CONCRETE POETRY

In general, “concrete poetry” refers to a type of literary composition where the material aspects of a text (layout, typography, sound, etc.) are foregrounded and reinforce its symbolic or semantic values, rendering form and meaning highly interdependent. Concrete poetry is often associated with visual and sound poetry, making these categories sometimes interchangeable. However, going beyond mere imitation, in concrete poetry, sound and visual elements effectively become both the structures and content of the text.

**History and Development**

Poems calling attention to their form have been created since classical antiquity, passing through the Middle Ages, and into the modern period, including Renaissance contemplative texts known as *carmina figurata* and avant-garde calligrams. But concrete poetry, as such, only emerged in the 1950s. In Sweden, the artist Öyvind Falström authored a “Manifesto for Concrete Poetry.” Working in Germany, the Swiss-Bolivian Eugen Gomringer produced texts he named [“constellations”](http://www.cipmarseille.com/pop_audio.php?id=118) (1953). In his poem [“silencio,”](http://mtwebsit.blogspot.ca/2012/02/letters-michael-morris-and-concrete.html) the word meaning silence in Spanish, is repeated enclosing a blank space, indicating a transition from the outer reality to inner silence.

Independently, in Brazil, the group formed by the brothers Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari, published similar poems in their little magazine, *Noigandres* (1952-1962). When Gomringer met Pignatari in 1955, they agreed on the term “concrete,” and the following year an exhibition of poetry and art opened in São Paulo, Brazil. In their “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry” (1958), Pignatari and the De Campos brothers declared the end of the cycle of verse and proposed instead a “verbi-voco-visual” poetry that joined avant-garde poetics to the media and methods of modern advertising, as seen in Pignatari’s [“beba coca cola”](http://www.poesiaconcreta.com/poema/beba.html), where the commercial slogan “Drink Coca-Cola” is manipulated into a critique of consumer culture.

**Theory and Influences**

Gomringer was influenced by Concrete Art and worked closely with the Swiss artist and designer Max Bill, and though similarities with Italian futurism are evident, the is no clear evidence of a direct connection. Brazilian concrete poetry was modeled after figures from the international avant-gardes, including Stéphane Mallarmé in “Un Coup de Dés”, e.e. cummings, Ezra Pound, Guillaume Apollinaire, James Joyce, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Sergei Eisenstein; and from Brazilian premodernists and modernists such as Joaquim de Sousândrade, Oswald de Andrade, and João Cabral de Melo Neto. Other influences included constructivist architecture, art, and design, and avant-garde and concrete/serial music.

**Legacy**

Both Gomringer in Europe and the *Noigandres* group in Brazil succeeded in establishing a concrete poetry movement worldwide. The influence of their proposals spread to Great Britain, Germany, and Sweden, and later to places as diverse as Czechoslovakia, France, Italy, Japan, Spain, Canada, and the United States. The movement was rich and truly international, but, besides the emphasis on the material aspects of language, had no coherence or agreement with regard to principles or methods. William Emmet, an American concrete poet, wittily observed that, “such diversity, may seem to rob the label ‘concrete’ of any concrete meaning whatsoever.”

**Further Reading**

Bann, Stephen. (ed.) (1967) *Concrete Poetry: An International Anthology*. London: London Magazine Editions.

Campos, Augusto de, Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari. ([1958] 2007) “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry,” *Novas: Selected Writings by Haroldo de Campos,* A. S. Bessa and Odile Cisneros (eds.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 217-219.

Solt, Mary Ellen. (ed.) (1968) *Concrete Poetry: A World View*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Wildman,Eugene. (ed.)(1967) *The Chicago Review Anthology of Concretism*. Chicago: The Swallow Press.

Williams, Emmett. (ed.) (1967) *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*. New York: Something Else Press.

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