

ENVIRONMENT / OBJECT / ACTION: Graphics by Other Means in the New Century

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Recent political changes in the Middle East, made possible in large part by the use of social media, have brought back into discussion provocative ideas about the role of technological innovation in effecting cultural change. In the early 1960s, Marshall McLuhan popularized this idea in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, arguing that the advent of new technologies deeply affected our perception of our surroundings. According to McLuhan, the adoption of writing (and specifically the alphabet) by cultures steeped in oral traditions entailed a radical realignment of the senses that changed mental processes on a collective basis. McLuhan's groundbreaking insight—that technological advances become interiorized, causing the “externalization of our senses,” which in turn fosters the creation of a “‘noosphere’ or a technological brain for the world”¹—is again pertinent as the West looks on in astonishment at radical changes set in motion within cultures we thought of as “traditionalist,” changes that historians and political commentators were unable to foresee even a year ago. Our current state of perplexity was also predicted by McLuhan, who noted that our “enormous backlog of literate and mechanistic technology renders us helpless and inept in handling the new electric technology.”² As we move on to new modes of production and communication, we seem unaware of what exactly we are embracing, and the behavioral changes now being set in motion will only be apparent in hindsight.

The feeling of discomfort, of unquiet brought forth by the new throughout the eighteenth century in France was widely recognized in the documents of the era issued through the press, itself a new and, to some, unsettling, even threatening medium. In his introduction to *Revolution in Print: The Press in France, 1775-1800*, Robert Darnton notes that “historians generally treat the printed word as a record of what happened instead of as an ingredient in the

¹ Marshal McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962, 32. The concept of the noosphere that McLuhan employs was first proposed by Vladimir Vernadsky and further developed by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. It assumes that, following the geosphere and the biosphere, a new developmental phase is about to happen on earth through the interaction of human minds.

² McLuhan, 27.

happening.”³ The printing press, he maintains, actually helped shape the very events it recorded:

To seize power [the revolutionaries] must seize the word and spread it—by journals, almanacs, pamphlets, posters, pictures, song sheets, stationery, board games, ration cards, money, anything that will carry an impression and embed it in the minds of twenty-six million French people, many of them bent under poverty and oppression, many sunk deep in ignorance, many incapable of reading the declarations of their rights. When the revolutionaries grasped the bar of the press and forced the platen down on type locked in its forme, they sent new energy streaming through the body politic. (xiii–xiv)

Darnton’s informed and insightful account of the role of the press during the revolutionary years notwithstanding, it is his emphasis on the various modes of printed material that gives a measure of the sweeping cultural change taking place at the time. In fact, the great assortment of printed materials spawned throughout the last quarter of the eighteenth century offers an inventory of a brand new environment, one that, cloaked in an aura of modernity, under different premises, and with different objectives, lasted well into the twentieth century.

The proliferation of printed material in the early decades of the nineteenth century was noticeable enough to lead Victor Hugo to claim that “the book will kill architecture.”⁴ Hugo’s

³ Robert Darnton and Daniel Roche, eds., *Revolution in Print: The Press in France, 1775–1800*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, xiii–xiv. The volume accompanied an exhibition in 1989 at the New York Public Library of pre- and post-Revolutionary printed material in France, including books, pamphlets, and prints.

⁴ Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, also known as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, trans. Isabel F. Hapgood, 1888 (Project Gutenberg EBook # 2610, November 13, 2009). Hugo’s musings on the future effects of printing is found in Book V, Chapter II, titled “This Will Kill That.” Here I quote an excerpt, but the entire chapter is well worth reading: “It was the affright of the priest in the presence of a new agent, the printing press. It was the terror and dazzled amazement of the men of the sanctuary, in the presence of the luminous press of Gutenberg. It was the pulpit and the manuscript taking the alarm at the printed word. . . . It was a presentiment that human thought, in changing its form, was about to change its mode of expression; that the dominant idea of each generation would no longer be written with the same matter, and in the same manner; that the book of stone, so solid and so durable, was about to make way for the book of

visionary prediction in a well-known passage of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is of the same order as McLuhan's: both men's appraisals of Gutenberg's invention telescopes many chapters of history in order to depict a pivotal moment in civilization when the human mind would be forever transformed. As it happened, with the rise of bourgeois capitalist society after the defeat of the Paris Commune in the early 1870s, all these new modes of printed expression were coopted, transformed into marketing tools for advertisement and other commercial ends.⁵ As we experience today's developments in the digital media, the words of Hugo and McLuhan are invested with new urgency. "As electricity creates conditions of extreme interdependence on a global scale," McLuhan noted, "we move swiftly again into an auditory world of simultaneous events and over-all awareness."⁶ With the internet reaching out into every corner of the global village, the idea of a "technological brain for the world" no longer strikes us as science fiction. The noosphere is, as a matter of fact, visible on the streets as people increasingly interact non-stop via a number of digital gadgets that seem to be replacing the printed media with text messages, tweets, and the like. As McLuhan also anticipated, this new technological development is making the world auditory again.

paper, more solid and still more durable." I am grateful to Edward Yanisch for bringing this most illuminating passage to my attention.

⁵ By 1895, it was no longer the rise of the book that seemed to be the menace, as Victor Hugo had forecast, but rather the visual pollution of the newspaper, a fact that led the Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé to issue a manifesto defending the book for its spiritual qualities: "Every discovery made by printers has hitherto been absorbed in the most elementary fashion by the newspaper, and can be summed up in the word: Press. The result has been simply a plain sheet of paper upon which a flow of words is printed in the most unrefined manner. The immediacy of this system (which preceded the production of books) has undeniable advantages for the writer; with its endless line of posters and proof sheets it makes for improvisation. We have, in other words, a 'daily paper.' But who, then, can make the gradual discovery of the meaning of this format, or even of a sort of popular fairyland charm about it? Then again, the leader, which is the most important part, makes its great free way through a thousand obstacles and finally reaches a state of disinterestedness. But what is the result of this victory? It overthrows the advertisement (which is Original Slavery) and, as if it were itself the powered printing press, drives it far back beyond intervening articles onto the fourth page and leaves it there in a mass of incoherent and inarticulate cries." "The Book: A Spiritual Instrument," in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Mary Ann Caws, trans. Bradford Cook, New York: New Directions, 1982, 80-84. Mallarmé's pointed attack on the press seems contradictory when we learn that he published his own newspaper, *La Dernière Mode*, which chronicled the fashions and mores of his contemporaries. Many scholars have also noted the fact that his exploration of type in *Un Coup de Dés* owes a debt to the jarring aesthetics of the newspaper and street advertising.

⁶ McLuhan, 29.

For McLuhan, the basic distinction seemed to lie in the fact that “the auditory field is simultaneous, the visual mode is successive.”⁷ The environment we now inhabit, however, is neither thoroughly aural, as it was in tribal societies, nor purely visual as in the literate cultures of manuscripts and printed books. Combined with the aural and the visual, interactivity seems to play a fundamental role in the present. For over a century, entire populations across the globe have been exposed to the cinematic experience, in which image, sound, and word combine. And since the advent of the personal computer and the internet, we have been introduced to the idea of a “hypertext,” in which words on a luminous screen are signaled as being parts of complex networks of associations, with instantaneous connections.⁸ We will argue, then, that the new aural space brought forth by the digital revolution is not the same one that McLuhan identified in primitive societies, but rather a “verbivocovisual” model as suggested by James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* and put into practice by Concrete poets around the world.⁹

As one considers the impact of graphics in shaping culture and language, a question may arise as to whether the emergence of print and the technology of movable type can be seen as an evolution of language itself. In the context of the this exhibition and publication, *El Panal/The Hive*, we are led to consider how and why strategies first employed for political propaganda

⁷ McLuhan, 111.

⁸ This changing environment was perhaps best summed up by Charles Baudelaire in his poem “Correspondances,” in which nature is described as an interactive architecture that *speaks* to the subject. Written at a time when the natural landscape was being replaced by the turbulent city with its advertising posters, newsstands, and commercial signs mixed with the “perfumes, colors, and sounds” of passers-by, Baudelaire’s poem intimates that the urban environment has become like a book that offers a pluralistic experience. Baudelaire’s musings on environment as a temple/book seems grounded in a perception shared by many of his contemporaries. Citing Kurt Seligmann’s *The History of Magic*, McLuhan notes that a “favorite nineteenth-century theme was that the medieval cathedrals were the “books of the people” (108). By the mid-nineteenth century, as the presence of graphics became ubiquitous on the streets, large cities gradually took on the role of “books of the people.”

⁹ In *Finnegans Wake*, the term *verbivocovisual* is casually used by Joyce amidst a slew of other verbal inventions. One of Concrete poetry’s greatest contributions has been to rescue this term and apply it to a contemporary exploration of language. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Joyce’s work is often invoked without actually addressing the verbivocovisual proposition. It was perhaps through the intervention of Dick Higgins that in 1967, Something Else Press published a revised edition of a text by McLuhan (originally published in Toronto as Issue 8 of the journal *Explorations*) titled *Verbi-Voco-Visual Explorations*. For the original context of the term see James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, New York: Viking, 1957, 341.

during the French Revolution developed, in the early twentieth century, into tools for artistic expression and are now being increasingly used as a means for critiquing language. In the process, we might also note an inversion of values, as materials originally intended as disposable and anonymous (posters, pamphlets, libels [defamatory handbills]) have increasingly become fine-art artifacts, issued in limited editions and authenticated with the artist's signature.

It is also worth noting that with the appropriation of the technological, the political element goes, as it were, hand in hand. In this regard the proliferation of art manifestos in the early decades of the twentieth century seems an apt example. One might even wonder whether the appropriation of those modes of dissemination lent political edge to twentieth-century aesthetics. Mary Ann Caws notes in her introduction to *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, that originally,

a 'manifesto' was a piece of evidence in a court of law, put on show to catch the eye. . . . Since the 'manus' (hand) was already present in the word, the presentation was a handcrafted marker for an important event. The manifesto was from the beginning, and has remained, a deliberate manipulation of the public view.¹⁰

Janet Lyon, in *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*, also notes that the word "manifesto" derives etymologically from a Latin composite of *manus* and *fectus*, or "hostile hand": "like a fist striking through the scrim of civic order."¹¹ It seems ironic that a genre so closely identified with political struggle—one thinks of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848 as the prime example—becomes coopted at the turn of the twentieth century by artists in what can be considered a war of aesthetics. One notes an odd sense of symmetry in the fact that avant-garde movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries made use of graphic means to effect their critique of language. From Mallarmé all the way to the Concrete poets, the struggle to renew language was articulated in both the content of the discourses and the form of the printed output. In 1961, quoting the Russian revolutionary poet Vladimir Mayakovski, the Noigandres group added the following postscript to their 1958

¹⁰ Mary Ann Caws, *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000, xix.

¹¹ Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.

manifesto “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry”: “There’s no revolutionary art without revolutionary form.”¹²

The Concrete Moment

The Noigandres group of São Paulo—poets Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Decio Pignatri—recognized in Joyce’s *verbivocovisual* the hallmarks of early Modernism, primarily the interplay of disciplines that favors synaesthesia and tactility. By expanding on Joyce’s concept, the Noigandres group articulated a new cultural mode to suit the new environment of a thoroughly industrialized world. Their highly visual brand of poetry owed a great debt not only to early precursors of visual poetry like Stéphane Mallarmé and Guillaume Apollinaire, but also to avant-garde ideas associated with Russian and Italian Futurism, the Imagism of Ezra Pound, and Ernest Fenollosa’s writings on the poetic possibilities of the Chinese ideogram.¹³ In addition, core concepts of Concrete poetry were inspired by ideas related to avant-garde music (Anton Webern’s *Klangfarbenmelodie* and Pierre Schaeffer’s *musique concrète*, for instance), filmmaking (Sergei Eisenstein’s theory of film editing), and architectural theory. Furthermore, the strategies these poets employed included all the modes of printing available, including the typewriter, lettraset, photostat, computerized images, and so on. Within a decade of Noigandres’ formation, the group had achieved international renown and their poetics found followers in several countries in Latin America, Europe, and Asia. The immediate reception of the Concretist paradigm by other cultures and languages, one must add, was predicated on the fact that in the postwar period, technological innovations like electric typewriters, tape recorders, and cameras were quickly becoming available worldwide.

¹² For the full text of “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry” see Antonio Sergio Bessa and Odile Cisneros, editors, *Novas: Selected Writings of Haroldo de Campos*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007, 217–219.

¹³ The modern emphasis on visuality was officially acknowledged by Arthur Rimbaud in 1871 when he wrote in a letter to his teacher Georges Izambard: “I’m working at turning myself into a *Seer*.” Rimbaud’s letter, a pivotal literary document of the nineteenth century, masterfully sums up McLuhan’s musings on the emergence of a new subjectivity in the wake of the print revolution: “The ‘I’ of medieval narrative did not provide a point of view so much as immediacy of effect . . . It was some time after printing began that authors or readers discovered ‘points of view.’” McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 136.

In the emergence of the international Concretist movement one recognizes the collaborative nature of graphics—or, rather, graphics as an activity that fosters community. There is indeed an uncanny sense of synergy in the fact that in the early 1950s, poets as geographically distant from one another as Öyvind Fahlström in Sweden, Eugen Gomringer in Switzerland, and the Noigandres group in Brazil, were, unbeknownst to each other, drawn to the same ideas as they engaged in a critique of contemporary language. Almost telepathically, they established a cross-cultural program to renew the way we perceive language. This program was based on an exploration of graphics that sought out commonalities among cultures: Fahlström's groundbreaking manifesto "Hipy Papy Bthuthdth Thuthda Bthuthdy" first appeared in the mimeograph journal *Odysseé* in 1953; Gomringer's first manifesto, "From Line to Constellation," came out in 1954; and Noigandres' "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry" appeared in 1958. And there we have it—in the span of about five years, a new poetics had appeared that appealed to many on the basis of both its reductive approach and its extremely broad applicability.¹⁴

Not surprisingly, Concrete poetry's stated mission of establishing new modes of writing and reading for post-war audiences was perceived by and large as yet another avant-garde fad. In Sweden, Fahlström's language experiments were virtually ignored by the mainstream, and a broader selection of his Concrete poems found publication only in 1966. Gomringer, who for some time worked as a secretary for painter, sculptor, and designer Max Bill, encountered a more receptive environment in Switzerland among Bill's inner circle of Concretist artists. The Noigandres case stands in stark contrast to their European counterparts if we consider that Noigandres' development occurred in tandem with an industrialization program implemented in Brazil that was intended to move the country away from its colonial past. Against this background of sweeping structural realignments taking place in the country throughout the 1950s, the renewal of (poetic) language was invested with a civic role. The fact that daily newspapers and weekly magazines across the country opened their pages to air the ongoing polemics between Concrete poets in São Paulo and Rio demonstrates the wide reception of their ideas.

On the other hand, the legacy of Concrete poetry has now been absorbed into the structure of contemporary art and popular culture to such a degree that one could easily

¹⁴ For an overview of the Concrete poetry movement and its development worldwide, see *Mary Ellen Solt: Toward a Theory of Concrete Poetry*, ed. Antonio Sergio Bessa, Stockholm: OEI, 2010.

mistake it for a “natural” effect. The revolution in graphics (particularly in advertising), the widespread use of sampling techniques in writing and music recording, and the hyperconscious use of language in popular culture are some of the main traits of this legacy. The fluidity between written and visual languages—how they interact and intertwine—is a distinct feature of this period. Toward the end of the 1950s, Concretism had become a strong international movement, only to dissipate in the first years of the next decade. By then, Öyvind Fahlström’s work had taken a radical turn toward visual art, a development that seemed congruent with the ideas expressed in his manifesto and in other Concrete theory. This phenomenon—the shift from poetry to visual art, from word to image—also affected other Concrete poets, Ian Hamilton Finlay and Dieter Rot among them, and represents one of the strongest artistic statements in the second half of the twentieth century. Other poets, not necessarily affiliated with Concretism, also made the transition; the examples of Marcel Broodthaers and Vito Acconci show the importance of this phenomenon to the contemporary arts.

The exploration of graphics spearheaded by Concrete poetry led to a renaissance of artisanal print-making in the 1960s. Among the many small presses that popped up around the world during that period, the Wild Hawthorn Press in Glasgow, founded in 1961 by Ian Hamilton Finley and Jessie McGuffie; Something Else Press in New York, founded in 1963 by Dick Higgins; and Coach House Press in Toronto, founded in 1967 by Stan Bevington are exemplary for their commitment to presenting the work of mostly unknown authors with the highest standards of quality. It was unquestionably the pioneering work of these and other small presses that raised the bar in terms of publication. The innovative graphics and language explored by those pioneers gradually earned a wider audience, and soon extremely well-produced anthologies on the subject would come out by major printing presses. By the decade’s end, graphic works had carved an undeniable presence in the market, as brilliantly demonstrated in Mary Ellen Solt’s important anthology *Concrete Poetry: A World View*.¹⁵ The fact that these publishing houses were created and maintained by poets and artists should not be overlooked, as it indicates a pivotal shift in *modus operandi*. Printing, which only a century earlier implied the use of complex equipment and skill, was suddenly becoming available to Everyman. With the introduction of new technologies such as offset printing, the mimeograph, and Xerox copiers, the essential

¹⁵ Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968.

element of printmaking—multiple copies available to anyone—was readily available, and between 1960 and 1980 a surge in the small-press culture became noticeable.¹⁶

Post-Everything

In her most recent book, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*, the literary critic Marjorie Perloff refers to Concrete poetry as the *arrière-garde*, a military term for the part of the army that “protects and consolidates the troop movement.” And she adds: “When an *avant-garde* movement is no longer a novelty it is the role of the *arrière-garde* to complete its mission, to ensure its success.”¹⁷ Perloff goes on to briefly comment on the tripartite foundation of Concrete poetry (Fahlström, Gomringer, Noigandres) as playing *arrière-garde* to the early efforts of Italian Futurism, Velimir Khlebnikov’s *zaum* (“transreason,” an experimental poetic language characterized by indeterminacy in meaning), and Pound’s Imagism, among other *isms*. If we accept Perloff’s premise that Concretism brought the Modernist project to a close, we must consider that what came after might be deemed post-Modern, as problematic as this formulation might be. The expression “counterculture,” often used to describe the period beginning in the late 1960s and developing throughout the 70s, perhaps better defines the atomizing culture of instability, difference, diversity, and discontinuity that characterized the post-Concrete era.

A transitional period notable for its focus on transformative and experimental art, the 1970s presents us with a disjointed narrative in that its heterogeneous moments do not cohere into an identifiable whole. Given this unstable environment, artists and audiences were constantly prodded to exchange roles and perspectives. With the boom in periodical publications and the proliferation of new formats such as comics, *fotonovelas*, encyclopedias issued in fascicles, tabloids, magazines, and posters, all spewed out at unprecedented speed, the function of graphics became equally central. It was the pre-dawn of the digital era, we must

¹⁶ For an informative and well-documented overview of the small-press publishing scene in San Francisco and New York during this period, see *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side: Adventures in Writing, 1960-1980: A Sourcebook of Information*, ed. Steven Clay and Rodney Phillips, New York: The New York Public Library and Granary Books, 1998.

¹⁷ Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010, 53.

note, and while its manifestations were not necessarily stable or easily communicable, artists and the public learned to move in, through, between, and among them with agility.

In Brazil, a new generation of poets and artists would be compelled to find alternatives to the hostile and repressive environment created by the military junta that took power in 1964. Notwithstanding the repressive conditions, the 1970s in Brazil were a highly innovative time. For one thing, they marked the beginning of a process of cultural decentralization in the country, with voices emerging from cities other than Rio and São Paulo. The period was also marked by a strong underground movement that released journals, anthologies, and chapbooks in small circulation but at great speed. The influential tabloid *A Flor do Mal*, for instance, survived only a few issues, as did the magazines *Bondinho* and *Navilouca*; the latter actually was designed as a “sole issue.” All over the country, a movement known as “marginal poetry” took hold, with young poets making use of any means they could to get the word out. The vibrant graphic environment was deftly conveyed in a popular song in 1967 that offered a collage of the visuals and contents being explored at the time: “The sun splinters into crimes, / spaceships, guerrillas, / in beautiful Cardinales . . . In faces of presidents / in great kisses of love / in teeth, legs, flags / the bomb and Brigitte Bardot.” The song ended by asking: “Who reads so much news?”¹⁸

For many artists and poets, graphics offered a platform for subverting mainstream means of communication. Cildo Meireles’ well-known series of “insertions into ideological circuits,” for instance, conjures up the urban guerrilla spirit that took hold in many cities at the time by posing troubling questions that no one was then allowed to ask, like “Who killed Herzog?”, a plaintive cry for government accountability in the face of the growing number of students and intellectuals then being imprisoned.¹⁹ Meireles’ gesture, however, must not be confused with the strategies involving graphics during the French Revolution, as its reach was mostly limited

¹⁸ “Alegria Alegria,” a hit pop song by Caetano Veloso, helped launch the Tropicália music movement in Brazil, a style that aimed to meld high and low cultures into a product that could reach out to many audiences. In the original: “O sol se reparte em crimes, / espaçonaves, guerrilhas / em Cardinales bonitas . . . em caras de presidentes / em grandes beijos de amor / em dentes, pernas, bandeiras / bomba e Brigitte Bardot / O sol nas bancas de revista / me enche de alegria e preguiça / quem lê tanta notícia?” [Trans. SB.]

¹⁹ This particular “insertion” from 1975 featured the phrase “Quem matou Herzog?” rubber-stamped on money that was then returned to circulation. The phrase referred to Wladimir Herzog, a Brazilian journalist of Yugoslavian descent imprisoned by the military police in 1975 and whose death was officially pronounced a suicide despite clear indications that he had died under torture.

within the closed circuit of an art audience. Paulo Bruscky's use of the postal system in the early 1970s, on the other hand, tried an entirely new approach, in that the audience he intended to reach was invisible, if not unknown. Often, the addressees for many of the postings were other artists living in remote countries in Eastern Europe, or in neighboring countries in South America, who had never met him or each other in person but who were nevertheless able to create an international network and keep art and information in constant flow. Cristina Freire, in her well-researched monograph *Paulo Bruscky: Arte, Arquivo e Utopia*, accurately notes that his pioneering work with mail art "reiterates in his poetics the primacy of circulation over form, of the network over the individual artist, of the alternative over the established, of the margins over the center."²⁰

While the dissemination of information through the press was being closely monitored by the military police through its department of censorship, a parallel industry of fantasy and escapism was allowed to develop freely. This highly popular industry boomed in the mid-1960s, releasing a variety of comic books and *fotonovelas* that targeted children and female audiences, respectively. Both formats were introduced to the country by foreign productions such as Disney comics or, in the case of the *fotonovelas*, through translated versions of Italian productions. Home-grown editions soon started to appear; they reflected issues of interest to specifically Brazilian women (in the case of *fotonovelas*) and national topics adopted for consumption by Brazilian children. Because of their huge popular reach as well as their inherent formal possibilities—the cinematic quality of the *fotonovela*, the rich color saturation and dazzling graphics of the comics, among other aspects—both formats had particular appeal among visual artists. Antonio Manuel's *Arma Falica*, for instance, turns the romanticism of the *fotonovelas* on its head with its reenactment of a routine inner-city crime of passion. Raimundo Colares' "gibis" (comics), on the other hand, deconstruct the grid and pagination of the comics into a kind of Mondrian experience.

The poet Waly Salomão, one of the editors of *Navilouca*, was also a pop lyricist closely associated with the Tropicália musicians and also with Hélio Oiticica. Often working closely with visual artists Ivan Cardoso and Luciano Figueiredo, Salomão was able to impart a distinctive look to his work, entirely different from that of the Concretists. The *Babilaque* series that he initiated

²⁰ Cristina Freire, *Paulo Bruscky: Arte, Arquivo e Utopia*, Recife: Companhia Editora de Pernambuco, 2006, 137. [Trans. SB.]

while living in New York represents a breakthrough in terms of visual poetry. The original texts scrawled on notebooks owe a debt to the New York graffiti scene that was emerging then. Furthermore, as if to emphasize the “street character” of those texts, Salomão photographed the notebooks on the street against gritty backdrops.

Other technical innovations emerging at the time relate to a growing interest in cybernetics on the part of artists and poets. Starting in the mid-1950s, Concrete poets and artists from São Paulo wrote groundbreaking texts on the subject of art (and literature) and the advent of computers.²¹ Waldemar Cordeiro, one of the pioneers in the Concretist movement, coined the term “arteônica” to denote the fusion of *arte* and *eletrônica* that would be, according to him, the future of art. In that endeavor, Cordeiro initiated a collaboration with Professor Giorgio Moscati of the Nuclear Physics Department at São Paulo University, and later with scientists at Campinas University. The computer-generated print *A Mulher Que Não É B.B.* (“The Woman Who Is Not B.B.,” 1971) is a typical work of this period, in which he often used images taken from newspapers. The great Erthos Albino de Souza, an engineer for the Brazilian oil company Petrobras, was also one of the precursors of computer art, working in close collaboration with the Noigandres poets as well as on his own individual projects. The highly complex apparatus used by Cordeiro and de Souza would look primitive in comparison to the new technology available to artists and poets today, but there is no question that those rudimentary experiments opened the door to our current digital age of e-books, blogs, and digital animation.

The Pleasure of Texting

In many parts of the world, the dislocation of the art object from within the confines of the museum space or the art gallery into the streets is one of the main characteristics of the post-war period. In the United States, most notably, one can trace interest in the street as an arena for political art back to tactics associated with the civil rights movement that soon gave way to demonstrations in support of women’s and gays’ rights, among other social issues. In an era marked by abrupt, mostly enforced, cultural changes, many artists and other cultural actors opted to focus on the transient aspect of art and developed events that communicated directly with their audiences. In several of these productions, graphics would play a basic, quasi-

²¹ See Haroldo de Campos’ essay “Concrete Poetry—Language—Communication,” in *Novas*, 235.

imperceptible role either as advertisement, prop, or documentation. Most often, the outcome of a project was not determined in advance, and its structure would develop more or less organically in response to the specific situation of the presentation or action. Mary Ellen Solt's *The Peoplemover*, for instance, inspired by protests against the Vietnam War, is characteristic of works of the era. The double-sided posters that comprise *The Peoplemover* were originally created in 1968 as Concrete poems, and only later used in a performance.²²

Öyvind Fahlström's *Mao-Hope March*, from the same period, also collapses public demonstration into street theater and political graphics. Like Solt's *The Peoplemover*, the development of *Mao-Hope March* was complex, although one must acknowledge that Fahlström knew well in advance what he was aiming for. The "march" took place on Fifth Avenue in New York in 1966; it was recorded on 16-mm film and later screened as part of Fahlström's *Kisses Sweeter Than Wine*, a performance commissioned by Billy Klüver for *9 Evenings: Theater and Engineering* and presented at the 69th Regiment Armory that same year. Fahlström's witty combination of the smiling faces of Mao Tse-Tung (as his name was then spelled) and Bob Hope, at first glance nonsensical, would speak volumes, as it was meant to juxtapose two popular icons of strikingly different connotations. In the short documentary, a number of "protesters" carry the signs while someone with a tape recorder asks passers-by whether they are happy. Unlike Solt's posters, Fahlström's placards were never released as an edition and the work has survived only as documentary film. Since that time, the poster has become a major element in contemporary art. Exploring the graphic qualities of commercial posters and signage has allowed conceptual artists such as Lawrence Weiner, Allen Ruppersberg, Kay Rosen, and Lenora de Barros to present complex language-based work in formats that feel oddly conventional and familiar.

Inspired by theater groups of the time that challenged traditional forms of engagement, Fahlström and Solt were certainly not alone in their appropriation of political strategies into performance. It is noteworthy, moreover, that as the 1960s came to a close, the political element in most street works was gradually replaced by concerns related to language. The

²² Solt's posters were subsequently used as props in a performance at the suggestion a colleague at Indiana University who created the performance in collaboration with students from his experimental design class. Upon seeing the work, Solt was struck by the possibility of extending it even further, and she wrote a libretto-collage that she published as *The Peoplemover: A Demonstration Poem* (Reno, NV: West Coast Poetry Review, 1978).

Street Works series organized in New York by John Perreault and Eduardo Costa in 1969 acknowledged the fact that the street had become a desirable arena for many artists and poets to act in. In this “street lab” atmosphere, artists were challenged to expand their vocabulary and try new formats. Carolee Schneemann, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Vito Acconci, all artists who excelled in a variety of media including performance, writing, and the visual arts, exemplify the willingness to explore new territories that is a hallmark of the period.

Residing in New York in the 1970s, Hélio Oiticica was also drawn to the street. But whereas in Rio he had been mostly motivated by the vernacular architecture of the *favelas*, he saw some parts of New York as the locus in which a particular chapter of Brazilian history was inscribed. It was here, after all, that the Brazilian Romantic poet Joaquim de Souzaândrade had published his magnum opus, *O Guesa*, considered the first pan-American epic. Oiticica’s short, unfinished film *Agripina é Roma Manhattan* used the downtown Financial District in Manhattan to stage a performance based on a fragment of “Wall Street Inferno,” one of the poems in *O Guesa*.²³ Despite its obvious limitations, *Agripina é Roma Manhattan* is a work of exceptional power if only because of its strong feeling for historical continuity and rupture. In the tentative, semi-improvised style that was common to many underground films of the time, *Agripina é Roma Manhattan* allows the viewer a unique peek into Oiticica’s state of mind, with its evocations of Andy Warhol (through the inclusion of Factory actor Mario Montez) and the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé (through a dice game between Montez and Brazilian artist Antonio Dias).

Oiticica’s keen understanding of history is also evident in a print he produced in 1972 titled *Homage to my Father*. This print was inspired by *Mangue Banguê*,²⁴ a film by Neville d’Almeida about the Mangue neighborhood in Rio, an area traditionally associated with poverty, crime,

²³ This masterpiece of Brazilian literature was virtually ignored by literary critics during the author’s lifetime, but in 1960 it came to the attention of Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, who later published a highly influential critical study on the poet (*Re Visao de Souzaândrade*, 3rd Edition, São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 2002). Perhaps it is fair to say that for Oiticica, the figure of Souzaândrade, a highly inventive poet, represented a high standard of accomplishment and creativity. Like many artists and poets of his generation and later, Oiticica learned about Souzaândrade through the work of the de Campos brothers.

²⁴ Neville d’Almeida’s title *Mangue Banguê* is a play on the expression “bang-bang,” thus alluding to the everyday violence of the Mangue neighborhood.

and prostitution.²⁵ A rarity in the context of Oiticica's *oeuvre*—it was the sole print he ever produced and it uncharacteristically focused on language—*Homage to my Father* resonates deeply within a tradition of socially oriented works such as those produced by Oswaldo Goeldi and Lasar Segal. In addition, the witty wordplay and rigorous graphics relate the work to early Concrete poetry. A protean artist who eludes easy definition, Oiticica casts a web of references in *Homage to my Father* that evince the work's complex genealogy. In a related manuscript dated 1972, Oiticica interweaves references to Paul Klee and Piet Mondrian, the singers Dinah Washington, Billie Holiday, and Sarah Vaughn, and the Brazilian outlaw Valdir Orelhinha. This constellation of names was summed up in the final work in a graphic mapping of the Rio neighborhoods of Bangú and Mangue.

The configuration of networks thus seems to be the ultimate goal in works such as these—whether networks of historical names, events, and specific sites, as in Oiticica, or even of physically connected bodies. With counterculture's emphasis on the body, many works of the 1970s (such as Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* or Gordon Matta-Clark's *Tree Dance*) were mainly concerned with connecting bodies in space. Networks became a major concern also for Lygia Clark, the great Brazilian Neo-Concrete artist who moved to Paris in 1968 and, beginning in 1972, led a course on "gestural communication" at the Sorbonne. Among the many works Clark developed with her students, the building of networks among participants was often the focus, as we see in such works as *Estruturas vivas* ("Live Structures," 1969) and *Cabeça coletiva* ("Collective Head," 1975). *Baba antropofágica* ("Cannibalistic Drool," 1973), another work from the same period, represents an important shift in the cultural power struggle as Clark turns her back on the legacy of Modernism and introduces the disruptive strategies of *antropofagia* into European territory. With its ritualistic use of bodily fluids mixed with notions related to Reichian orgone therapy, *Baba antropofágica* "infects" the Parisian cultural milieu from its epicenter—the university—while also echoing one of its most influential intellectuals:

Text means Tissue; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now

²⁵ For a brief history of the development of the "red district" in Rio de Janeiro, see Sueann Caulfield, "The Birth of Mangue: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Prostitution in Rio de Janeiro, 1850-1942," in *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, ed. Daniel Balderston and Donna J. Guy, New York: New York University Press, 1997, 86-100.

emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue—this texture—the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web. Were we fond of neologisms, we might define the theory of the text as an *hyphology* (*hyphos* is the tissue and the spider's web).²⁶

Works like Oiticica's, Clark's, Matta-Clark's and Schneemann's in fact acquire new meaning when considered under Barthes's notion of a "corporeal exteriorization of discourse." In the last pages of *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes's call for a "carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language" sounds entirely in tune with avant-garde experiments going on at the time, but it also, and most importantly, points to broadly accepted social conventions today. The carnal stereography that Barthes hinted at in *The Pleasure of the Text* seems to have become palpable in our current environment. In the new digital environment in which anyone at all is able to produce and disseminate images and texts, graphics no longer stand as the meeting point where people gather for information. Every individual has become a graphic unit interconnected to all others, and constantly exchanging information.

²⁶ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975, 64.