual words, the metaphors', meaning only the structures themselves were visible.²⁴³ Brooke-Rose refocused attention upon the dazzling – and often laughable – profundity of language, returning to the 'typology of digressive utterance by a narrator like Tristram Shandy'.²⁴⁴ She conceived of her literary practice as beginning at those remotest reaches of conception: 'One starts with a sentence *ex* almost *nihilo* [...] the words suggest another sentence, and so on until a very specific "idea" (story, model, paradigm, theory) begins to take form'.²⁴⁵ In his identification of her 'glass wall of language', Frank Kermode recognised an observance of language as a passage of discovery, as a labour through which one will attain a heightened awareness of the world, while also noting her tendency to see through the supposed sovereignty of language. Intriguingly, extending the concept of the 'glass wall', Brooke-Rose added one exception to her characterisation of unique systems of conception operating within the disciplines, concluding that the only other artistic medium that would possibly correspond with what she had desired to create in the novel was presented by 'videoclips'.²⁴⁶ Noting 'videoclips' in the context of a number of other fine art disciplines – literature, art, music, theatre, film, dance – she alludes to the aesthetic ambitions of video and what it offers as challenge to an analogous act of engagement, as opposed to popular home or commercial use. This is a striking assertion, a comparison drawn more than two decades after the publication of *Thru*, and only noted on one previous occasion in 1987, with the assertion that 'video comic strips will

²⁴¹ Brooke-Rose, 'An Interview', *Contemporary Literature*, p. 4.

²⁴² Brooke-Rose, 'Is Self-Reflexivity Mere?', p. 62.

²⁴³ Brooke-Rose, *Invisible Author*, pp. 13-14.

²⁴⁴ Brooke-Rose, *Thru*, p. 39.

²⁴⁵ Brooke-Rose, *Stories, Theories and Things*, p. 14.

²⁴⁶ Brooke-Rose, *Stories, Theories and Things*, p. 35. This comparison was omitted in the reprinting of the essay in *Invisible Author*, see p. 108.

continue to take over' as the modern day parable.²⁴⁷ Where the screen of film is large and encompassing, video is small and perceptually distant like the printed page.²⁴⁸ This position, the closeness of video to the literary text, and the capacity of a medium to serve as hermeneutic vehicle symptomatic of the cultural zeitgeist, would appear to suggest that the natural evolution of non-representational narrative is its transposition into video. This chimed with Fredric Jameson's concurrent pronouncements on video, which he considered to have instigated an epistemic break with modernism to produce the consummate postmodernist 'text', the 'video-text', as a 'sign flow which resists meaning':

we are left with that pure and random play of signifiers [...] which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type, but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage; metabooks which cannibalise other books, metatexts which collate bits of other texts.²⁴⁹

The 'bricolage' is of a different kind to the ontological hierarchy of modernist collage, relinquishing a totalizing vision to a less definitive textual field formed of 'noise and jumbled signals, the unimaginable informational garbage, of the new media society'.²⁵⁰ The autonomous artwork, subject and ego have been 'volatilised', dissolving the dialectical relationship between object and subject to activate degrees of presence and points of disassociation within an expected 'immersion in the total flow of the thing itself'.²⁵¹ As a 'ceaseless rotation of elements' that shift and swap at every moment, 'no single element' within the video-text 'can occupy the position of "interpretant" (or that of primary sign) for any length of time; but must be dislodged in turn in the following instant [...] falling to the subordinate position in its turn, where it will then be "interpreted" or narrativised by a radically different kind of logo or image content altogether'.²⁵² It is not entirely conceivable to Jameson that

²⁴⁷ Christine Brooke-Rose, 'Id is, is id?', in *Discourse in Psychoanalysis and Literature*, ed. by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (London, New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 19-37 (repr. in Brooke-Rose, *Stories, Theories and Things*, pp. 28-44 (p. 35)).

²⁴⁸ See Richard Kostelanetz, 'Literary Video', *Visible Language*, 29.2 (1995), 198-203.

²⁴⁹ Fredric Jameson, 'Reading Without Interpretation: Postmodernism and the Video-Text', in *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments between language and literature*, ed. by Nigel Fabb, Derek Attridge, Alan Durant and Colin McCabe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), pp. 199-223 (p. 223). For a constructive critique of Jameson's essay, see Nicholas Zurbrugg, 'Jameson's Complaint: video-art and the intertextual "time wall"', in *Screen*, 32.1 (Spring 1991), 16-34.

²⁵⁰ Jameson, 'Reading Without Interpretation: Postmodernism and the Video-Text', p. 210.

²⁵¹ Jameson, 'Reading Without Interpretation: Postmodernism and the Video-Text', p. 208.

²⁵² Jameson, 'Reading Without Interpretation: Postmodernism and the Video-Text', p. 218, cf. Brooke-Rose, 'An Interview', *Contemporary Literature*, p. 5.

the spectator will reach a determinable moment of clarity or a saturated memory of this whole, from which a formal reading would be expected to begin. The critical response, in answer to the kaleidoscopic ultimatum laid down by the object of criticism, has taken on an abstraction of its own.²⁵³

Thru anticipates the video-text. It is a text built upon continual movement, displaying the heightened awareness of the passage of a reader through a text, as evoked at the close of the novel with the collision of the words 'TEXT', 'EXIT' and 'THRU'.²⁵⁴ However, this movement is provisional, proceeding through the generation of momentary points of dominance by one voice or one sign over another, foregrounding certain elements or voices only to discount them moments later, and returning as echoes with minor variations. As Brooke-Rose insisted, in *Thru* the 'referential function really is reduced to zero', as it is 'constructing itself and then destroying itself as it goes along'.²⁵⁵ Writing is made an act of literary *décapage*, endlessly turning in on replications of its own workings, constantly requiring 'adjusting', to finally disintegrate with an index that offers no directives.²⁵⁶ The names of every figure alluded to in the novel are given arbitrary marks in accordance with their 'degrees of presence', all 'represented in a hidden representation | inside a representation alphabetically', absenting one another.²⁵⁷ This acts as an injunction to the novel itself; no longer can the author, reader or novel presume to 'grasp the whole'.²⁵⁸ Considered the termination point of the twentieth-century late modernist novel, as video was considered by Jameson to be the 'artform [...] *par excellence*' of late capitalism, *Thru* foretells the discursive chaos of the information age.²⁵⁹

²⁵³ Jameson, 'Reading Without Interpretation: Postmodernism and the Video-Text', p. 212: 'our description would necessarily remain as empty and as abstract as the terminology of musical form, whose problems today, in aleatory and post-twelve-tone music, are analogous'.

²⁵⁴ Brooke-Rose, *Thru*, p. 164.

²⁵⁵ Brooke-Rose, 'An Interview', *Contemporary Literature*, p. 5.

²⁵⁶ Brooke-Rose, *Thru*, pp. 4, 9, 32, 120.

²⁵⁷ Brooke-Rose, *Thru*, pp. 159-163.

²⁵⁸ Brooke-Rose, *Remake*, p. 115.

²⁵⁹ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction*, pp. 147-48; Jameson, 'Reading Without Interpretation: Postmodernism and the Video-Text', p. 207.

Conclusion

Beyond the Mirror and the Square

‘The writer’s task is to invent the reality’
(J. G. Ballard, 1973)

This thesis has taken as peripheral to its course of inquiry two prevailing rhetorical signs of the period, the mirror and the square. For the 1952 exhibition ‘The Mirror and the Square: An Exhibition of Art Ranging from Realism to Abstraction’, launched by the Artists’ International Association (A.I.A.), at their Burlington Galleries, they were pivotal.¹ The two figures were understood as emblematic of the opposing poles of artistic representation: the mirror – as the ‘literal image of the visible world’ corresponded to ‘those artists who are primarily concerned with the representation of natural appearances’; and the square – an ‘abstract geometrical concept’ which here ‘serves as a symbol for those artists whose pictures rely upon the presentation of “abstract” forms’.² The works of ‘mirror’ artists, such as John Aldridge, Matthew Smith and William Townsend, were placed into a proposed dialogue with exponents of the ‘square’, such as Victor Pasmore, Eduardo Paolozzi, and Vera Spencer, although that dialogue was somewhat obscured by the separation of the two categories into two different rooms.³ Only one work, the ‘Black Mirror’ (1952), sought to collapse this curatorial logic in on itself; painted on a perfect 1219 x 1219mm square board, the gleaming frame of a mirror emerges from the shadowy corners of a room (Fig. 71). It brought into collision the arch work of

¹ As their annual retrospective exhibition, it showed from 2-20 December 1952. Embarking on a tour the following year that would last until spring of 1954, it became one of the longest-running touring shows since the end of the war. For an overview of the A.I.A.’s activities see Lynda Morris and Robert Radford, *The Story of the A.I.A.: Artists’ International Association 1933-1953* (Oxford: The Museum of Modern Art, 1983); and Robert Radford, *Art for a Purpose: The Artists’ International Association 1933-1953* (Winchester: Winchester School of Art Press, 1987).

² ‘Introduction’, *The Mirror and the Square: An Exhibition of Art Ranging from Realism to Abstraction*, Artists’ International Association (London: Christopher Foss, 1952), p. 1. London, Tate Gallery, Tate Archive, TGA.7043.3.79.2.

³ The 281 pictures and 6 sculptures were also divided into their various types and mediums; painting, sculpture and mobiles. Many reviews criticized these curatorial decisions: Pierre Jeannerat, ‘You need a guide to this artistic short cut’, *The Daily Mail*, 2 December 1952; T.W. Earp, ‘From Nature to Abstraction’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 5 December 1952; John Berger, ‘Definitions’, *New Statesman and Nation*, 20 December 1952.

modern abstraction, Malevich's Black Square', with the arch instrument of mimesis, the mirror.

Although it was not developed with the show in mind, the painting became 'a kind of protest against the theme of the exhibition'.⁴ Obscured by the coarse work of the brushstrokes, forms merge to build a figure that leans towards their vague reflection in the mirror; even a 'black mirror' can register or reveal something of the 'visible world'.⁵

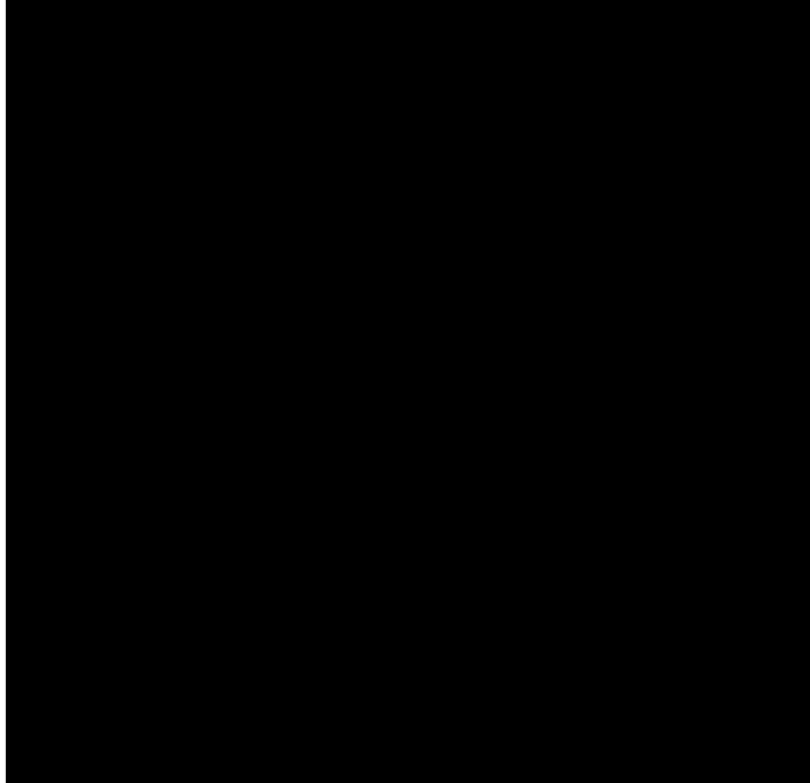


Fig. 71. Alan Davie, 'Black Mirror' (1952), oil paint on board, 1219 x 1219mm, Tate Gallery, London.

Exhibited in the room of abstract works, the artist behind 'Black Mirror', Alan Davie, would not accept the unbroken nature of this line drawn from realism to abstraction, and even less so his placement within its parameters. The title was invented with knowledge of his inclusion in the show, becoming a means by which he could push against the absurdity of the assumed 'division between "mirror-visual" and "square-abstract"'.⁶ For Davie, to be abstract was to aspire to the absolute, to believe in the possibility of an ultimate perfection of human expression, and this attitude was apposite to what he hoped to achieve in the symbolism of his improvised tableaux, evocative shapes, and

⁴ Alan Davie, quoted in Alan Bowness, 'Acquisitions 1972-4: T1749 Black Mirror 1952', *The Tate Gallery 1972-4 Biennial Report and illustrated Catalogue of Acquisitions* (London: The Tate Gallery, 1975), pp. 116-17 (116)

⁵ Alan Gouk suggests that this painting exhibits Davies' affinity for Francis Bacon's darker themes, see Alan Gouk, 'Alan Davie: The Phenomenon of Expanding Form', *abstract critical* (18 July 2014) <<http://abstractcritical.com/article/alan-davie-the-phenomenon-of-expanding-form/>> [accessed 22 July 2016]

⁶ Davie, quoted in Bowness, 'Acquisitions 1972-4', p. 116.

calligraphic marks: 'I always insisted my work was never ABSTRACT' – thus suggesting – "here is a picture which you would call Abstract, but it actually is a mirror in itself".⁷ Davie's rejection of abstraction was based upon the realisation that, in the eyes of the general public, it abided by a set of conventions – primary colours and Euclidean forms mainly derived from the observation of the natural world – as homogenous and fixed as those believed to constitute realism. Davie's 'protest' is not the only departure of this type, forcing popular opinion to observe its own assumptions, divorcing itself from the demand that a work of art offer a 'literal image of the visible world'. It precipitated the mounting fascination with the ways in which abstract art might be thought to constitute more than the progressive development of recognisable image to abstract structure, as the trace of prior figuration, as a more complex network of interrelated forms that act with the structural eloquence of a language.⁸ As Stephen Bann suggests, it was 'no accident that modern art "came of age" at the same time as the structural linguistics of Saussure', which laid the groundwork for the modern study of language.⁹ New forms of seeing, reading and looking animated the pages of newspapers, books, and journals throughout the period: the Independent Group challenged the established divisions between high and low culture, presenting the 'new role' of the spectator or consumer as now 'free to move in a society defined by symbols'; Systems art obeyed a generative 'internal syntax' built upon sequence, rhythm, feedback loops, outputs and structures related to external developments in computer technology, corporate culture and semiotics; George Rickey put forward a 'morphology of movement' in his examinations of op and kinetic art.¹⁰ The perception of art was increasingly likened to the interpretation of a literary text, but on what terms, if at all, does the abstract work communicate?

This is one of the most recurrent questions of the age, and one foregrounded in the aim of this thesis, albeit it in mirrored form, examining the extent to which the interpretation of the literary text is contingent with the perception of abstract art.¹¹ The preceding chapters have sought to

⁷ Davie, quoted in Bowness, 'Acquisitions 1972-4', p. 116.

⁸ Piet Mondrian's Tree Series was executed 1908-1913, in which his process of 'denaturalisation' sees trees metamorphose to corresponding geometric forms. See Susanne Deicher, *Piet Mondrian 1872-1944: Structures in Space* (Berlin: Taschen, 1999).

⁹ Stephen Bann, 'Abstract Art – a Language?', in *Towards a New Art: essays on the background to abstract art 1910-1920*, ed. by Michael Compton (London: Tate Gallery, 1980), pp. 125-145 (p. 127).

¹⁰ See *This is Tomorrow*, exh. cat. (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1956), n.p.; *Systems*, exh. cat. (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1973); George Rickey, 'The Morphology of Movement A Study of Kinetic Art', in *The Nature and Art of Motion*, ed. by Gyorgy Kepes (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), pp. 81-115.

¹¹ Bann, 'Abstract Art – a Language?', p. 125.

illuminate an important passage in our recent literary history by drawing out the continuities and discontinuities between literary forms and the canonical models of abstraction, offered by its earlier twentieth-century invention and its post-war renaissance.¹² They build a vision of a literary period that increasingly jettisons the predetermined critical lexicon of abstraction in favour of works of a more pragmatic abstract inspiration: the spatial demands of concrete poetry, language as medium in the conceptual artwork; the absence of plot in the new novel. This thesis is intended as a comprehensive account of the evolving status of abstraction in literature within the inevitable confines of a thesis. The restrictions of time and space place unavoidable pressure upon the selections made of individuals and groups of practitioners most suited to my chosen lines of questioning. The operative framework of 1945-1980 precluded a detailed investigation of the St Ives artists, many of whom relocated to London or elsewhere in the years following the war. However, with additional time I would examine the proximity of the work of writers such as Adrian Stokes and W. S. Graham to the painters and sculptors who resided in St Ives, and more closely examine the influence of abstract expressionism upon writers such as Adrian Henri, Michael Horovitz and Lee Harwood. With their limited application as a critical apparatus in mind, the figures of the mirror and the square have made several profitable visitations upon the critical discussions in this study. In their accumulation – black blocks, square books, texts accentuating their corners, fragments interlaid within screens; lenses, optical devices, reflected texts, the driving mirror, kaleidoscopes – the square and the mirror support what may be presumed to be the chief hypothesis of this study: that the post-war period is witness to an intensification in the meeting of spatiality and visuality in literature.

In 1980, W. J. T. Mitchell summarised one of the lengthiest critical debates of the period, which had begun in 1945 with Joseph Frank's seminal series of articles on 'spatial form' in literature, to comment that vision is privileged among the senses in the perception of literary space as it 'focuses attention on the process by which spatial form is created and perceived, rather than objectifying that form'.¹³ John Christie and Ron King's *Mirror Book* (1979) had offered this consummation: pages of reflective mirror foil are bound within hard-edged covers of mirrored glass, a bookwork that offered

¹² An impressive recent survey on the originating forces of modern abstraction can be found in Leah Dickerman, ed., *Inventing Abstraction 1910-1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2013).

¹³ W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Spatial Form in Literature: Towards a General Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 6.3 (1980), 539-67 (p. 547).

only iridescent reflections of the reader.¹⁴ Both objects may employ strategies of self-effacement, but where the 'Black Mirror' voids the picture plane of any solipsistic illusion that that it might offer a universal meaning, the *Mirror Book* places an exponential responsibility upon the reader to make meaning derived from their self-image. In the absence of language, the replicating distortions with the turning of each page produce an endless interrogation of oneself as subject and itself as object, outrunning its own attempts at recognition. It actualized what writing had become: 'not representation, not a communicative transparency, but an opacity, a resistance to recuperation which exercises sensibility and intelligence'.¹⁵

More than thirty years later, where has this line lead? As the title of a recent retrospective suggests, 'Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915-2015', the square persists, but in transmogrified form: the handheld screen. It is the illuminated portal through which everything is made accessible, connected to invisible networks of global data, and upon which everything is made visible: temporary locations, patterns of consumption, innumerable 'selfies'. It is a surface tooled towards our particular specifications and reflective of our efforts of perception, image-making, and writing in abbreviated forms; posting, commenting, messaging. However, contrary to its utopian and universalist ambitions, the state of abstraction in this climate of increased visibility is now typically cast in the negative, 'increasingly used to describe a dystopian present, a post-industrial, post-mechanical and de-humanised digital age'.¹⁶ The machine age has given way to the age of data saturation, in which a regime of omnipresent and coercive signals tabulate and cross-index our movements, conversations and behaviours, as identities to be archived in vast powerhouses of digital knowledge. A number of literary works have explored the enrichment of literature by new computer technologies and the blurring of contexts real and virtual, for example Christine Brooke-Rose's *Xorandor* (1986), Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs* (1995) and Xu Bing's *Book from the Ground: from Point to Point* (2014). However, all of these examples, whether using binary code or pictographs, maintain the syntactical orchestration and presentational expressivity of language. What would it look like to write

¹⁴ John Christie and Ron King, *Mirror Book* (London: Circle Press, 1985), Yale Center for British Art Rare Books & Manuscripts, YCBA N7433.4.K55 M57 1985+ This was the first book made by King and his Circle Press. The 1979 version was a prototype for an exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum, 'The Open and Closed Book'. John Christie, in correspondence with the author, 18 August 2016.

¹⁵ Jonathan Culler, 'Towards a Theory of Non-Genre Literature', in *Surfiction: Fiction Now...And Tomorrow*, ed. by Raymond Federman (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1975), pp. 255-262 (p. 258).

¹⁶ Iwona Blazwick, 'Utopia', in *Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915-2015* (London and Munich: Whitechapel Gallery and Prestel Verlag, 2015), pp. 15-18 (p. 18)

in ‘the shadow of omnipresent and omniscient data that makes a mockery of any notion that the writer might have something to inform us, and of a technologically underwritten capitalism that both writes and reads itself’?¹⁷ How to reclaim experience through the abstractions of language in these abstract digital spaces?

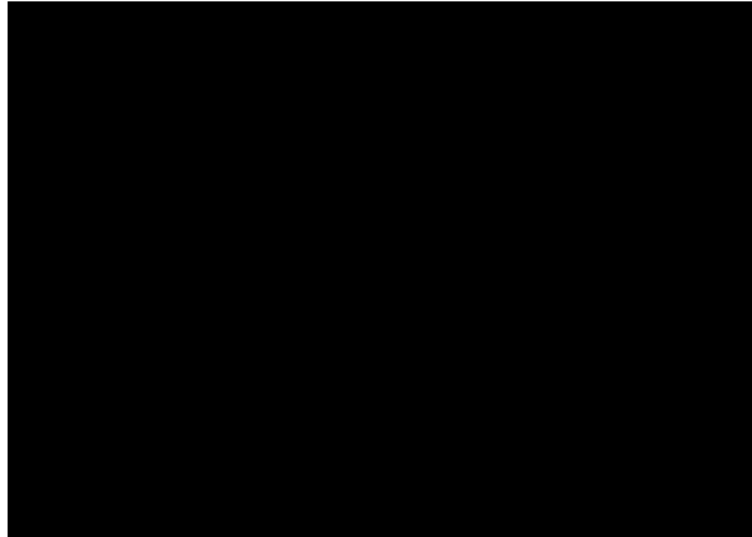


Fig. 72. Ed Atkins, *Ribbons* (2014), three-channel HD video work, 13 min. loop.

As a final thought, I would like to consider the ways in the recent video installation work and poetry of Ed Atkins offers one possible route out of these questions, in which the genealogy developed over the course of this study might arrive in the twenty-first century at Atkins’ language of digital mortification. Working principally with the elegiac monologues of hyperreal computer-generated avatars, language is used as physical textual manifestations in the space coupled with the monologues uttered by digital surrogates, with both often working against the authenticity of the other. As principally a video artist, Atkins often stresses the role played by ‘writing, and a concern for the possibilities of language’, forming the ‘artistic practice at the core’ of his digital video works and installations:

Well, it’s sort of all coming from writing. The structure, the expedience, shape, rhythms, and all that. Full of punctuation, the videos are a kind of poetry of their own. And they’re very interested in previously literary-theoretical concerns about seeing and reading, interpretation of metaphor, figuration and literality. CGI is pretty much concerned with literalizing stuff, rendering literal what was once only possible as metaphor.¹⁸

¹⁷ Tom McCarthy, ‘The Death of Writing’, *The Guardian*, 7 March 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/07/tom-mccarthy-death-writing-james-joyce-working-google>> [accessed 8 March 2015]

¹⁸ Ed Atkins, quoted in Thea Ballard, ‘Newsmaker: Ed Atkins on His Serpentine Sackler Gallery Installation’, *Blouin Art Info*, 13 July 2014 <<http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1044455/newsmaker-ed-atkins-on-his-serpentine-sackler-gallery>> [accessed 30 August 2016]

Atkins' work is a dialogue between these two means of 'literalising', the linguistic and the graphic, to agitate perceptions of the most effective means of conjuring a physical apparition or believable/perceivable agent of meaning. The centrality of 'writing', with particular emphasis on the activity of writing in all of its inaccuracies, frustrations and misapprehensions, can be observed in his recent collections of poetry, *A Seer Reader* (2015) and *A Primer for Cadavers* (2016), and across the walls of his installations, in which language is spoken, sung, printed, scrawled, redacted, erased, illustrated and spooled into marginalia. In his recent work *Ribbons* (2014), an installation split across four separate screens to occupy a room, Atkins' mapped his own features onto the physiogomy of a high-definition male avatar, a 3D realisation of the hard-drinking, smoking, 'Dave', a simulated self which is progressively defaced with the scribbled expletives across his face and body, and finally deflated like a balloon (Fig. 72). Language appears to work against Dave; not only is he a channel for expressions, lyrics and sentimentalities evidently devised by his creator, delivered in a relentless stream-of-consciousness torpor, but he is continually interrupted by incoming email alerts, corrective asides and the 'advertorial blockbuster pummellings' of errant words and phrases which flash across the screens: 'Whatever!'; 'Rebuttall!'; 'Collared and cuffed!'¹⁹ 'Help me communicate without debasement, darling', Dave verbalizes in a voice devoid of feeling, and yet he seems incapable of doing so, farting, burping and spluttering his way through his looping monologue.

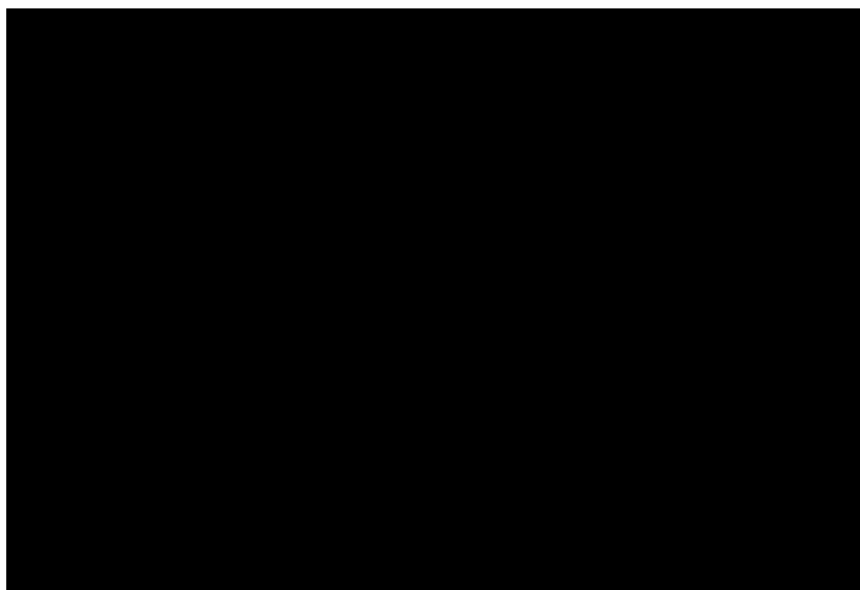


Fig. 73. Installation shot from 'Ed Atkins' at Serpentine Gallery, 11 June 2014 – 25 August 2014, <<http://www.serpentinegalleries.org/exhibitions-events/ed-atkins-0>> [accessed 15 July 2016].

¹⁹ Ed Atkins, *Ribbons* (2014), three-channel HD video work, 13 min. loop.

Does Atkins mean to suggest that this is the fate met by modern man? The texts arranged around the rooms of the installations, large panels formatted to resemble the blown-up pages of books, also have a self-defeating logic about them – aggrandized to human-scale but largely unintelligible, sullied with body parts, subjected to penned revisions (Fig. 73). The verbosity of *Ribbons* and its supporting objects reveals the Beckettian *horror vacui* at the root of Atkins' work, the 'desperate need to speak' faced with the 'impossibility of doing justice' to what one means to say.²⁰ This exercise in bathos finds expression in Atkins' recondite vocabulary, abundance of images, and repeated termination 'etc.', used throughout his poems as either a gesture towards the unknown, the infinite, an extension of the already implied, or a 'simple shrug' of indifference.²¹ Although this is a trope well-rehearsed in art and literature of the twentieth-century, communicating a style aware of the exhaustion of own possibilities but nonetheless continues, Atkins takes this one step further by requiring the abuse of this resulting discourse, demanding 'an abstraction that commits a violence on representation'.²² Mike Sperlinger notes the only adequate relationship to reality is one that is conceived '*negatively*', through 'the misuse of language', which splices, oozes and invades spaces in which it is not welcome.²³ Atkins has described his writing as 'gratuitous', but it exists in a vertiginous relationship to his elliptical, tightly edited films. In spite of the layered density of his texts and monologues, content is made provisional in the fast moving, fragmentary nature of their syntax – a caricature of our own interactions with the content-driven currency of the internet, in comment threads, newsfeeds, social profiles. All of this comprises the new mirror image, split across multiple scriptable platforms. As Sven Lütticken has remarked, 'We are the natives of abstraction', for whom the abjection of representation – in the divisions between corporeal and digital self – comprises our contemporary mythology, placed at a remove from our own endlessly self-defeating trajectory.²⁴

²⁰ Ed Atkins, 'Talk About That – an Introduction' at 'Un-like Symposium: Part 3 WORDS', 26 April 2014, Kunsthalle Zürich, Switzerland < <https://vimeo.com/94422611> > [accessed 15 July 2016]

²¹ For a discussion of 'etc.' in Atkins' poetry, see Mike Sperlinger, 'Close Without Saving', in Ed Atkins, *A Seer Reader* (London: Koenig Books, 2014), pp. 105-120 (pp. 109-112).

²² Ed Atkins, 'Ed Atkins Interviewed by Katie Guggenheim', September 2012, Chisenhale Gallery London < http://www.chisenhale.org.uk/archive/exhibitions/images/EAtkins_Interview.pdf > [accessed 1 August 2016]

²³ Sperlinger, 'Close Without Saving', p. 109.

²⁴ Sven Lütticken, 'Living with Abstraction', in Maria Lind, ed., *Abstraction* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), p. 150. Also see *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. by Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

Wordcount: 98103

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