

Short Circuits

Visual Poetics and a Play on Shortness

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I WOULD LIKE TO START with Gertrude Stein and in particular her poetry sequence, 'Objects', published in *Tender Buttons* in 1914. Let's go through four of them, one at a time:

Eye Glasses

A color in shaving, a saloon is well placed in the centre of an alley.

Cutlet

A blind agitation is manly and uttermost.

Water Raining

Water astonishing and difficult altogether makes a meadow and a stroke.

A Time to Eat

A pleasant simple habitual and tyrannical and authorised and educated and resumed and articulate separation. This is not tardy.¹

Yes, they're brief in terms of shortness but there's also something *conceptually quick* about them. Without being descriptive or imagist, they are highly analytical. They're syntactically abstract or confusing (commonly perceived as the textual equivalent of Cubist still-life). But they are neat, definitely succinct and minimalist. It's that minimalism and the objecthood/objectness/objectivity in these texts that positions them as a move towards the concretisation of poetry: to the state where the form of the text = its content.

The main point I want to flash with this paper is the way that concrete or visual poetry has a poetics of *quickness*. Of course this 'instant' or 'flash' quality is on one hand owing to their function as an image, but is there something more interesting to be said about the tension between reading and seeing in a concrete poem? I'll start (again) with the Godfather of the *Konkrete*, Eugen Gomringer, and his book of concrete poems 'Konstellations', published in 1963 and translated into English in 1967.²

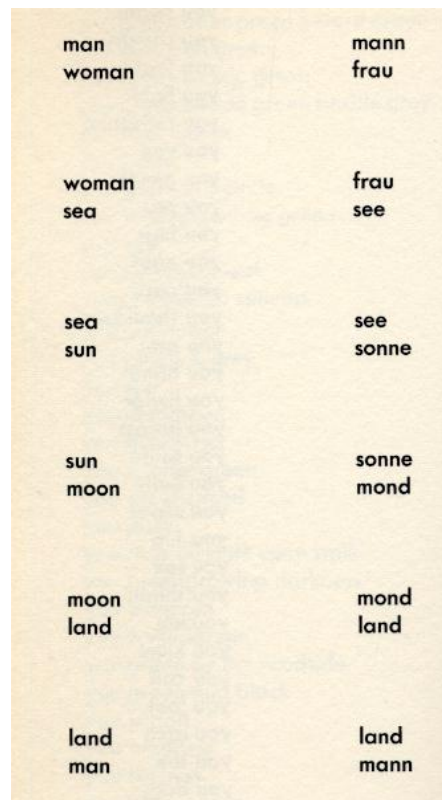


Fig.1. Eugen Gomringer, *The Book of Hours and Constellations*

w w
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 w w

Fig.2. Eugen Gomringer, *The Book of Hours and Constellations*

silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio

Fig.3. Eugen Gomringer, *The Book of Hours and Constellations*

These poems are not just icon-style diagrams. There is a density of text here, but you can absorb it as one shape. Yet, you feel spoken to, hailed or touched as a reader does in a poem. There is a distinct temporality in the process of visually gathering the information, somewhere between reading and seeing, and the poetic meaning is counterpointed between form and content.

The pace of the way sense or meaning comes to the surface is a bit like that of reading or being told a joke or a pun; text encounter → mental switch → reveal/affect.

These examples are from a book and the encounter you have is with the page. This page encounter is marked by the 'single shot' of text, which you 'grab' and move on. (You could spend hours meditating but they definitely allow a satisfaction within that initial moment.)

Now I want to come off the page, to a more physical example of text presence in space.



Fig.4. Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Water-Cooled Watercress* (1989), accessed at <http://www.victoria-miro.com/exhibitions/_376/> [accessed 09 August 2011].

Ian Hamilton Finlay was a Scottish visual poet who worked for 40 years in various forms of concretised poetry. These neon signs are just one aspect of his practice.

The examples here are instant, like statements, and play on ideas of slogans and functional signs, but they gesture towards a meaning rather than conclude anything.



Fig.5. Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Poverty, pitted with larks*, accessed at <http://dailyserver.com/2007/03/ian-hamilton-finlay/> [accessed on 09 August 2011].

Through gesture, the poems achieve brevity in their combination of optical and textual presence, or wordplay laid out.



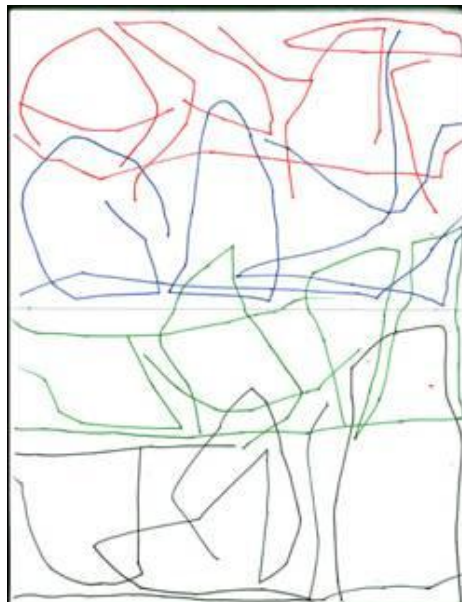
Fig.6. Phillipe L'Home, photographed by Michael Roulier, accessed at <http://flux-boston.com/?p=21> [accessed on 09 August 2011].

Wordplay and *playful* are good terms to navigate a way into these works. They are communicative with a lightness of touch. A lightness that corresponds to shortness.

Finally I want to look at these:



Robert Grenier's long series of visual poems, *64*, from 2004.³ Though not strictly concrete, they correspond to the issues of image-form becoming an 'instant' initiator of the text.



This is condensed but it in no way feels dense; it's got that same lightness of touch as Finlay, or perhaps in this case, delicacy. Now perhaps this is cheating

because if anything Grenier is elongating language – or at least the small fragments he’s making visual - but there’s still a sense that they are encountered as a whole and consumed in a moment. In an interview about this series Grenier says that he fights for a poetry that exists in space. Not through performance or interlocution. The poem speaks for itself. And that I think is a kind of conceptual quickness.

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Notes

¹ Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*, Ebook, Project Gutenberg: < <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15396/15396-h/15396-h.htm> > [09.08.11].

² Eugen Gomringer, *The Book of Hours and Constellations* (Something Else Press, 1968). The following images are scanned by the author from this collection.

³ The images were shown at the “The Irony of Flatness” exhibition, Bury Art Gallery, 19 July-8 November 2008. They can be viewed online at < <http://www.parametrmagazine.org/grenier.htm> > [accessed on 09 August 2011].