

HOW POETRY MATTERS: POETICS OF THE OBJECT IN 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY  
BRAZIL, CHILE, AND THE UNITED STATES

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HOW POETRY MATTERS: POETICS OF THE OBJECT IN 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY  
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*How Poetry Matters: Poetics of the Object in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Brazil, Chile, and the United States*, explores how poetry, rather than attempting to describe, invoke, or symbolize material objects, can be an object itself. This study argues for four different constructions of poetic objecthood—autonomous, relational, assembled, and architectural. Beginning with Brazil’s concrete poetry, this dissertation considers the poem as an autonomous object, wedding the midcentury poetic practices of Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos, and Décio Pignatari to current debates about the object and its ontology, which have traditionally sought to mark their distance from philosophies of language. In its exploration of neoconcrete poetry, this project borrows from artist Lygia Clark’s writings on the relational object and Ferreira Gullar’s engagement with Merleau-Ponty to propose a “relational poetics” in which the poet, the reader, and the poetic object are mutually constitutive in the moment of phenomenological encounter. In its study of Juan Luis Martínez’s *La nueva novela*, this dissertation considers the poem-object in light of what Manuel DeLanda calls, after Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “relations of exteriority,” connecting what was, for the neoconcretists, a relational poetics, to what is, for Martínez, a material poetics of relation. The final chapter, on U.S. poet Ronald Johnson’s concrete epic poem, *ARK*, brings poetry into contact with both the built environment and the epic, showing that material poetics can both take time and take up

space. While many of these examples are more commonly read as art objects, this project situates them inside of poetry, asking, for example, what it means for a poem to be spatial and to invite its reader into a sensorially engaging experience. Together, the four accounts of the poem's objecthood that appear here propose an alternative history of 20th century poetics and argue in favor of a paradigm in which it's not just the poem that makes sense, but the sensible that makes the poem.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Rebecca Kosick received a B.A. in Creative Writing and Literature from the University of Michigan's Residential College in 2004 and an M.A. in the Humanities from the University of Chicago in 2006. From 2011 to 2015, she studied in the Department of Comparative Literature at Cornell University, receiving her M.A. in 2014 and her Ph.D. in 2015. During the 2014-2015 academic year, Rebecca was a Mellon Graduate Fellow at Cornell's Society for the Humanities. While at Cornell, Rebecca was also awarded the Dean's Prize for Distinguished Teaching, along with research grants from the Mario Einaudi Center and Tinker Foundation, a Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship, and the Daniel Clarke Johnson Memorial Scholarship from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In September 2015, Rebecca joined the School of Modern Languages at the University of Bristol (UK) as a Lecturer in Translation Studies.

For Mike and Teddy

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At Cornell, I am grateful to have been guided by my special committee of Pedro Erber, Bruno Bosteels, and Jonathan Culler. In a very real way, this project would not be what it is without Pedro. I didn't come to Cornell planning to write a dissertation primarily on Brazilian concrete poetics, but after one meeting, and subsequently one class in my first year with Pedro, that's the path I found increasingly clearing its way for me. I am grateful to Pedro for his easy fearlessness, for his unquestioning encouragement, and for teaching me a kind of boldness that is also laid-back, like a "yes" that creates its own momentum. I am grateful to

Bruno for being my toughest reader, and for always pushing me to prevent the formal from becoming an enclosure from the social and historical, which is something he showed me can be true of work and life too—that to do this work, you don’t have to fence out life. I am grateful to Jonathan for helping me always place this project in the context of poetry’s biggest questions, for describing my arguments back to me as better versions of themselves, and for being the most reassuring port whenever the nerves of program hurdles threatened to storm.

Along with the formal mentors of my committee are many others, whose formal and informal interventions helped launch and shape this work—Ken Mikolowski, whose “poetry is everything” first day exercise in the RC 15 years ago continues to shape the questions and flexibilities I bring to the genre; Kelly Austin who advised my thesis at the University of Chicago, and continued to encourage and support my interests in translation in the years that followed; Fanny Rubio, whose prose poems first invited my visual curiosities about poetry; Peter O’Leary who helped me read Ronald Johnson; and the members of the faculty of the Department of Art History at the University of Chicago, where I worked before coming to Cornell. Among them, I thank Joel Snyder for starting a conversation “about my future” in the office with the one red wall those many years ago, for inviting me to faculty lunches, for encouraging me toward this work before I knew it would be my work, and for being, as I’ve joked, the ghost fourth member of my committee, which isn’t a joke at all, but the kindest kindness that’s been invariably at my side since I left Chicago. At Cornell, I also want to thank Sue Besemer, whose labor is care, and whose care has carried me throughout these years; Bret Leraul, my cohort and conspirator; and Liz Blake, Diana Hamilton, and Anna Horakova, my dissertation writing group and dear, brilliant friends.

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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation begins from the assumption that poetry matters. It is not an argument in favor of why. Instead, it explores how poetry, rather than attempting to describe, invoke, or symbolize material objects, can be an object itself. In this, I look at four examples of what I'm calling material poetics. These kinds of poetry emphasize their matter. Sometimes this takes the form of drawing attention to the material texture of language itself—the ways it looks or sounds, or the ways it imprints on the page. Other times, the poem takes on the characteristics of what are more frequently considered to be objects of plastic or visual art, in that the poem becomes a three-dimensional structure that breaks with the page and the book entirely. Or, the book comes to be a physical holding place for extra-poetic objects and materials that, along with language, assemble the poem. Still another version of this leaves the poem inside the book, but finds ways of making it obvious that the book is, and always was, a three-dimensional structure, not just the inconsequential, unnoticed support of poetry.

This type of poetry has broadly been called “concrete.” Though I do use the term here, I also offer the alternatives of “material poetry” and “material poetics.” Part of the reason for this is that “concrete poetry” in Brazil, which the first chapter of this book considers, meant something very specific. The term was not then, as it often is now, an umbrella that broadly encapsulated poetry's move from the textual to the visual. Although, that was part of it. I also use the term in the last chapter, on Ronald Johnson's *ARK*, because Johnson was involved with the international practice of “concrete poetry” that grew out of conversations the Brazilian concretists were having with likeminded poets like Eugen Gomringer and Ian Hamilton Finlay. Johnson considered himself to be a concrete poet, and I'm interested in exploring the ways his



long poem *ARK* can be considered concrete despite breaking with many of the tenets of the original movement.

Still, I would broadly characterize *ARK* and all the other examples in this dissertation as “material poetry.” Another reason for this is that I want, specifically, to stress the materiality of these poetries. Chapter two, on neoconcrete poetics, especially, takes up the question of whether these practices are better categorized as conceptual or material. My argument throughout this dissertation is that the material matters to these poetries. As each of the chapters show, there’s not a simplistic either/or proposition in this. The move toward materiality does not come at the expense of the concept, or the poem’s ability to “mean.” As I show, in many cases, matter itself is invited to participate in the meaningful outcomes of the poem. In other instances, meaning is poetic material on par with the ways language looks and sounds.

I also offer “material poetry” as an alternative to the term “visual poetry,” which, as should be clear, emphasizes visual material over other kinds of poetic materiality. That’s not the case with the examples this dissertation “looks” at. I show, for example, that concrete poetry, the most apparently visual in form, is always constructed from what the concrete poets call “verbivocovisual” material—meaning the meaningful, sonic, *and* visual materials of language. In *ARK*, reading is done with the eyes, but where the eyes end and the other senses begin is often a confusing proposition and the book makes use, for example, of sounds that can only be heard with the ears and visual play whose poetic possibilities increase only when the reader attempts to say the poem aloud. Going further, in *La nueva novela* some of the poetic materials that construct the Juan Luis Martínez-assembled poem actually stick out from the page and invite the reader’s touch. This is the case with neoconcrete poetry too, in which the “reader”’s body not

only partakes of the “reading” process but, at times, becomes another of the poem’s material components.

As the scare quotes around “reading” should make clear, reading is not what it used to be in the examples this dissertation studies. Reading isn’t even consistent across these chapters, or even further, from one example to the next. Part of the claim this dissertation makes is that these poetries reshape the reading experience. They also reveal and make consequential aspects of more typical approaches to reading that are usually overlooked. This, then, is one way in which these poetries can be considered “visual.” They stop us from *over*looking and make the hidden aspects of reading visible. One criticism I hear when I give talks on the materials of this dissertation is that what these poetries do isn’t really new. Reading, critics say, always involves physically handling the pages of the book. And the book was always (until recently, anyway) a material object. These things are true. And though the various poetic manifestos that appear in this dissertation do, at times, make the argument for a whole new way of doing poetry, that’s not the case. What is revolutionary about these forms is that they make you notice the ways text is material, or the book is material, or the ways material objects can signify, or the way language can block or obscure signification.

Material poetries, then, train us to read in such a way that these present, but usually latent, aspects of poetry and language are newly manifest. The type of reading these poetries call for is not uniform across each example, but there are strategies that can be used in most cases. For example, material poetries call for a type of reading that does not take meaning to be the primary—or even, at times, *a* primary—outcome of the reading process. No example I’ve considered here disregards meaning altogether, but it is prioritized, or de-prioritized, to varying degrees. In concrete poetry, for example, meaning is just one third of what the poem offers to its

readers. The other two thirds are its look and its sound. At the other end of the spectrum, Ronald Johnson's *ARK* can likely be read with all of poetry's familiar interpretive tools, plus some. It does not suggest that matter outweighs meaning, but shows itself to be both a work of material architecture and a work about the metaphor of architecture, at once. In the middle are neoconcretism, in which the experience of matter is the meaning of the poem, and *La nueva novela*, in which paradox and riddle frustrate meaning in language and in which material objects contribute meaningfully to the text.

In large part, what all these examples require is a type of reading in which perception of the poem's material qualities is at least on par with, sometimes outweighing, interpretation. As such, the type of reading these poetries demand shares an affinity with "surface reading" and "new formalisms" in which poetry "insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through."<sup>1</sup> In essence, this insistence is the demand of concrete poetry. And the material poetic practices that follow it all, to a certain degree, share this demand. Even *ARK*, with its steadfast reliance on metaphor, finds ways of resisting the reader's easy passage from word to referent. For example, it makes frequent use of the homophonic pun of "I" and "eye," preventing readers from ever really "seeing" through to what either of these words could be said to, stably, mean. At the macro level, *ARK* is invested in displaying itself as an object-in-progress, rather than a completed object capable of obscuring the things it is, and was, made of.

In general, all the material poetries I examine here share this affinity for showing themselves as they are. This is sometimes why concrete poetry, in particular, is dismissed as being too simple or obvious to bother with. Without some deeper meaning to uncover, many readers who were trained in reading-as-interpretation find there's not much for them to do.

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1. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 9.

Concrete poetry doesn't just resist the notion that meaning is "hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter."<sup>2</sup> In concrete poetry, there's nowhere for anything to hide in the first place. So few words are used that, when a reader looks at a concrete poem, everything is manifestly there for her perception. But, simplicity is not always the outcome of this strategy, as *La nueva novela* makes clear. That book shows itself to be exactly as it is, but exactly *what* it is, is a materialization of an incredibly dense thicket of relations. Nearly every page is dedicated to some other author, or borrows materials from some other person or object. The reader can see it all there, but that doesn't make it anymore easily understandable.

Neoconcrete poetry adds a challenge to the notion that the poem is all there for its reader to perceive. That's because to perceive the neoconcrete poem, readers have to actually touch it, sometimes even enter the poem with their entire bodies. As might be obvious, this presents certain challenges to someone like me who wishes to write about this poetry and to theorize its materiality. Inevitably, I rely on description. But I have also worked, throughout this project, to take seriously neoconcretism's suggestion that embodied sense experience can lead to a different kind of understanding than mental contemplation can. For this reason, I am grateful to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, who gave me a scholarship and invited me to their summer artist residency and art school in Saugatuck, Michigan. At Ox-Bow, as the school is called, I was able to spend two weeks making relational objects with a group of similarly interested artists, led by Anna Mayer and Jemima Wyman, two L.A. based artists whose work is inspired by Lygia Clark. I have also brought the practice of making relational objects—poetic and otherwise—to my classroom as a teacher, and to other scholarly presentations I have given. And I have traveled to see and touch some of the original objects.

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2. Ibid., 1.

My hope is that this dissertation will encourage these alternate kinds of reading. And, my recommendation is that readers let the poetry guide the way it can be read. This means coming to a material poem ready to perceive whatever the poem is and working against the assumption that, first of all, language means to mean above all else. I also hope that what these poetries contribute to reading as a practice in perception can extend beyond the poems themselves. In this, way, I hope to answer another criticism that these poetries are often charged with: that the type of reading you do when reading, for example, a concrete poem, can only happen when you're reading a concrete poem. I would argue that's not the case and that the method of reading these poetries enable *can* extend to other forms, genres, and objects. This is the case I make for neoconcrete poetry's impact on our understanding of conceptual art practices. There, I argue that if you take a neoconcrete poem that looks an awful lot like a conceptual art event and insist that it is a poem, then conceptual art itself starts to look a lot more material. Unlike Ferreira Gullar's "Buried Poem," most poems are not underground rooms. The "Buried Poem" is though. So, if we accept that to be true, lots of things stand out about this "poem." Poems don't usually have doors or floors or antechambers or walls or boxes or human bodies in them. These material aspects of the "Buried Poem" register for the "reader" precisely because they are not expected from the genre. The "Buried Poem," thus trains us to perceive all these things. And if we turn our gaze from there to other works of conceptual art that claim to prize the concept but take place in very similarly material surroundings, well, we might start to wonder if maybe the material matters over there too. This can happen inside of poetry as well. Though happening separately from this study of material poetry, my project finds affinity with the recent publication of *The Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson's Envelope Poems*.<sup>3</sup> That book, which reproduces in facsimile

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3. Emily Dickinson, *The Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson's Envelope Poems* (New

Dickinson's fragments as they were written on envelopes, is an example of making visible poetic materials that were previously treated as invisible. Material poetics, I claim, are all around us if we just know how to look.

To get that looking started, I've chosen four examples of material poetry from the Americas which were constructed during the second half of the twentieth century. Not all of what I would characterize as material poetry aspires to become material *objects*, but that is the case with the examples covered in this dissertation. This is where my study of material poetics intersects with object-oriented ontologies and new materialisms. In that intersection, I don't draw from a single theory of what the object is, but, rather, allow the particular approaches of the poetic examples to guide me toward a theory of the object the poem itself works to express. In doing this, I have found certain affinities, for example, between concrete poetry's interest in an autonomous object and the object as it is described in Graham Harman's *Towards Speculative Realism. La nueva novela*, made, as its "author" says of "little pieces that connect,"<sup>4</sup> shares affinities with Manuel DeLanda's elaboration of assemblage theory. The neoconcrete chapter and the chapter on *ARK*, concerned as they are with both the senses and the sensible, look toward older forms of phenomenology in place of or in addition to contemporary engagements with the object. But, in that, they suggest that perhaps current theories of the object are too hasty in their disregard for the subject, and offer explorations of how subjects can be said to interact, and at times join, with the object.

But the main theorists that guide this dissertation are the poets themselves. I have, throughout this project, worked to place the American (by which I mean to include *all* of the

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York: New Directions, 2013).

4. Juan Luis Martínez and Félix Guattari, "Félix Guattari: Conversación con Juan Luis Martínez," *Revista Matadero*, July/August, 2000.

Americas) poets I engage with on equal footing with theorists whose primary identification is with Theory. Though this project is unlikely to be described as a work in politics and literature, my critical politics registers in the moves I have tried to make to destabilize the hierarchies which would place theory above poetry, Europe above America. I examine political questions in more than one of these chapters, most prominently in the chapter on neoconcretism's relational poetic objects. I conclude there that the avant-garde practices of the neoconcrete movement are capable of incorporating the political into the relational. But, in the background of the entire dissertation is a politics that I borrow from Gullar's own approach to neoconcretism. While he eventually turns away from neoconcretism to become an actual politician, I have used Gullar's belief in relationality's potential as an orienting politics for my own writing. Though this comes through only in the background, I work against the notion that hierarchies left over from colonialism prevent the dream of relationality from ever being realized. Instead, like the assumption that poetry *does* matter, or that poetry *can be* whatever strange object I say it is here, I assume that these poets and poetry *are already* on par with any of the theorists or theories engaged in this dissertation. As such, I also assume that poetry can do the work of theory, and does.

The material poetries discussed in this dissertation diverge in many ways, but they do share a set of theoretical interests. In addition to thinking through what it means for poetry to be an object, and the consequences that has for subjectivity and meaning, another major node of theoretical interest grows from questions surrounding relationality. At the far end of the spectrum is concrete poetry, which represents the only attempt, in these chapters, to create a poetic object that favors autonomy over relationality. This works in concrete poetry primarily as a rejection of communicative, representative language. Concrete poetry does not seek to communicate a

message to a reader with whom the poem's "speaker" is in a relational exchange. Instead, concrete poetry works to become an object that, like other objects, can be apprehended with the senses but doesn't have to be. As I show, though concrete poetry doesn't completely break the bonds of relationality, it does find ways of, for example, creating poems capable of writing themselves. At the same time, it works to disrupt the usual relation of objects and language. Rather than naming an extra poetic object, the concrete poem makes itself into an object that may evoke or invite comparisons with other kinds of objects, but doesn't have to. That means the relation between concrete poetry and objects is not the typical one whereby language represents objects but one in which the object of the concrete poem can, but doesn't have to, invite relationships with any other object.

*La nueva novela* and the examples of neoconcrete poetry I look at are both explicitly engaged in theorizing relationality, though in quite different ways. In neoconcrete poetry, the relational field is much smaller than the one *La nueva novela* reveals itself to be a part of. While *La nueva novela* shows itself to be in relation to a vast library of other texts, objects, and people, neoconcrete relational objects spur relations only with those participants actively engaged in their handling. I have called neoconcrete poetics a "relational poetics" as a way of emphasizing that poetry emerges from the relation the object creates with its participating subject. And, I have called *La nueva novela* a "material poetics of relation" as a way of emphasizing that the book turns relation into a poetics by showing itself to be constructed in and as a complex relational network. *ARK* is interested in relation too, but it's more interested in blurring the lines that might divide any one sense, genre, or dimension from another. If *La nueva novela* is a network, *ARK* is more like liquid cement—everything all stirred up together, ready to build something new.



I have tried not to collapse the distinctions among the various material poetics this dissertation considers. Instead, I have worked to provide four different accounts for what a material poetics of the object might look (and sound, and feel, etc.) like. My aim has been to show both how broad and how widespread material poetry is. One of the great pleasures of talking about this project with scholars working in other periods or geographies is that everyone always has an example of materials poetics proper to their time and place. Though material poetry is often treated as marginal, much less central to poetry than the lyric or the epic, I hope this dissertation will begin to raise the poles of a big tent in which all these, and all of your, examples can come together.

## CHAPTER 1 THE OBJECT OF CONCRETE POETRY

In their Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry,”<sup>5</sup> Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari<sup>6</sup> called for what they claimed would be a new kind of poetry. In it, the poem would not be “the interpreter of exterior objects” but “an object in and of itself.”<sup>7</sup> As a first step, this would mean introducing “graphic space” into what was formerly assumed to be an art of “linear-temporal development.”<sup>8</sup> The poem would not, for example, describe an object as the reader followed along in time. Nor would it seek to develop metaphors out of objects. Rather, it

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5. The “Pilot Plan” was originally published in the group’s *Noigandres* journal in 1958. The essay’s name refers to the nation’s then-new capital Brasília, which was laid out in the shape of an airplane, and built in the latter half of the 1950s. Though this essay was published some six years into the practice of concrete poetry in Brazil, it functions as the group’s primary manifesto and draws from many other of the group’s prolific auto-critical writings. For more on concrete poetry’s relationship with architecture, see chapter four.

6. The de Campos brothers and Pignatari were the primary practitioners and theoreticians of concrete poetry in Brazil. Though it became an international movement and the term “concrete poetry” has come to stand in for a broad genre of visual and material poetics, its roots can be traced to these three poets from São Paulo. As Charles A. Perrone describes it,

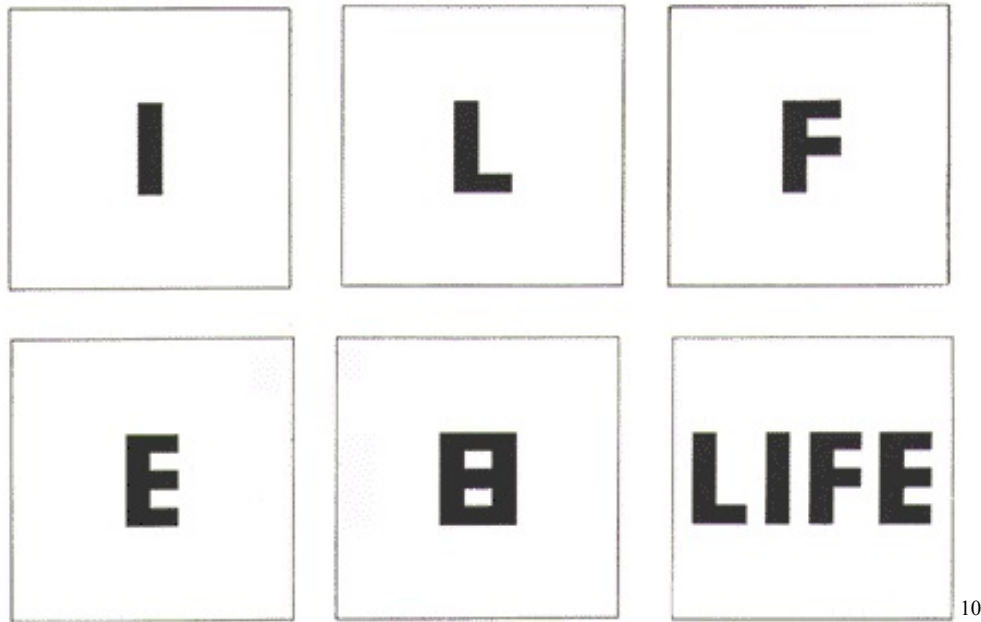
Concrete poetry in Brazil developed in three stages. The first (1952-1956) involved the organization of the self-named Noigandres group by the São Paulo poets Décio Pignatari, Augusto de Campos, and Haroldo de Campos. In this “organic” or “phenomenological” phase, creative texts were still verselike but visual factors and verbal dispersion began to play leading roles. In the second stage, a spatially syntaxed poetic minimalism developed. In this so-called “heroic phase” (1956-1960)—the echoes of *modernismo* are intentional—manifestos were issued and the theory of concrete poetry evolved significantly. This period saw the making of “classical,” “high,” or “orthodox” concrete poetry, texts composed according to rational, “mathematical” principles. More flexible notions of creativity and “invention” prevailed in the third stage, beginning about 1961. The last phase witnessed both definition of social concerns and extreme challenges to the conventions of poetry, as well as intense discord and the emergence of other vanguard groups.

Charles A. Perrone, *Seven Faces: Brazilian Poetry Since Modernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 26.

7. Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari, “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry,” in *Novas*, ed. Antonio Sergio Bessa and Odile Cisneros (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 218.

8. *Ibid.*, 217. Literature’s association with time, and the visual arts’ association with space, is further discussed and problematized in chapter four of this dissertation.

would construct itself as an object from the material that language makes available—its meaning, its sound, and its image. In other words, the concrete poem is not merely a verbal art, nor a picture in words, but a “verbivocovisual” object,<sup>9</sup> as much something to look at, as it is something to hear, or understand.



Pignatari’s poem “LIFE,” for instance, forefronts the visuality of its constructive material. Unlike poetry in verse, which concrete poetry opposes, “LIFE” isn’t separated into lines of verse, and its meaning doesn’t unfold via “a succession of words proceeding through time”<sup>11</sup> Rather, it is lines. It is a “space-time structure,”<sup>12</sup> that works as a kind of flipbook, where each of the squares

9. Ibid., 218.

10. Because my claim is that images such as this one are poems, I have, as much as possible, cited them throughout this dissertation in the footnote-style typical of poetry citations. Charles Bernstein, “Décio Pignatari (1927-2012),” *Jacket 2*, accessed September 8, 2014.

11. Joseph Frank, “Spatial Form in Modern Literature : Part I,” *The Sewanee Review* 53 (1945): 223.

12. de Campos, de Campos, and Pignatari, “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry,” 217.

shown in the above image is actually an individual page of the poem. The first page shows the single stroke of the “I,” and additional pages add additional lines, forming the shape that can be seen on the fifth page, before separating back out into “LIFE.”

Pignatari’s poem is not a poetic meditation on life, but a poetic materialization of “LIFE,” an object made from language. The poem is an object. This assertion is troubling for poetry, which doesn’t generally think of itself on these terms. And it’s troubling for studies in poetics, which aren’t used to thinking about objects as something poetry might be. When objects enter into poetry, it’s usually from the outside, as images, symbols, or ekphrasis, as things to be invoked, approached, or described. As such, there has remained between objects and poetry a stubborn horizon, where the harder language works to find the world of objects, the more “it finds in it[self] a barrier to accessing” that world.<sup>13</sup>

This barrier has remained in place and helped to define the borders between the so-called “linguistic turn” of the twentieth century and more recent inquiries into the object and its ontology. According to Graham Harman, the philosophy of language “leaves humans in absolute command” while the “arena of the world is packed with diverse objects” that go largely ignored.<sup>14</sup> When language does pause to find the object, it finds instead either a thing<sup>15</sup> that impossibly exceeds its name or that, once named, the thing’s no longer there to be found.

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13. Haroldo de Campos, “Concrete Poetry-Language-Communication,” in *Novas*, ed. Antonio Sergio Bessa and Odile Cisneros (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 236.

14. Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 94.

15. In their writings, the concrete poets often use “object” and “thing” interchangeably, and though I am aware that this is a subject of much philosophical debate, for the purposes of this project, it’s bracketed in favor of following the poets’ lead.

Characterizing this latter outcome, Peter Schwenger writes that, “the death of the thing, then, is the price we pay for the word.”<sup>16</sup>

And yet, more than fifty years ago, a group of three young poets from São Paulo built a poetry “at the service of an unexpected goal: the creation of its own object.”<sup>17</sup> This poetry aimed to cross the divide between language and object not by achieving the perfect description or by finding its way back to the “perfectly referential” language that “brought the world out of the void in the act of speaking,”<sup>18</sup> but by pointing out that “for the first time, it no longer matters if a word is not a given object, since, in reality, it will always be, in the special domain of the poem, the object given.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, by not trying to make objects out of language, concrete poetry shows that language is already objects, not forever barred from the world of things, but capable of creating “out of its own material, a new form, or rather, an entire parallel world of things—the poem.”<sup>20</sup>

In this way, concrete poetry reveals that the opposition between language and objects can’t hold, and demands that, in light of their shared place in the “world of things,” they be examined together. Though Harman wishes to oppose philosophies of objects to philosophies of language, I wish to argue that concrete poetry comprises a philosophy of language that is, at once, a philosophy of objects. In this, the concrete poem not only disrupts the supposedly radical break between these two regimes, but shows itself to be anticipatory of many of the debates ongoing within so-called “new materialisms.” For Harman, the object is “that which has a

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16. Peter Schwenger, “Words and the Murder of the Thing” *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001): 100.

17. de Campos, “Concrete Poetry-Language-Communication,” 236.

18. Barbara Johnson, *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003), 49.

19. de Campos, “Concrete Poetry-Language-Communication,” 236.

20. Ibid.

unified and autonomous life apart from its relations, accidents, qualities, and moments.”<sup>21</sup> Over the course of this chapter, I will show that this definition is not unique to non-linguistic objects, but for the time being, let’s consider those objects Harman is more likely referring to. His definition isn’t too tricky with these things—billiard balls, snowflakes, submarines, hammers (both broken and not)—in mind.<sup>22</sup> The word “life” might pose some problems, but we can imagine, for example, that a billiard ball has some kind of existence outside of our ability to perceive its qualities or be inconvenienced by its breakdown.

Language, though, throws a wrench in things. It’s much more challenging to think about language as an object than it is to think about a billiard ball as an object. In everyday life, objects tend to look a lot like billiard balls, or lamps, or toothbrushes, or chairs. Language, on the other hand, is not typically seen as an object, but as a system made of words that represent or stand in for objects, among other things. “Ball” for ball, “submarine” for submarine. And in this way, the question of language’s autonomy is a particularly stubborn one. A ball may continue being a ball whether we’re aiming at it or not, but without a human subject to bind a word to the thing it means, what becomes of language?

Pignatari’s poem “LIFE” begins to point us toward the ways in which concrete poetry will answer that question. For one, it is “an object in and of itself, not the interpreter of exterior objects.”<sup>23</sup> Its life is not our lives or any life lived, but the component material parts of the word “LIFE.” That those parts represent the idea of life is not immaterial to the poem, but neither is it a message the poem, or its author, wishes to communicate. “The concrete poem communicates

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21. Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 199.

22. As Harman writes, “the dualism between tool and broken tool actually has no need of human beings, and would hold perfectly well of a world filled with inanimate entities alone.” Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 99-100.

23. de Campos, de Campos, and Pignatari, “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry.” 218.

its own structure: structure-content”<sup>24</sup> such that the “autonomous life” of this object lives literally inside of “LIFE.” In what follows, I hope to explore concrete poetry as a poetics that made language its object. And I mean this in two ways. First, that language—and its boundaries, qualities, relations, and possibilities—was the object of this poetry’s inquiry. And second, that language would come to be, for the concrete poets, an autonomous object, one that is not merely a materialization of language, but key to understanding the matter of language more broadly.

### ***The External Object***

The Brazilian concrete poets were not the first to make an object-oriented poetry. German has, for instance, the “dinggedicht” (object poem) where “poems represent concrete objects and situations”<sup>25</sup> and there is the North American modernist “movement” of Objectivism which tended “to use language more literally than figuratively, presenting concrete objects for themselves rather than as embodiments of abstract ideas.”<sup>26</sup> But while these examples, like concrete poetry, may be “searching for an instrument capable of bringing language closer to things,”<sup>27</sup> they don’t necessarily share concrete poetry’s aspiration to become an object. That said, there are other poetics which align more closely with this position, and concrete poetry does not belong only to Brazil. At the same time the practice was developing in São Paulo, the Bolivian-born Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer was developing a poetics quite similar to what the Noigandres group in Brazil was after. This branch (and other international branches) of concrete poetry is not the domain of this chapter, but I will say that, though the two practices began

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24. Ibid.

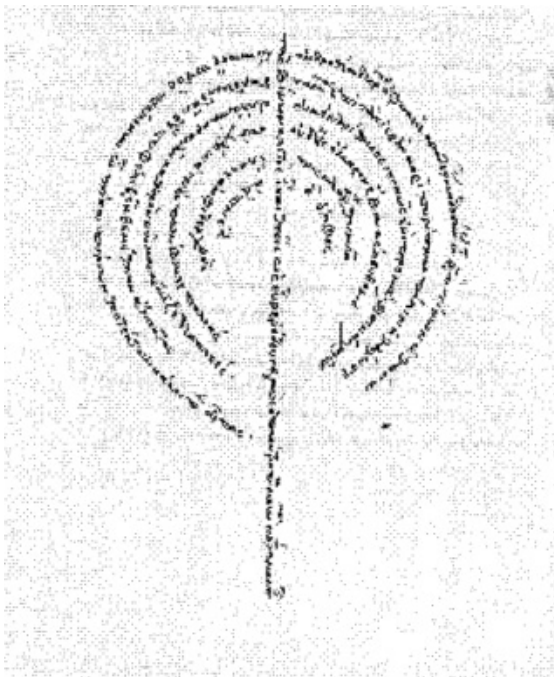
25. M. Winkler, “Dinggedicht” in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Roland Greene (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 367.

26. E. Berry, “Objectivism,” in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Roland Greene (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 963.

27. de Campos, “Concrete Poetry-Language-Communication,” 236.

somewhat independently, they later joined,<sup>28</sup> and their lineages are entangled in influential figures like Mallarmé and Apollinaire. The Brazilians established the name “Concrete Poetry,” but the origins of that term can be traced out of poetry entirely, to concrete music and to concrete art, whose influences include the Swiss artist Max Bill, to whom Gomringer was secretary.

But, visual, shape, and pattern poetry have a much longer history dating back, at least, to the technopaegnia of Ancient Greece. Objects are certainly not absent from this long history of visual poetry, but for the São Paulo-based group, the object *is* the poetry and the poetry *is* the object. It’s not a represented object and it’s not external to language. This is the key difference. For example, you can see an external object in this Hellenistic poem: an axe.



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28. For more information, see Haroldo de Campos, “Brazilian and German Avant-Garde Poetry,” in *Novas*, ed. Antonio Sergio Bessa and Odile Cisneros (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 249-275.

29. Simias of Rhodes, *Axe*, 3rd century B.C. Luis Arturo Guichard, “Simias’ Pattern Poems: The Margins of the Canon,” in *Hellenistica Groningana: Beyond the Canon*, ed. Annette Harder et al. (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2006), 91.



The poem, which is about the axe that chopped down the trees that built the Trojan Horse, is also in the shape of an axe. The handle extends down the middle, and two metal blades frame it on each side. You read the poem as a spiral inward, where the lines run along the edges of the blades and on inward toward the handle. This is an example of an arrangement of words that allows language to represent an external object both verbally and visually. And this is not the aim of concrete poetry. But, this poem already begins to upset the division Harman assumes between language and things. If object-oriented philosophies wish to insist on a new kind of realism, this poem shows that the real appears not outside of, but in, language. Harman writes that for Manuel “DeLanda<sup>30</sup> ‘realism’ means at the very least that reality has a certain autonomy from the human mind.”<sup>31</sup> But, the axe that’s represented in this poem—verbally and visually—cannot claim that autonomy because it is a mythical axe, imagined by the human mind. This and other of Simias’s pattern poems can be thought of, as Luis Guichard argues, as “purely literary pieces,” not “conceived to be inscribed on real objects.”<sup>32</sup> The real object, then, isn’t the axe, but the axe poem. Still, whether material or mythical, this poem is engaged in the representation of an object external to itself, something I want to emphasize differs from the project of concrete poetry.

This is similar to the kind of visual representation we see in Apollinaire’s Calligrammes.

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30. Manuel DeLanda and “assemblage theory” are further discussed in chapter three of this dissertation.

31. Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 174.

32. Guichard, “Simias’ Pattern Poems: The Margins of the Canon,” 91.

CET  
 ARBRISSEAU  
 QUI SE PRÉPARE  
 A FRUCTIFIER  
 TE  
 RES  
 SEM  
 BLE

33

In this calligramme from “Paysage,” translated by Anne Hyde Greet as “THIS LITTLE TREE BEGINNING TO BEAR FRUIT RESEMBLES YOU,”<sup>34</sup> an external object is represented, and the text’s meaning points directly to this fact. The “you” the poem resembles is equal to the external referent for the words “little tree.” In other words, “little tree” resembles a little tree. At the same time, “this” forces the poem to turn back on itself to mean “this little representation of a tree,” emphasizing again the link between the representation and the represented. As W.J.T. Mitchell writes about “Easter Wings,” perhaps the most famous “shaped” poem in the Anglophone tradition, “the space of artistic representation in this poem is the utopia of its desire for speech to become actual.”<sup>35</sup> “This little tree” points to this same desire, hoping that its reference might simultaneously be both that tree external to the poem and the tree that is the poem. That’s, of course, not accomplished and this failure serves to reestablish the very split it hopes to overcome.

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33. Guillaume Apollinaire, *Calligrammes: Poems of Peace and War (1913-1916)*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 30.

34. Ibid., 31.

35. W.J.T. Mitchell, “Space, Ideology, and Literary Representation,” *Poetics Today* 10 (1989): 96.

## *Matter and Meaning*

If we return to the question of autonomy, this is a problem. Because if these poems are representative of an external object—whether visually or verbally or both—it would seem they necessarily exist in relation to that object. And this is not a problem posed by these poems alone. It’s a problem for language in general. If language is by nature referential, and not just to things, then it would seem to have little chance at an “autonomous life.” But, concrete poetry does not eliminate language’s relation to the things it names. It uses it as constructive material. Rather than materializing an external object, concrete poetry materializes itself.

ra terra ter  
rat erra ter  
rate rra ter  
rater ra ter  
raterr a ter  
raterra terr  
araterra ter  
raraterra te  
rraraterra t  
erraraterra  
terraraterra

36

If we look at this poem by Décio Pignatari, we can see this difference. Composed from a single word—“terra” (earth)—and its parts, this poem isn’t so much a representation of earth-the-object but a “content-structure”<sup>37</sup> that builds itself out of the materials its word makes available. That word naturally inspires some meaningful associations and readers are likely, after looking at it, to find in the poem visual references to plots of land, cultivated fields, city blocks, etc. But, unlike the axe, for example, the poem isn’t clearly a representation of any of those things and the

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36. Pignatari, *Poesia pois é poesia 1950-2000*, (São Paulo: Ateliê Editorial, 2004), 126.

37. de Campos, “Concrete Poetry-Language-Communication,” 240.

directionality of such references is reversed. Rather than bringing an external object into the poem as a represented one, Pignatari's poem "creates in the spatial field a movement all its own, supported by elements of proximity and similarity,"<sup>38</sup> out of which readers may make their own associations.

Concrete poetry, then, is not a poetry made from objects, but a poetic object made from the materials available in language. Sight and sound are emphasized in ways that differ from most other forms of poetry, but, as the poem above shows, that does not mean that, in the process becoming-object, concrete poetry denies the "virtuality"<sup>39</sup> of the word—its ability to mean, refer to, or stand in for. It's just that, in concrete poetry, the word no longer disappears beneath its meaning. At the same time, though, the inverse is also true. The word's meaning does not disappear beneath its material presence. In that way of thinking, the word becomes matter once it ceases to mean. As Maurice Blanchot puts it,

a name ceases to be the ephemeral passing of nonexistence and becomes a concrete ball, a solid mass of existence; language, abandoning the sense, the meaning which was all it wanted to be, tries to become senseless. Everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of the ink, the book. Yes, happily language is a thing: it is a written thing, a bit of bark, a sliver of rock, a fragment of clay in which the reality of the earth continues to exist.<sup>40</sup>

Schwenger argues that Blanchot's account of language without sense "is one strategy for countering the death of the thing."<sup>41</sup> But the object of concrete poetry does not come to be sensible only when it stops being sensical. "Concrete poetry's function," as Haroldo writes, "is not, as one would imagine, to empty the word of its charge of content but rather to utilize this

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38. Ibid., 241.

39. de Campos, de Campos, and Pignatari, "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry," 218.

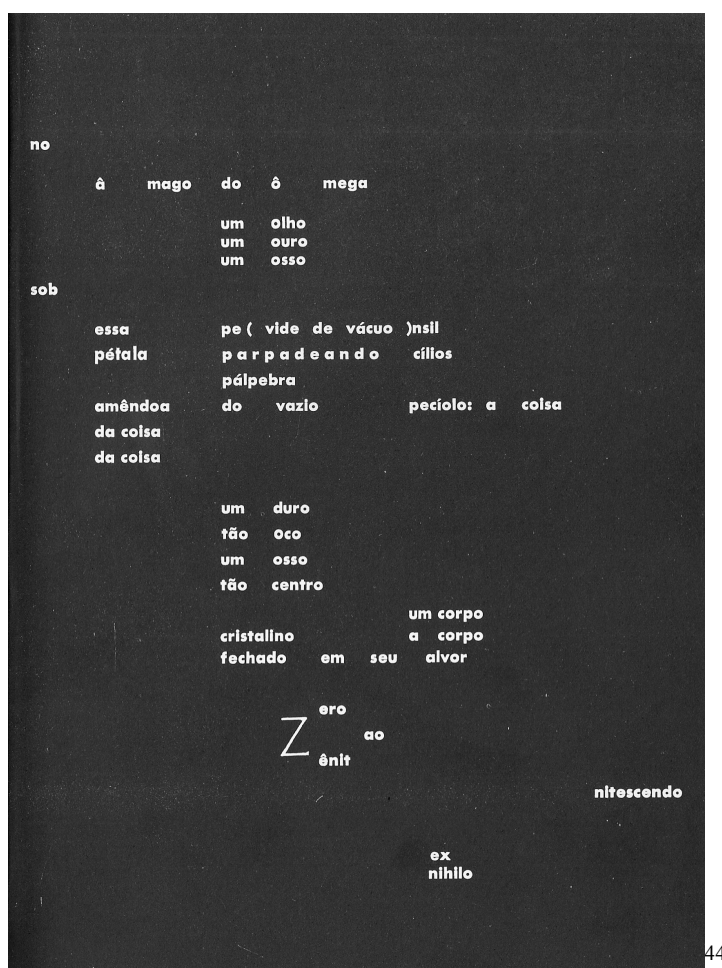
40. Maurice Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," in *The Work of Fire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 327-328.

41. Schwenger, "Words and the Murder of the Thing," 103.

charge as working material in equal conditions with all other material that is available to it.”<sup>42</sup>

This material is, for concrete poetry, “verbivocovisual.”<sup>43</sup> And the verbal portion of its material (its meaning) is equally important as the poem’s sound and look.

For concrete poetry, then, the poem becomes a material object not by shedding its ability to mean, and not in spite of its meaning, but by insisting that meaning matters as much as language’s visuality or vocality, as can be seen in this portion of Haroldo de Campos’s “O Âmago do Ômega,” (The Core of the Omega) from 1956.



42. de Campos, “Concrete Poetry-Language-Communication,” 237.

43. de Campos, de Campos, and Pignatari, “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry,” 218.

Though not straightforwardly, the poem does convey meaning, and the words it uses do name external objects—“olho” (eye), “ouro” (gold), “osso” (bone), and so on—but it doesn’t compose itself as strictly representative of those objects, and it doesn’t mean at the expense of its matter. Instead, the poem constructs itself from all the materials its words make available—their look, their sound, and their meaning. The poem happens not just because “olho” points out to eyes external to the poem, but in the fact of that word’s place in the poem, which plays visually and sonically with the other two similar looking and sounding words in its sequence. What matters for “olho,” is not just that it means eye, but that it looks and sounds very much like “ouro” and “osso.” That each of these words means something different is another way of saying their materiality matters. Two letters is enough to turn the proximity of these words into absolute difference, to highlight the gap not just between language and the material objects to which it refers, but between the matters of language itself.

This type of gap is pointed to by Rachel Price in her reading of this poem, which argues that “O Âmagô do Ômega,”

a visually arresting poem of white words arranged on a black background, is an ode to O, to 0 (zero), to the hollowness within finitude (Omega, the end of the alphabet). The heart of the O is a void, synonymous with the modern thing’s Ding, as Lacan defined it: that which animates the power of thingliness but which, truly sublime, escapes it. The thing (the poem) contains a hollow or a bone (um osso). A hollowness or void is everywhere alluded to in the poem.<sup>45</sup>

But, though the void isn’t lacking as a theme of the poem, it’s not all that animates its thingliness. Because, though the poem may, as she says, “allude” to a void, its functioning is not

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44 Haroldo de Campos, *Xadrez de estrelas: Percuso textual 1949-1974*, (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 2008), 75.

45. Rachel Price, “Object, Non-Object, Transobject, Relational Object: From ‘Poesia Concreta’ to ‘A Nova Objetividade,’” *Revista de Letras* 47 (2007): 36.

limited to what its words—any of them—might refer to. If we bring in its visual and vocal aspects, we find the poem never quite settles on the void. For example, the work is printed, as Price points out, on black paper. And while it's possible that black, in general, can be read as absence, space, etc., in the context of the book, it's white space that typically does this. Black, for books, is not equal to blank, but the material imprint of ink on the page. That said, the issue is a little more complicated in the case of concrete poetry. Blank space, what Mallarmé calls “the very silence of the poem”<sup>46</sup> is not nothingness for the concrete poets, but additional material to be utilized, something Haroldo characterizes Mallarmé of utilizing “in the way that Calder used air.”<sup>47</sup> So, in this case, neither the black page nor the blank fully functions as a void, meaning that, even if the poem is verbally suggesting a hollowness when it makes use of the word “osso,” it is constantly preventing that suggestion from pointing transparently to nothingness by filling, with dark, black ink, the apparently empty space inside the “O.” And if we try to argue the opposite—that the whiteness of the “O” is itself a void, we come back to idea that white space, for the concrete poets, was never nothing in the first place.

Similarly, by arranging the “Zero ao Zenit” (Zero to Zenith) in such a way that the zenith appears in the position opposite its meaning—below the zero—the poem again calls into question any straightforward assertion of a void. Though this arrangement might be read as zeroing out the zenith, an interpretation that does align with Price's, it also conversely zeniths the zero. Furthermore, by using the words' spatial arrangement to express the opposite of the words' meaning, the very possibility of trusting their allusions is called into question. Here, the verbal

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46. Stéphane Mallarmé, “Crisis in Poetry,” in *Toward the Open Field: Poets on the Art of Poetry 1800-1950*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 157.

47. Haroldo de Campos, “The Open Work of Art,” in *Novas*, ed. Antonio Sergio Bessa and Odile Cisneros (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 221.

and visual are in competition, such that the poem reads not as a call to the void but as a refusal to take a side, a “tension of word-things”<sup>48</sup> in black, not blank, space.

As another example, because the poem visually breaks “ex nihilo,” placing “ex” not next-to, but above “nihilo,” it makes “ex” into a somewhat independent actor, apart from the word it would anticipate. This has the effect of stalling, if for only a second, “ex”’s pairing with “nihilo,” meaning that the word temporarily regains the potential of being read not just as “out of,” but as “former.” So, again, the poem creates a visual and vocal paradox of what might have been a straightforward verbal reference to the void. “Ex nihilo” is not just “out of nothing.” It is also “formerly nothing,” a slight semantic change with the effect of undermining the void in favor of the substance.

The meanings that become available to readers of this poem increase by at least double when the poetic features being evaluated are not just verbal allusions, but also visual and vocal materials. By using all these poetic materials, readers can see that what words mean is only one portion of what matters in understanding the poem. And, the other available materials contribute not only to its construction, but to its meaning as well, suggesting that meaning was never not material in the first place.

Even so, though the concrete poets cite the word’s meaning as a constructive material of their poetry, the fact that they call this the word’s “virtuality” points to a difficulty of understanding meaning alongside the more apparently material conditions of being visual or of making sound. Meaning does not seem to be a sensible aspect of the poem/object in the way that sound or sight is. And, in general, this would imply, as Saussure claims, that the linguistic signifier is “incorporeal—constituted not by its material substance but by the differences that

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48. As the de Campos brothers and Pignatari write, concrete poetry is a “tension of word-things in space-time.” “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry,” 218.



separate its sound-image from all others.”<sup>49</sup> To return to the difference between “olho” and “osso,” this would mean that the two words have the potential to signify not because of their vocovisuality but because their vocovisuality differs. But, though the difference in look and sound between the two words is what allows us to understand their meaning and function in most language conditions, including in the poem, it’s not the case that these signifiers are, here, incorporeal. It is precisely their material substance that makes the poem happen—especially the shape of the repeating letter “o,” inside which so much of the poem’s play with substance and absence takes place.

### ***Meaningful Matter v. Discursive Propositions***

Meaning matters for concrete poetry. But, that’s not to say that it means in the way other poeties, or other uses of language mean. For one, the so-called virtuality of the word comes to share in its materiality. Secondly, as a counter to other practices in visual poetry, the concrete poem, while made of words that do refer to external objects, does not function by way of its representation of them. Finally, though the concrete poem makes use of meaning, it is not a form of discourse. And this would bring concrete poetry’s manner of meaning closer to that of other objects, which can act as symbols, but aren’t generally engaged in the communication of complex ideas, beliefs, or propositions. But, that does not mean that the object of concrete poetry is only possible when language acts like non-linguistic objects. On the contrary, though concrete poetry may act as a catalyst, it hopes to have the potential to affect the very kind of language it rejects. As Augusto writes,

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49. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966), 118-119.

concrete poetry doesn't intend to be a panacea to take the place of discursive language. Concrete poetry circumscribes its own space and autonomous functioning within the field of language. But it does try to influence discourse, in the manner in which it can revivify and dynamize its dead cells, impeding the atrophy of a common organism: language."<sup>50</sup>

Two common critiques of concrete poetry are 1) that the vision of language that concrete poetry brings to light can only ever happen in the context of this poetry and, in the other direction, 2) that what concrete poetry does isn't unique to concrete poetry at all, but just calls attention to features of language that were always already there. Concrete poetry's response to these critiques, as Augusto indicates, is: yes. Concrete poetry creates, in his words, the "space" for these already existent features of language to come to the fore. In this context, the verbivocovisual qualities of language can be more readily understood (and seen and heard) and, from there, animate language more generally.

But this requires, first, that concrete poetry distinguish its use of language from its other uses, both in and outside of poetry. This begins with discourse. Concrete poetry is against language's "appropriation by discourse,"<sup>51</sup> against language's being limited to its communicative function alone. In many ways, this can be said of nearly all poetry, which, like the concrete, isn't made just to serve in the communication of ideas or propositions. Frequently cited by the concrete poets, Susanne K. Langer argues, for example, that,

were poetry essentially a means of stating discursive ideas, whether directly or by implication, it would be more nearly related to metaphysics, logic, and mathematics than to any of the arts. But propositions—the basic structures of discourse, which formulate and convey true or false beliefs "discursively"—are only materials of poetry. (Langer 227)

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50. Augusto de Campos, "A moeda concreta da fala," in *Teoria da poesia concreta: Textos críticos e manifestos 1950-1960*, ed. Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari (São Paulo: Edições Invenção, 1965), 113.

51. Ibid.

For Langer, then, discourse is, at its base, equal to the ideas or beliefs it communicates. But poetry, in general, does more than communicate. As she writes, “the poet uses discourse to create an illusion, a pure appearance, which is a non-discursive symbolic form.”<sup>52</sup> Her emphasis on the symbolic form that might be non-discursive is resonant with concrete poetry but its “use” of discourse still differs from that of other poeties. As just one example among many that could be cited, we might look at Oswald de Andrade’s little poem, “3 de maio,”<sup>53</sup> to see this difference:

Aprendi com meu filho de dez anos  
Que a poesia é a descoberta  
Das coisas que eu nunca vi<sup>54</sup>

Here, discourse is put to use ironically. In English, these lines might read:

I learned from my ten-year-old son  
That poetry is the discovery  
Of the things I’ve never seen.<sup>55</sup>

By suggesting that the poet can learn about poetry from his 10 year old son, the poem upends the notion that it might, in Langer’s terms, convey a “true or false belief,” and opts, instead, to portray a scene in which our likely beliefs about who creates poetry (poets) are rendered false. This poem, then, uses discourse as a tool for its own undoing.

Concrete poetry does not use discourse in this way. And if we think about discourse on Langer’s terms, as something that communicates a proposition, then it does not use discourse at

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52. Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Scribner, 1953), 211.

53. Oswald de Andrade was greatly admired by the concrete poets, who wrote frequently about him and his work, for example in Haroldo’s essay “Uma poética da radicalidade” that accompanied Oswald’s *Poesias reunidas* in 1966, or the fourth issue of *Invenção*, (a journal put out by Pignatari and the de Campos brothers, among others, during the 1960s) which was dedicated to the modernist poet.

54. Oswald de Andrade, *Pau Brasil* (São Paulo: Editora Globo, 2000), 141.

55. My translation.

all. Rather, concrete poetry uses discourse's constitutive, material parts. In other words, it uses the same base material as discourse—language. But, it does not use language to communicate discursively. It doesn't even always use whole words, as individual letters or their combination can be as important in concrete poetry as words and phrases. In this way, discourse is put to use in concrete poetry in a manner that is distilled down to "the lowest common denominator of language."<sup>56</sup> And language, for concrete poetry, is not a system in which discourse or poetry happens, but is whatever language materially is—letters, sounds, spaces, words, sentences, etc. What ideas or beliefs do get communicated in concrete poetry adhere in these small parts of language that are used, too, to eventually construct discursive speech. But, the larger propositions discursive language might build to are hardly present.

We can see this, for example, in the below poem by Haroldo de Campos.

**se**  
**nasce**  
**morre nasce**  
**morre nasce morre**  
  
**renasce remorre renasce**  
**remorre renasce**  
**remorre**  
  
**re**  
**desnasce**  
**desmorre desnasce**  
**desmorre desnasce desmorre**  
  
**nasce morrenasce**  
**morrenasce**  
**morre**  
**se**

57

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56. de Campos, de Campos, and Pignatari, "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry," 218.

57. de Campos, *Xadrez de estrelas: Percuso textual 1949-1974*, 110.

Here, we have the makings of entire sentences, if all that's required is a subject and a verb. For example, the poem begins "se nasce." But, though that expresses the idea of being born, it isn't necessarily a proposition in Langer's sense. Even the ambiguity of the conjugations in Portuguese stress this fact as that short phrase, lacking a supporting context other than the poem itself, could be translated into English as either "people are born"/ "one is born" in the general sense, or as "if he/she/it is" (or even "we are," if the implied subject is the frequently used "a gente" meaning "we," but conjugated in the third person) "born." If a deliberate proposition is to be found here, it cannot be found by reaching for a discursive understanding of this "sentence." Rather, materials of discursive speech—words and their combination—are put to use entirely within the domain of the poem, and not to serve the external communication of a proposition.

What this means is that, though the concrete poets may take Langer's depiction of discourse and its difference from poetic language as a starting point for their practices, they also move beyond these theoretical propositions to put even more distance between discourse and poetic language than might be possible in other poetics which would, to a greater degree, "use" discourse in the way Langer describes. Concrete poetry's use of it is not only stripped down to its most basic parts, but is also stripped of its usual dominance, such that all of language's other material is able to come forward in importance. This includes the play of words like "remorre" (re-die) which repeats its first and last syllables (both visually and sonically) just as it points to a repetition of death, as well as the visual arrangement of the words on the page which first eliminates the words "nasce" and "morre" so that just "re" remains, and then visually "desmorre" (un-dies) the missing parts back to the page in the second stanza.

Concrete poetry, in this way, creates new ways of using discourse without being subsumed into its elsewhere dominant pull, so that other, often overlooked, aspects of language can share in the construction of the poetic object. As Haroldo puts it, concrete poetry creates

a nondiscursive linguistic area that shares the advantages of nonverbal communication (greater proximity to the object, preservation of the continuity of action and perception), without mutilating its instrument—the word—whose special power to express abstractions, to communicate interpolations and extrapolations, and to frame wide-ranging aspects of diverse events and ideas in comprehensive terms are not rejected but rather used toward the creation of a total communication.<sup>58</sup>

Inside of this “area” concrete poetry enables a new kind of communication, one that is both material and virtual. Though it may, in its own way, use discourse, it equally uses the word’s “nonverbal” aspects in its “total communication.” If, in Jakobson’s classic definition, the “poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination,”<sup>59</sup> then, in concrete poetry, this happens at all levels, verbivocovisually.

Haroldo counters concrete poetry’s poetic function to the functioning of discourse, writing,

whereas for the referential use of language it makes no difference whether the word *astre* (“star”) can be found within the adjective *désastreux* (“disastrous”) or the noun *désastre* (“disaster”), or whether there are affinities between *espectro* (“specter”) and *espectador* (“spectator”), for the poet this kind of “discovery” is of prime relevance.<sup>60</sup>

Though this happens in more than concrete poetry, it happens differently, and to an even greater degree there. In concrete poetry, the poetic function happens materially, and because concrete

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58. de Campos, “Concrete Poetry-Language-Communication,” 244.

59. Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Style and Language*, ed. Thomas Albert Sebeok (New York: M.I.T. Press, 1960), 358.

60. Haroldo de Campos, “Poetic Function and the Ideogram/The Sinological Argument,” *Dispositio* 6 (1981): 23.

poetry distills language down so greatly, it is able to largely construct itself *as* the poetic function, with nearly no discursive excess, as in the below lines from Haroldo's collection *Fome de forma* (Hunger of Form)

nomeio o nome  
nomeio o homem  
no meio a fome

nomeio a fome

61

What strikes most in this poem is not the relation between the word “nome” (name) and the thing that a name is. Or, it is, but it's a loop, because a name is just a name for some other thing. But, the main activity of this poem takes place in the words themselves, which, in their likeness, encourage linkage, such that it doesn't matter that in a discursive situation there would be no meaningful relation between the homophones “nomeio” (I name) and “no meio” (in the middle). In the poem, there is, and it springs from the sonic and visual material of these words that, accidentally, afforded them so much similarity.

### ***The Object Speaks***

Here, again, the poetic material that is both emphasized and exploited in concrete poetry facilitates a use of language that is more expansive than discourse and less discursive than other

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61. I name the name  
I name the man  
in the middle of hunger

I name the hunger  
My translation. Haroldo de Campos, *Xadrez de estrelas: Percuso textual 1949-1974*, 126.

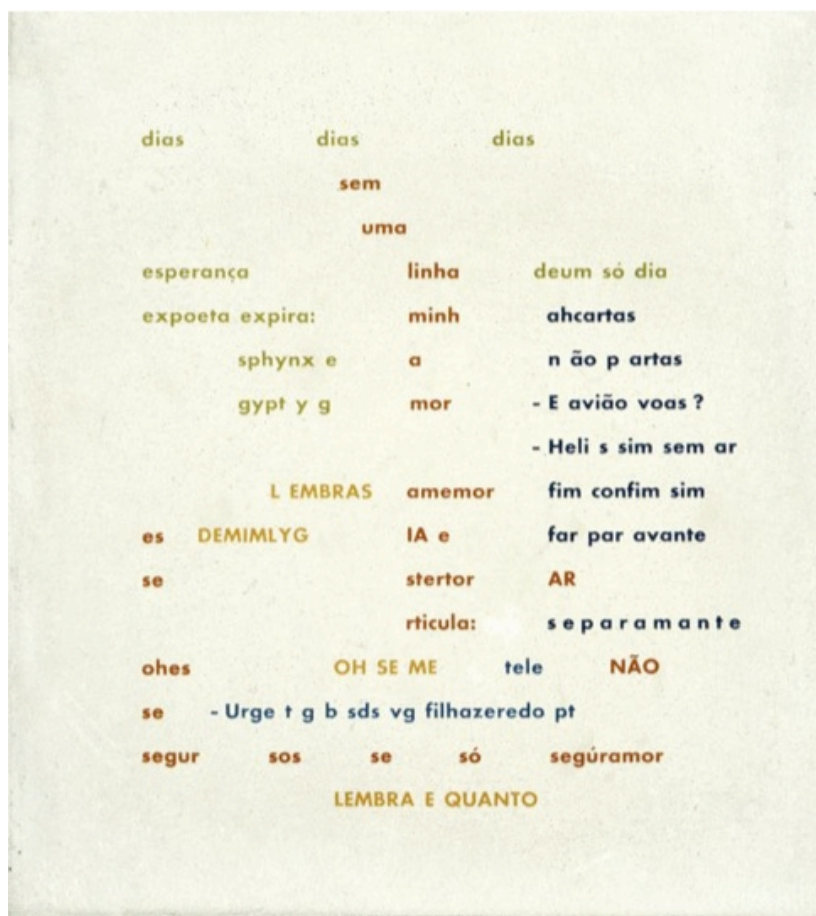
uses of language, both poetic and not. Still, this poem introduces a further problem in the middle of its homophonic play—the “I.” The poem reads “*I* name.” And though, in the middle (“no meio”) we again see the poem’s refusal to pick a side, it’s hard to ignore the presence of some kind of poetic voice here, something concrete poetry would associate with the “hedonistic poetry of expression”<sup>62</sup> that it rejects. Behind this, of course, is the nagging problem that poetry, even concrete poetry, must be made by someone. Objects, too, are made by people. But not always. So while being-made isn’t necessarily a criteria that would strip the concrete poem of its status as an object, it does put into question its chance at autonomy. The “I” who names in this poem can’t help but suggest a “you.” And suddenly, concrete poetry finds its way back into the tangle of expressive, communicative language that can only exist in relation to the people who speak and listen to it.

Still, concrete poetry does manage to find ways out of this problem. As I’ve already mentioned, even as the “I” shows up above, it disappears into “nomeio,” always stuck inside the poem, never quite speaking from outside of it. Even the structure of the Portuguese replicates this situation. Though “nomeio” means “*I* name,” “I” is bound inside the verb, to an act of naming that never needs to name its namer. Elsewhere, the “I” is even harder to extract.

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62. de Campos, de Campos, and Pignatari, “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry,” 219.





63

In Augusto de Campos's "dias dias dias" (days days days) it's much more difficult to locate a speaking subject. For one, the visual arrangement of this poem disrupts the flow of discourse to a great degree. Not only do the words offer no clear order of operations, but their different colors further impede any way of imagining an easy exchange between speaker and reader. There are, as Pedro Erber writes, "multiple trajectories of reading, to which a plurivocality of meanings corresponds,"<sup>64</sup> making both the act of reading and the possibility that this poem could be read as having issued from a single speaker—a poetic "I"—nearly impossible. And yet, as Erber goes on

63. Augusto de Campos, "dias dias dias," in *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte (1950-1962)*, ed. Aracy A. Amaral, (São Paulo: Museu do Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, 1977), 147.

64. Pedro Erber, "The Word as Object: Concrete Poetry, Ideogram, and the Materialization of Language," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 49 (2012): 89.

to note, this poem was recorded by musician Caetano Veloso in 1979. In it, Veloso attempts to mimic the words' changing colors by changing his pitch when they do. For Erber, this points to "the possibility of an immediate, simultaneous perception of the poem," where "Caetano's multiple voices seem to come from different places, thus introducing a sense of space even in recitation itself."<sup>65</sup> Here, Erber makes the case not only for "an immediate form of communication"<sup>66</sup> that, for the concrete poets, allows the poem to speak as objects do, but also demonstrates the equal participation of the vocal aspect of language in the poem's construction, something often overlooked in favor of the visual. But his claim points to another outcome as well—that these multiple voices disperse any hope for a singular "I." Too, the fact that the poem's arrangement suggests multiple voices further undermines its status as something that might issue from one. Instead, the voices seem to come from the poem itself, whose particular vocovisual structure is what directs their speech.

This idea is key for understanding the concrete poem as an object, one which, though made of language, doesn't only ever exist in relation to a speaking subject. In concrete poetry, it's not just that the word's materials are what construct the poem, but they are also what define its form, its limits, and its possibilities. The concrete poem can be, in other words, a "poem that generates itself,"<sup>67</sup> as in this other example by Augusto:

atrocaducapacaustiduplielastifeliferofugahistoriloqualubrimendimultipliorganiperio  
diplastipublirapareciprorustisagasimplitenaveloveravivaunivoracidade  
city  
cité<sup>68</sup>

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65. Ibid.

66. de Campos, "Concrete Poetry-Language-Communication," 243.

67. Ibid., 240.

68. Augusto de Campos, "Cidade City Cité," *Invenção* 3 (1964): unpaginated.

It's difficult to transcribe this poem within the constraints of this page. What appears above as four lines is three in the original, with the first being one long line that ends on "cidade." The poem is constructed of portions of words, in alphabetical order, that all carry the suffix "cidade" in Portuguese, "city" in English, and "cité" in French, for example "atrocidity," "duplicité," "felicity," "sagacity," and so on. This poem demonstrates many of the features of the concrete poetic object. First, it stresses its verbivocovisuality by constructing itself as something that can be apprehended only via the three-part process of understanding, looking, and listening. Though its visuality is somewhat altered in its appearance within this chapter, it was published in *Invenção* on one long, narrow piece of paper that folded out from the surrounding pages of the journal. And, as Augusto's performances of this poem demonstrate, it is *really something* to listen to.<sup>69</sup> Secondly, it does not work to materialize an object external to itself. Though the word "city" appears in three languages, this poem is not, in any overt way, a representation of the city. The words made with "city" as their suffix are all abstractions, and though they have meaning, they don't communicate any discursive propositions. Finally, there is no speaking subject. In its place is, literally, "multiplicity." Though we might call this Augusto's poem, it's the poem's linguistic materials that, in effect, wrote it, and that determined what it would or could contain.

The same can be said for "Alea 1—Variações semânticas":

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69. See, for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7AOGvHj6T4>

N E R U M  
 D I V O L  
 I V R E M  
 L U N D O  
 U N D O L  
 M I V R E  
 V O L U M  
 N E R I D  
 M E R U N  
 V I L O D  
 D O M U N  
 V R E L I  
 L U D O N  
 R I M E V  
 M O D U L  
 V E R I N  
 L O D U M  
 V R E N I  
 I D O L V  
 R U E N M  
 R E V I N  
 D O L U M  
 M I N D O  
 L U V R E  
 M U N D O  
 L I V R E

*programa* o leitor-operador é  
 convidado a extrair noutras  
 variantes combinatórias  
 dentro do parâmetro semântico dado  
 as possibilidades de permutação  
 entre dez letras diferentes  
 duas palavras de cinco letras cada  
 ascendem a 3.628.800<sup>70</sup>

The instructions that follow the anagrammatic poem, which, in English read,

*program* the reader-operator is  
 invited to extract other  
 combinatory variations  
 within the given semantic parameter

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70. Haroldo de Campos, “Alea I - Variações semânticas,” *Invenção* 6 (1966-1967): 32.

the possibilities of permutation  
between ten different letters  
two words of five letters each  
reach 3,628,800<sup>71</sup>

indicate that this is a poem with no author other than itself. Its compositional material establishes the parameters of the poem and any reader, even a nonhuman one, can write the rest. In this way, it is truly the concrete poem, and not the poet, that “uses the word (sound, visual form, fixed concepts) as compositional material rather than a vehicle of interpretation of the objective world.”<sup>72</sup>

In concrete poetry, then, language comes to find its “autonomous life” as an object not by divorcing its relations to nonlinguistic things, but by, in Harman’s terms, showing how language can exist “apart” from them as well. This includes the relation language has to meaning, along with complicated network of relations that meaning itself spurs—between words and things, writer and reader, medium and message. Concrete poetry makes language into an object not by making language anything other than itself, but by making the object out of everything that language already is.

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71. My translation.

72. de Campos “Concrete Poetry-Language-Communication,” 237.

## CHAPTER 2

### RELATIONAL POETICS IN AND OUT OF NEOCONCRETISM

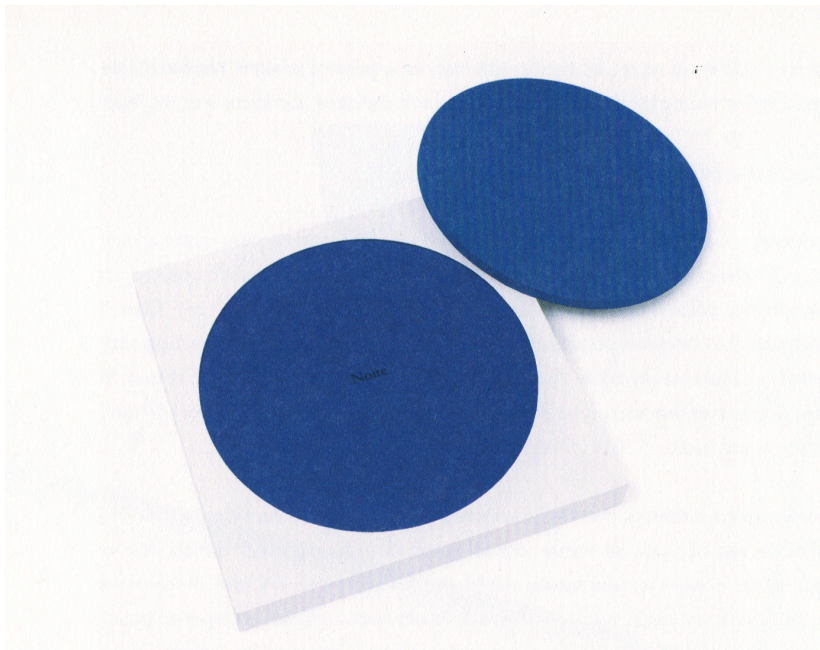
Neoconcretism differs from the concrete poetry that preceded it not just in matters of form and material, but, too, in the kind of attention it's been given. Whereas concrete poetry could be said to belong, however marginally, to scholarship on poetics, neoconcretism has, so far, pertained little to poetry and poetics, and more to art history. This is not without reason. Of the group's participants, the two most well-known in the United States—Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica—are artists. What's more, neoconcrete poems, like the concrete poems of the prior decade, shared a number of characteristics with what we still think of as works of plastic art.<sup>73</sup> This may be even truer, in fact, for neoconcrete poetry than for the concrete. While concrete poetry made use of “verbivocovisual” materials—language's meaning, sound, and look—, neoconcrete poetry brought additional materials to bear, including the tactile and spatial, and with these, extended the experiential capacity of the poem. We might look at the two poems below to see this difference.

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73. I use the term “plastic art,” which is less common in English than in Portuguese (“arte plástica”) as an alternative to what is more commonly called, here, “visual art.” Because neoconcretism favored embodied interaction, “visual” is a mismatch for the type of art they were making. Still, I need a shorthand way of distinguishing between art that is apparently not poetry and poetry that is also an art.

se  
 nasce  
 morre nasce  
 morre nasce morre  
 renasce remorre renasce  
 remorre renasce  
 remorre  
 re  
 re  
 desnasce  
 desmorre desnasce  
 desmorre desnasce desmorre  
 nascemorrenasce  
 morrenasce  
 morre  
 se

74



75

Both examples demonstrate poetic strategies that approach those we more typically associate with the plastic arts. In the first, by concrete poet Haroldo de Campos, these strategies include the visual arrangement of the words on the page as well as repeating visual and sonic motifs that

74. de Campos, *Xadrez de estrelas: Percuso textual 1949-1974*, 110.

75. Ferreira Gullar, *Ferreira Gullar in Conversation with = En conversación con Ariel Jiménez* (New York: Fundación Cisneros, 2012), 216.

take shape in the language itself. These motifs, for example the repetition of the roots “nasce” and “morre” (be born and die), encourage readers to look at the poem as much as listen to it or understand it. A similar claim might be made about the second example, by neoconcrete poet Ferreira Gullar, which contains just a single word—“noite” (night). But in this case, the encouragement to touch, might be stronger, even, than an encouragement that the work be apprehended visually or aurally. With this work, readers are able and encouraged to physically handle the poem, moving the blue circle in the top right of the image onto and off of the base where “noite” appears in the center of the circle. This is a rare opportunity for readers of poetry, whose tactile engagement with poems typically extends no further than the usually inconsequential act of turning a book’s pages. And this is one reason why neoconcrete poetry might more readily be thought of as belonging to the plastic arts that have not only long taken up space in this way, but especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, began to invite the kind of participation Gullar’s poem does.

But, Gullar calls these works poems. And my claim is that we ought to try reading them as poetry. As neoconcrete poet Theon Spanúdis writes in the preface to his “Poemas,”<sup>76</sup> neoconcrete poetry “opened an entirely new method of spatial creation in the field of poetry that abandoned traditional verse and syntax, and included the graphic space of the page as a constitutive element of poetic production.”<sup>77</sup> So while it is true that neoconcrete poetry broke radically from traditional verse, as Spanúdis’ emphasis indicates, however inclined this poetry might have been toward spatialization, it remains poetry. As such, the methodological opening that took place was located *inside* the poetic field, not outside of it. And, the consequences of that

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76. This preface was reprinted in the March 23, 1959 Sunday Supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil* alongside the Neoconcrete Manifesto.

77. Theon Spanúdis, “Poesia neoconcreta,” *Jornal do Brasil, Suplemento dominical*, March 23, 1959, 1. All my translations unless otherwise noted.



opening pushed against, but not beyond, the newly flexible limits of what poetry, as “neoconcrete,” could be and do.

Of the six signatories on 1959’s “Manifesto Neoconcreto” three are poets—Ferreira Gullar, Reynaldo Jardim, and Spanúdis. And poems and poetry aren’t entirely absent from the “artworks” produced by the group, either, as can be seen, for example, in Lygia Pape’s “poemas visuais” (visual poems) or Oiticica’s “caixa-poemas” (box-poems), among other works. Poetry’s place within neoconcretism is central, and its absence from critical accounts of the movement has limited our understanding of the group’s production and impact. In this chapter, I plan to reintroduce poetry and neoconcretism and to show that the neoconcrete *poetic* object participated equally, if distinctly, in the development of the “relational object” that most scholarship attributes to works of neoconcrete art. By considering how the poetic object becomes relational under neoconcretism, my aim is twofold: first, to reinscribe the legacy of poetics within the neoconcrete movement, and second, to think the ways in which a language-based art can produce a kind of relationality whose impact differs from that of the plastic arts. To do this, I will argue that language does not merely work to convey conceptual concerns, but is, in neoconcretism, part of a material apparatus that engages its reader sensorially. This, in turn, will inform an understanding of the ways material poetics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century struggled to define, construct, and relate to the object through poetry, as well as how they fit into broader concerns surrounding relational aesthetics.

### ***The Relational Object***

The term “relational objects” has applied primarily to the “objetos relacionais” that Lygia Clark produced beginning during, and going forward from, neoconcretism. While some critics

would limit that definition further to include only those objects she used in her therapeutic practice that began in the 1970s, I wish to approach the relational object more broadly to include earlier works by Clark, as well as Gullar and Lygia Pape.<sup>78</sup> As relational, these objects push against the distance between an artwork and its viewer to initiate a sensorial event in which there is “no separation between subject-object.”<sup>79</sup> This lack of separation is a literal as well as a philosophical stance. Clark’s relational objects functioned by actually diminishing the space between them and the subject who encountered them, coming to “have meaning and structure only in the moment of direct bodily interaction with the spectator, now more accurately called participant.”<sup>80</sup> Too, these objects, consisting of a range of mostly everyday materials—including plastic, rubber, sand, and paper, among other things—are able, in the encounter with the participant, to act on her. They act both on her embodied sensory apparatus and on her mind, two other binaries which, in neoconcretism, come to lose their separation. These factors are key to understanding the relational object, but not Clark’s alone. The term has a much broader use, applicable to a great deal of the kinds of promises and productions made by those artists *and* poets who aligned themselves with neoconcretism.

In the first portion of this chapter, I would like to consider the relational object across both plastic and poetic categories, before moving, later, to explore two versions of the poetic relational object, specifically. But, trying to uncover that specificity is difficult. In neoconcretism, poetry and art share so many practices as to be practically indistinguishable. And,

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78. Similarly, though the term “relational aesthetics” can be traced to Nicolas Bourriaud’s definition of “art that takes as its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an autonomous and *private* symbolic space,” many of the practices I will discuss share these exact concerns, not to mention terminology. Claire Bishop, *Participation (Documents of Contemporary Art)* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 160.

79. “Caminhando,” accessed September 20, 2013, <http://www.lygiaclark.org.br/>.

80. Guy Brett, “Lygia Clark: In Search of the Body,” *Art in America* 82 (1994): 61.

more than that, the indistinction itself is a defining aspect of the kind of work the neoconcretists were engaged in making. Poems are spatial, artworks call themselves poems, and the difference between generic markers comes, for the most part, to matter less to the neoconcrete project. Still, poetry can benefit from trying to think its version of relationality. For one thing, if poetry can reclaim neoconcretism, then poetic works of this kind can stop occupying what looks to be a marginal position within the poetic canon. Though, as Luis Arturo Guichard points out, “a type of poem existing in almost all literatures and periods can hardly be marginal,”<sup>81</sup> our usual classifications of poetry have, for the most part, been slow to realize this. For this reason, I want to bring what look to be marginal practices into the center of poetry and make way for understanding both what poetry already is, as well as how it can relate to the object, and indeed become, a relational one.

To consider neoconcretism within the history of material poetics, is necessarily to consider it with—or against, as Gullar might have it—the concretism that came before. As the prior chapter outlines, this movement took place in the years immediately preceding 1959’s “Neoconcrete Manifesto.” Before that year, the groups had been less distinct, and even exhibited their work together at the *Exposição Nacional de Arte Concreta* in 1956 and 57. There were differences between the São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro contingents from the beginning, also known, mostly on the art side, as *grupo ruptura* and *grupo frente*, respectively. Nevertheless, many of the figures who went on to claim the ‘neo’ prefix, began as concretists, including Clark, Oiticica, Pape, and (though not without tension) Gullar. When the neoconcretists came together,

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81. Here, Guichard is referring to Hellenistic pattern poetry, which he argues isn’t so much marginal as wanting “*to appear as marginal*.” This claim could well be applied to neoconcrete poetry, which as a practice in material poetics, also falls into the transhistorical category Guichard discusses. Luis Arturo Guichard, “Simias’ Pattern Poems: The Margins of the Canon” in *Hellenistica Groningana: Beyond the Canon*, ed. Annette Harder et al. (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2006), 96.

it was with the intent to combat what they saw as a “greater and greater tendency toward rationalization”<sup>82</sup> at work in concretism. They located this rationalization in both the poetry and the art, though, for Gullar, the São Paulo-based concrete poets were the primary target of his critique and a point of departure for his neoconcrete poetry which, instead of conceiving of the work of art as a “machine” or “object,” would consider it a “quasi-corpus” “a being whose reality isn’t exhausted by the exterior relations of its elements.”<sup>83</sup>

For Gullar, these perspectives differ enormously. And while I will dedicate this chapter to considering the ways in which the neoconcretists understood and worked to build their quasi-corpus, I want, too, to step outside of the ideological squabbles between the two groups to emphasize that, though their understanding of the object diverged, it played an absolutely central role in both movements. This fact also marks an important distance between neoconcretism and US-based conceptual art practices. Though comparing neoconcretism with US conceptualisms has not been unproductive, matter, and material objects, are not secondary to the concept in the neoconcrete work. Mari Carmen Ramírez writes that,

by considering the body and the senses as material for the conceptual proposition, [Clark and Oiticica] opened the possibilities for bridging the mind/body dichotomy that had plagued Western art since the Renaissance. This option was unthinkable in a North American context still fighting the orthodox legacy of puritanism. On the other hand, the notion of semantic participation paved the way for researching sensorial interaction as the basis for conceptual practices.<sup>84</sup>

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82. Amílcar de Castro et al., “Manifesto neoconcreto,” *Jornal do Brasil, Suplemento dominical*, March 23, 1959, 4.

83. This language demonstrates the difference between the neoconcrete understanding of the object and what Manuel DeLanda (after Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) calls assemblages, where it’s precisely the “exteriority of their relations” that define the object as such, something I will take up in the following chapter on Juan Luis Martínez’s *La nueva novela*. Ibid.

84. Mari Carmen Ramírez, “Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960-1980,” in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s*, ed. Luis Camnitzer et al. (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 62.

But though neoconcretism and conceptualism shared an emphasis on embodied and linguistic practices, for the neoconcrete work, it's important to note that more bodies than the human are operative. This means that, yes, the distinction between mind and body is eroded, but another important distinction erodes as well—between subject and object. In this way, those objects Clark and Oiticica make to interact with human bodies are, as Gullar says, also corporeal. The same can be said of language, which doesn't just serve to facilitate a "conceptual proposition" but, as I will show, is materially embodied in the poem, or the work of art. This matters to an understanding of neoconcretism which, though conceptual in many ways, never lets go of the object. On the contrary, the object is fundamental and, in the neoconcrete work, it serves as the material impetus for those relations that take place between it and the participant's sensory experience.

That said, the status of the object *is* a tricky question for neoconcretism. For one, if it's bound, relationally, to the also-in-question subject position, then it becomes difficult to talk about the object at all. Like the question of where poetry ends and plastic art begins within the movement, the blurred boundaries of subject and object put the suggestion of isolating either onto uneasy footing. Likewise, if the relational object is not defined by the "exterior relations of its elements," then it would seem to be defined by an interiority that is wholly inaccessible. Finally, if the object is conceived as a being, then it's possible the term "object" is itself problematic, a remnant of a way of thinking that neoconcretism works to break with.

Still, the term is used by the neoconcretists, if in modified form. The object, as the neoconcrete works also show, does not stand alone. It exists as a *relational* object, or, for Gullar, a "non-object." He explains:

The expression non-object doesn't intend to designate a negative object or any thing that would be the opposite of material objects with properties exactly counter to these objects. The non-object isn't an anti-object, but a special object in which a synthesis of sensorial and mental experiences is intended to be realized: a body transparent<sup>85</sup> to phenomenological understanding, fully perceptible, that gives itself over to perception without leaving a remainder.<sup>86</sup>

In neoconcretism, the object retains those relations of exteriority that would characterize a material object, but, via its very materiality, exceeds its material relations to function as a site where another kind of relation takes place—between the object and the participant's sense experience. In this way, the external and internal are likewise bound together. The interiority that matters in the non-object, or the relational object, is not something akin to the mysterious inner lives of things. Rather, it's an openness that enables the subject's internal sense experience to penetrate the object. But, this does not mean that the object disappears beneath the conceptual weight of its experience. On the contrary, its matter matters and is what makes "phenomenological understanding" possible in the first place.

The totality of the phenomenological understanding suggested by Gullar's theory might look suspiciously impossible. But, many neoconcrete works do manage to invite the participant *into* the relational object. One example is Clark's well-known *Caminhando*. This piece begins as a strip of paper and becomes something else as the hands of the viewer-participant literally enter the material object, following instructions Clark lays out:

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85. In this language, it's possible to see Gullar working closely with influential theorist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's assertion that "the completed object is translucent, being shot through from all sides by an infinite number of present scrutinies which intersect in its depths leaving nothing hidden." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 79.

86. Ferreira Gullar, "Teoria do não-objeto," *Jornal do Brasil, Suplemento dominical*, December 20, 1959.

take one of those strips of paper that surround a book, cut it horizontally, twist it, and glue it so that you get a Moebius strip.

Next, take a pair of scissors, poke a hole in the surface and cut lengthwise continuously. Pay attention so you don't fall into the cut already made—the one that separates the band in two pieces. When you have gone all the way around the Moebius strip, choose between cutting to the right or cutting to the left of the cut already made. This notion of choice is decisive. The only sense of this experience resides in the art of doing it. The work is its act. As you cut in the band it will thin and unfold into interlacings. In the end, the path will be so narrow that you won't be able to open it further. This is the end of the trail.<sup>87</sup>

If Clark's hand is visible in this score, it's the participant's hand that penetrates the object to create the work. This is one way the relational object emphasizes its materiality, despite the potential that having a score means a work like *Caminhando* could be read as conceptual. The concept, though contributing to the execution of the participant's intervention, exists outside both the object and the participant-subject, and that distance means that, unlike the penetrating participant and penetrated paper, the score partakes only tangentially in the phenomenological experience of the work. The meaning of the work lies not in the impetus laid out by the score, but in the experience the paper and scissors make possible—of cutting, of holding one's wrist at an appropriate angle, of choosing along which path to continue cutting, and when to quit, etc. These experiences of the object don't just contribute to, but comprise, the meaning of the artwork. Its sense lies not in the sense-making work of the concept, but in the sensorial relations that are located between the participant and the relational object.

Many of the challenges neoconcretism makes to the object are informed by conceptual and theoretical considerations, though. At the launch of the neoconcrete movement, Gullar and others were particularly influenced by French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose

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87. Lygia Clark, Ferreira Gullar, and Mario Pedrosa, *Lygia Clark: Textos de Ferreira Gullar, Mário Pedrosa, Lygia Clark* (Rio de Janeiro: Edição Funarte, 1980), 25-26.

work<sup>88</sup> Gullar began to read just as he was breaking from concretism following the *Exposição Nacional de Arte Concreta*. Among other things, Merleau-Ponty offered to Gullar an alternative to the “scientificist vision that sought to explain everything mathematically,”<sup>89</sup> a vision of art that Gullar saw as hurtful to concretism. In this approach, as Gullar sees it, “art lost its autonomy and its creative capacity, in order to become an echo of science.”<sup>90</sup> As an alternative, Gullar believes that “phenomenology recovers intuitive thought, which is aesthetic thought” and it was this possibility that Gullar wanted to emphasize in the “Neoconcrete Manifesto.”<sup>91</sup>

Though I am not certain that a “scientificist vision” is as representative of concrete poetry as Gullar would claim, the distinctions he draws here do point to fundamental differences in the way the two groups approach the object, and its autonomy. As I’ve argued, the autonomy of the object was an important concern for the concrete poets, who worked toward conditions whereby “the concrete poem is an object in and of itself, not the interpreter of exterior objects and/or more or less subjective feelings.”<sup>92</sup> In this way of thinking, the autonomy of the poem is carved out from a background where language is beholden to the objects or emotions it expresses, so that the poem can become, instead, one object among others. Though the relational object would come to complicate the direct representation of “exterior objects,” it’s clear that this is not Gullar’s understanding of autonomy. For him, the concrete poem, if liberated from the dominance of representation, remains obliged to science, and to the scientific approach that he sees the concrete work as necessarily emerging from. The neoconcrete work, on the other hand,

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88. Gullar notes that *Phenomenology of Perception*, *The Structure of Behavior*, and *Eye and Mind* were among his most influential texts. Gullar, *Ferreira Gullar in Conversation with = En conversación con Ariel Jiménez*, 43.

89. Ibid., 68.

90. Ibid., 43.

91. Ibid.

92. de Campos, de Campos, and Pignatari, “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry,” 218.



is autonomous precisely by its binding to sense experience, which, though taking place in the body of the participant, emerges not from an imposed framework, but from the object and its materiality. Too, in the neoconcrete conception, it's not just the poem that becomes an object among objects. The participant's body becomes "one of the objects" as well.<sup>93</sup>

Whereas the object was characterized, elsewhere by Gullar, as a "quasi-corpus," the body of the participating subject undergoes an analogous transformation as it engages sensorially with the neoconcrete work. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "[I] treat my eyes as bits of matter. They then take their place in the same objective space in which I am trying to situate the external object."<sup>94</sup> The sensory apparatus with which the participant apprehends the neoconcrete work partakes of the same "objective space" that the relational object does. Both the object and the subject are bodies, or both are objects, or both. Gullar's reading of Merleau-Ponty, then, also lays the theoretical groundwork for the relationality that matters for neoconcretism, sealing the space between subject and object without sacrificing the autonomy of art.

It's in this relationality that Gullar's understanding of artistic autonomy adheres. This definition is able to emerge thanks to neoconcretism's understanding of the object. But, they make this shift from the concrete version of autonomy, as I've said, without abandoning a central tenet of the notion for the concretists—the resistance to representation. As Gullar says about the non-object, what's created is "a creature of the cultural world that, in representing nothing, is its own representation and, therefore, pure meaning."<sup>95</sup> In this way, the neoconcrete work emphasizes its independence from representation and counters potential conceptualist readings. Though the relational object can be seen as a way of materially working out a set of

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93. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 81.

94. Ibid.

95. Ferreira Gullar, *Experiência Neoconcreta: Momento-limite da arte* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2007), 128.

phenomenological curiosities, the object itself does not simply represent its idea. And this is another way in which the interiority of the work is bound to its material exteriority. The meaning to be found *in* the relational object is precisely that meaning that accumulates from the sensorial experience of its matter. In this way, the neoconcretist resistance to representation produces an alternative result from the concretist. Whereas concrete poetry sought autonomy for the poetic object in this resistance, neoconcrete works seek to forefront the relational exchange of matter and sense experience. Because the experience of the work is equal to its meaning, the “pure meaning” it represents isn’t just the fact of the work itself, but the fact of those relations made to exist between the material object and the participant’s experience of it. The relational object can come to stand, then, for the convergence of subject and object that Gullar theorized after Merleau-Ponty not because it “represents” this idea, but because it opens up the space where this convergence becomes materially possible.

And this is as true of neoconcretism’s poetic objects as it is of the plastic. Gullar stresses this with regard to poetry, saying the work “is a direct phenomenological experience” and asking, “What does a poem mean? What is said there...if I could write it in another way, I wouldn’t make a poem. That means the work moves beyond its condition as an object, creating for itself its own way of existing, and above all opening a field of meaning, in some way.”<sup>96</sup> Though this claim may suggest that the object is a means to a meaning, it can’t be overlooked that that meaning is only possible by way of the particular material construction of the poem which is not, and can’t be, substituted for. The kinds of materials that make a neoconcrete poem may differ from those that make a neoconcrete work of plastic art (though these differences are minimal).

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96. Gullar, *Ferreira Gullar in Conversation with = En conversación con Ariel Jiménez*, 42.

But, regardless of the kind of material, what matters, and what means, for the work is the intersection of the relational object and the sensing participant.

To pause for a moment, I would like to, here, provide a summary of those characteristics of the relational object—poetic or artistic—before considering how these adhere in the poetic context and what their adherence there might have to contribute to a broader understanding of a relational poetics. First, the relational object rejects an understanding of the object-as-machine in favor of one where the object is considered, with the subject, to be a quasi-corpus. Second, the object and its materiality matter to neoconcrete poetry. Third, the relational object is, as the name suggests, *relational* and characterized not just by the relations of exteriority between its parts, but by its openness toward the traversal of the participant's sense apparatus. Fourth, the relational object, despite—or because of—its relationality upholds the autonomy of art in that the meaning of the work is the work itself. It is not beholden to either the method by which the work was produced or to a single object or idea it might be said to “represent.” Too, the work includes both the object *and* its relations, but nothing more. Finally, as this chapter stresses, the relational object belongs both to the history of art and the history of poetics.

That said, this conception of the object is, in large part, unfamiliar to the latter history. In recent years, critics have taken up the question of the intersection of poetry and the object. Bill Brown, for example, writes of modernist poems that “begin with things and with the senses by which we apprehend them.”<sup>97</sup> But fewer have addressed the poem that, as opposed to writing *about* objects and sense experience, constructs itself *as* the sensible object.<sup>98</sup> Part of the reason

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97. Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001): 2.

98. In a more recent article, Bill Brown discusses L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry as “insisting on the materiality of language—the thing-character of language—by retarding or congesting or displacing language (what we understand as the communicative function of language) with work made from fragments, syllables, letters, &c.” This insistence on the

for this is that, in comparison to the object-invoking modernist poem, fewer poems consciously construct themselves as objects, relational or otherwise. But another reason is simply that this kind of poetry wasn't particularly popular in the United States. Though there were concrete poets in the US, it was never home to a major movement akin to the Brazilian one, and offshoots like neoconcretism went largely unnoticed. I hope to rectify this not by re-writing material that better belongs to art history, but by showing that poetry's contribution to object understanding extends far beyond the descriptive or representational, and that the relational object's contribution to phenomenological understanding began with poetry.

In fact, it was poetry that gave rise to the relational object in the first place, specifically Gullar's book-poems and spatial poems, from which, according to him, "came the stimulus that led Lygia [Clark] and Hélio [Oiticica] to future experiences with the 'objetos relacionais' [relational objects]." <sup>99</sup> Similar experiments would be undertaken by other members of the group including Lygia Pape, who would both extend and complicate the vision of relational poetics that Gullar first developed. For her, poetics would not just become a relational object, but objects would become a relational poetics. I'll return to this, but I'd like to begin by discussing Gullar's poetry and the ways in which it comes to embody relational practices via a material poetry.

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materiality of the text shares many affinities with the work of concretism and neoconcretism in Brazil, though the Brazilian experiments began more than ten years earlier and produced quite divergent outcomes from the North American. Bill Brown, "[Concept/Object] [Text/Event]," *ELH* 81, no. 2 (2014): 524.

99. Ferreira Gullar, *Arte concreta e neoconcreta, Da construção a desconstrução: Concrete Art and Neo-concrete Art, From Construction to Deconstruction* (São Paulo: Dan Galeria, 2006).

### *Ferreira Gullar's Relational Poetics*

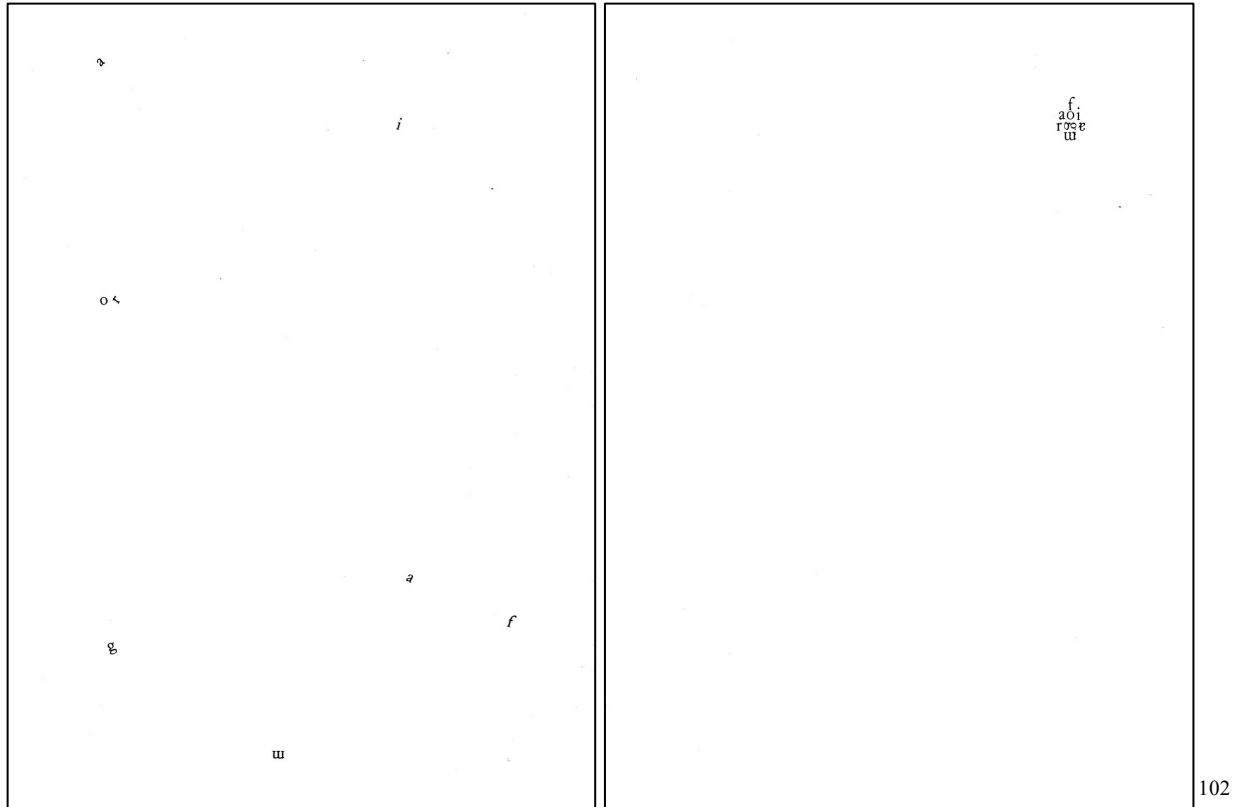
First, I would like to take a closer look at Gullar's career leading up to, and including, his neoconcrete works, and consider how, with each new material experiment, his poetry developed itself as relational object. As I mentioned, in the years preceding the "Neoconcrete Manifesto" Gullar was associated with concrete poetry and even exhibited his work alongside concrete poets and artists (including some of his neoconcrete colleagues) at the *Exposição Nacional de Arte Concreta*. This exhibit brought together works of concrete art and poetry from both São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in 1956 and 57 and Gullar contributed some seven pages from his 1955 poem, *O formigueiro*. The fifty-page poem, according to Gullar's introduction to its first published edition in 1991, is "born from one word—*a formiga*" (ant) that, over the course of its reading, "disintegrates itself into its elements [letters] and reintegrates itself in a new form."<sup>100</sup> The titular punning on "formiga" and "forma" (form) in this statement represents one such dis- and re-integration of the work's basic elements and speaks to a broader concern of Gullar's early production—that of poetry's form.

Among the poet's earliest visually experimental works, *O formigueiro* functions via the visual (and, were one to try and read the poem aloud, vocal) dis- and re-integration of the poem as the letters of "a formiga" disperse and recombine, like ants, before the reader in the space of the page. In addition, Gullar claims that *O formigueiro* "sought, as well, to valorize th[e] interior silence of the word, its semantic material, that which seemed to materialize in the blank space of the page."<sup>101</sup>

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100. Ferreira Gullar, *O formigueiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Edição Europa, 1991).

101. Gullar, *Ferreira Gullar in Conversation with* = *En conversación con Ariel Jiménez*, 35.



At one and a half meters tall by fifty centimeters across, the original pages of the poem that were displayed at the *Exposição* would have exaggerated this effect, calling additional attention to the material support, and space, of the page. Space is then able to shed its status as mere support and enter fully into the poem's perceptible materiality. This is something the published version of the *O formigueiro* accomplishes differently by being, in Gullar's words, "the promise of the book-poem that [he] would realize in 1959" in which the book and the poem would become "an indissoluble unity,"<sup>103</sup> and could no longer be apprehended separately.

Many of these characteristics are true not just of Gullar's work, but of all the concrete poetry displayed at the *Exposição*. Still, *O formigueiro* should be seen as a site of rupture, because, as Gullar tells it, "in the opinion of the paulista group, *O formigueiro* wasn't a concrete

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102. Gullar, *O formigueiro*, unpaginated preface.

103. Ibid.

poem.”<sup>104</sup> And though he credits the break-up to the São Paulo-based poets, who apparently rejected his contribution, in the same breath Gullar offers a critique of theirs, writing that *O formigueiro* “in their conception, it effectively wasn’t [concrete]: it neither reduced words to a mere element of phonetic-visual mechanics, nor intended the type of immediate, instantaneous communication, characteristic of advertising, that the paulista’s theory then prescribed.”<sup>105</sup> This critique is one version of Gullar’s fairly consistent characterization of the concrete poets after the rupture. That their method was problematically positivist is, as we have seen, another. It’s hard to be sure exactly how this falling-out took place, and if the concrete poets did, indeed, rebuff Gullar’s contribution for not partaking of the kinds of “sectarianism” that he sees in their approach to poetry, but it’s clear that, whatever the precise historical circumstances, after the *Exposição*, Gullar’s work and thinking would move in new directions.

The first of these directions, and the most important for the purpose of this chapter, is the neoconcretist. During this period, Gullar began to produce relational works in which the poem’s materiality more self-consciously engaged its participant— what he called “book-poems,” “object-poems,” and “spatial poems.” Though only one explicitly says so, in each case, the poem becomes an object whose construction and consumption invite the reader-participant *in* as they create an experience that takes place in the relations between object and subject. For example, in the book-poems, to which *O formigueiro* was a precursor, “the poem and the book are constructed at the same time”<sup>106</sup> via the reader’s participation, which renders the poem indivisible from its status as a material object just as it allows the participant to traverse it sensorially. In addition to emphasizing the material elements of its construction, the book-poems

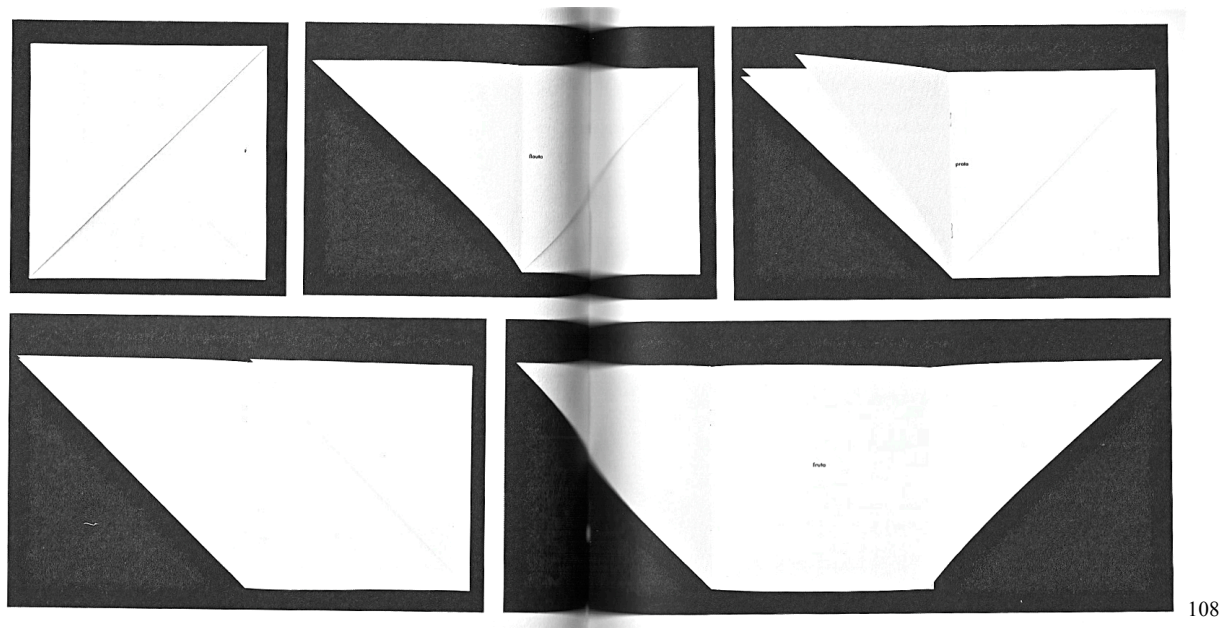
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104. Ibid.

105. Ibid.

106. Gullar, *Ferreira Gullar in Conversation with* = *En conversación con Ariel Jiménez*,

also “materialize [a] sensation.”<sup>107</sup> They are, in this way, the first example of a more realized relational poetics. To see how this works, we might take a look at “Livro-poema N° 3” (Book-Poem N° 3) below.



Gullar describes this book-poem as follows:

This livro-poema begins with blank space, and the first page, which is half the book diagonally, opens to uncover the word *flauta* [flute]. The next page, also on the diagonal, uncovered an entirely blank page and covers the earlier word *flauta*. Another diagonal page opens and the word *prata* [silver] can be seen. Everything else continues entirely blank. Next the reader must open a diagonal page toward the left, and then another along a diagonal to the right, to reveal the word *fruta* [fruit]. That is, this book opens as if it were being peeled. I had wanted to materialize that sensation of opening fruit, through the use of an object.<sup>109</sup>

107. Ibid., 72.

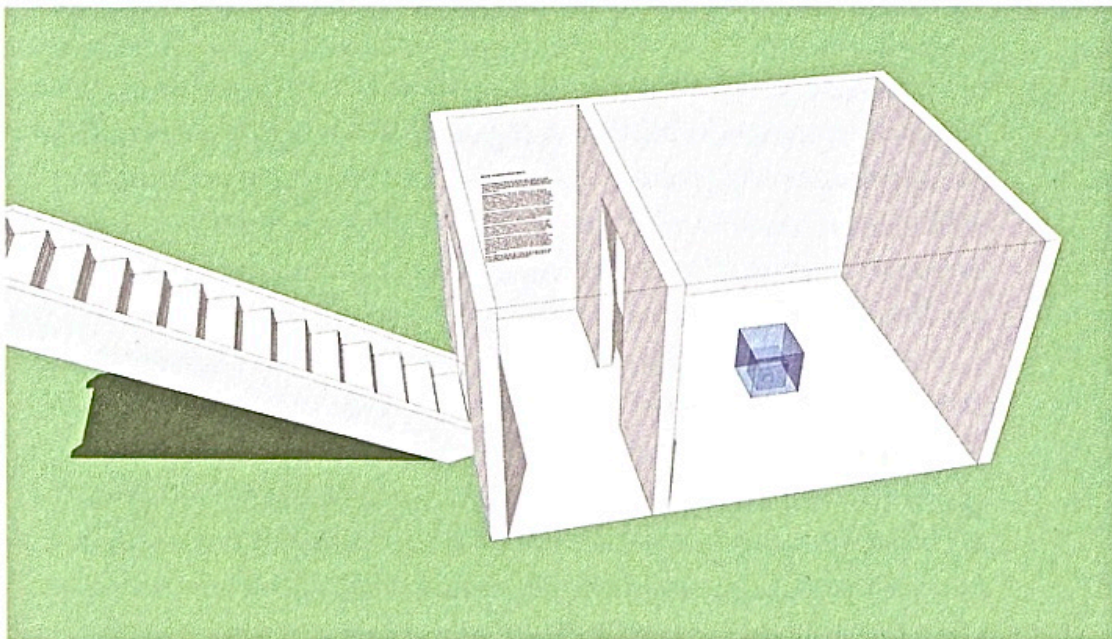
108. Gullar, *Ferreira Gullar in Conversation with = En conversación con Ariel Jiménez*, 74-75.

109. Ibid., 71-72.



Though Gullar recognizes that he “wasn’t the first person to make a spatial work,” acknowledging that “the book is and was always that way,”<sup>110</sup> his book-poems and poem-objects assure that the process of reading is no longer an activity so second nature as to be practically immaterial, but rather a deliberately relational, materially-experienced process. In this example, some remains of representation can be seen, in that the work’s unfolding is, if not necessarily representative of, at least analogous to, a fruit’s peeling. But what distinguishes this potential link to an external object from other ways in which traditional verse might approach such a thing is that, in the book-poem, it’s not language that represents by way of sensual description. Rather, it’s the object that materially reminds of a similar sense experience.

By the time Gullar makes 1959’s “Poema enterrado” (Buried Poem) this remnant of representation would be less present and sense experience further forefronted. This work would invite the reader “to participate with the entire body, entering the poem itself.”<sup>111</sup>



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110. Ibid., 76.

111. Gullar, *Experiência Neoconcreta: Momento-limite da arte*, 129.

This poem, a drawing of which you can see above, was constructed in the garden of Hélio

Oiticica's family home. It was:

a poem that could be a 3m x 3m room...buried under the earth. Readers would access this room via a set of stairs, would open the door of the poem, and would enter into it. In the anteroom preceding the poem itself, the reader-visitor would find the instructions of what to do in order to activate the poem. Once inside the poem, reader-visitors would find a 50cm x 50cm red cube; once lifted, it would reveal a 30cm x 30cm green cube. Once the green cube was lifted, they would find a smaller, white cube that was 10cm x 10cm, and on the face of the cube that was touching the floor, the word *Rejuvenesça* [Rejuvenate].<sup>113</sup>

Here, as opposed to the book-poems, Gullar's poetry would manage not just to make material the process of reading, but to create an entirely new "reading" experience, made possible by the spatial and material construction of this room/poem and existing in the relational space inside of it. To a greater degree, even, than a work like *Caminhando*, this work is "a body transparent to phenomenological understanding."<sup>114</sup> It is fully penetrable and, as such, creates a relation of total sense immersion in which the participating subject, literally inside the poem, is both a sensing body and one poetic object among others that, together, make the work.

And though this work shares many characteristics with installation art, and though it was a collaboration with Oiticica, the "Buried Poem" is a poem in which the most traditional of poetic materials—language—contributes to the kind of relationality produced. In *Caminhando* language existed outside the relational object as a score which prompted the participant's intervention. On the other hand, in the "Buried Poem," language is present in the work's most internal space, buried not only in the ground but under a series of nested boxes, themselves

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112. Gullar, *Ferreira Gullar in Conversation with = En conversación con Ariel Jiménez*, 83.

113. Ibid., 83-84.

114. Ferreira Gullar, "Teoria do não-objeto."

contained by the room. The word, then, is not external to the poem, but a most intimate constitutive material of it. It is not representational in any obvious way, but it does call for a rejuvenation of our understanding of how poetic language matters. By emerging *from* the participant's sensorial engagement with the rest of the poem's constructive materials, it suggests that language does not just function as a way of approaching objects. Rather only by engaging bodily with objects, in their materiality, can language be uncoverable. While language might be, phenomenologically speaking, left over in a work like *Caminhando*, in the "Buried Poem," even language "gives itself over to perception without leaving a remainder."

### ***Lygia Pape's 'Plastic Language'***

Though Gullar was the ideological spokesperson of the neoconcrete movement, the ideas that his work and theories explored—regarding relationality, participation, the object, and poetic language—were shared broadly by the group's members. Among them was Lygia Pape. She is better known as an artist, but has, both in and outside of her strictly neoconcrete period, demonstrated a consistent interest in language and poetry that demands to be considered in any account of the group's relational poetics. In Pape's version, the seam between language and object is eventually sealed, suggesting the possibility for a fully materialized poetics in which language is made from apparently non-linguistic objects. This happens, on the one hand, as an outcome of Pape's wide-ranging artistic output. Though Gullar always considered himself a poet, even when working at poetry's most material margins, Pape's loyalties are to a much broader set of practices, which include language-based works as well as works rooted in what was traditionally the domain of the plastic arts. Secondly, Gullar would eventually abandon his experiments with relational poetic objects in favor of a poetry that could account, in its content,

for the major social and political upheaval that came about as a result of Brazil's military dictatorship, which began in 1964.<sup>115</sup> But, Pape would not. Beyond the micro-political proposition that phenomenological openness has the potential to level hierarchies—between poet and reader, subject and object—Gullar's neoconcrete practices don't explicitly engage with politics. Pape, on the other hand, engages politics directly, and does so via an extension of the practices she began using during neoconcretism. This proves that relational poetics isn't merely a material staging of a philosophical proposition, but that it can be a poetic method that can engage directly with the political sphere.

I say poetic, and not just artistic method, for two reasons. One, it's in some of Pape's explicitly named "poems," and works that use language and the book-form, where many of her experiments with relationality take place. And two, as Pape herself says, she "experimented with all kinds of language."<sup>116</sup> For her, these "languages" were not limited to those composed of words, but rather, included "poems, sculptures, paintings, graphic designs,"<sup>117</sup> woodcut prints, and more. As such, much of Lygia Pape's output can be read as an investigation of the ways language, and poetic forms, find their place in the material objects of her creation. Though Pape does, at times, construct language from words, elsewhere, they are absent and in their place is a wholly materialized language, one that shares the relational potential of Gullar's own sensible poetics, but goes further to fully fuse poetic language and object, creating what Pape calls a "plastic language."<sup>118</sup>

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115. See, for example, Ferreira Gullar, *Dentro da noite veloz* (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio Editora, 2013). First published in 1975.

116. Lygia Pape, Mario Pedrosa, and Luis Otávio Pimentel, *Lygia Pape*. (Rio de Janeiro: Edições Funarte, 1983) 46).

117. Ibid.

118. Lygia Pape, Lúcia Carneiro, and Ileana Pradilla, *Lygia Pape: Palavra do artista*. (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 1998), 39.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will consider the poetics of Pape's plastic language both in and beyond the neoconcrete period. Before that, though, I want to take a step back and situate Pape who, like a number of those later associated with neoconcretism, was first a concretist. In the early years of her career, her work demonstrated the same interest in the line, the plane, geometric shapes, and limited set of colors that characterized the work of other concrete artists. And, Pape showed her work alongside other Rio-based concretists as part of Grupo Frente's first exhibit in 1954. Later, having joined with the neoconcretists, her work engaged a number of that group's shared problematics including what Luis Camillo Osorio calls "the displacement of the creative gesture, which ceases to be preoccupied by the 'I' and seeks its realization in collective communion with the other."<sup>119</sup> But even though Pape's work took on common concerns, it also stands out in a number of ways. If, as Osorio argues, "the dissemination of the act of expression was to become one of the poetic and political hallmarks of neoconcrete art,"<sup>120</sup> it's precisely the combination of the poetic and the political that materializes in Pape's work through her engagement with neoconcretism's material and relational practices.

This is one way in which Pape's practices generally, and poetics specifically, can be distinguished from her colleagues'. Likewise, scholars have commented on the breadth of Pape's work as another way that it differentiates itself from others associated with neoconcretism. In addition to underscoring "printmaking, and the woodcut in particular,"<sup>121</sup> as unique to Pape, Adele Nelson, for example, again points to Pape's use of many so-called "languages," writing that "over the course of [Pape's] fifty-plus year career, she explored multifarious mediums and

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119. Luis Camillo Osorio, "Lygia Pape: Experimentation and Resistance," *Third Text* 20 (2006): 572.

120. Ibid.

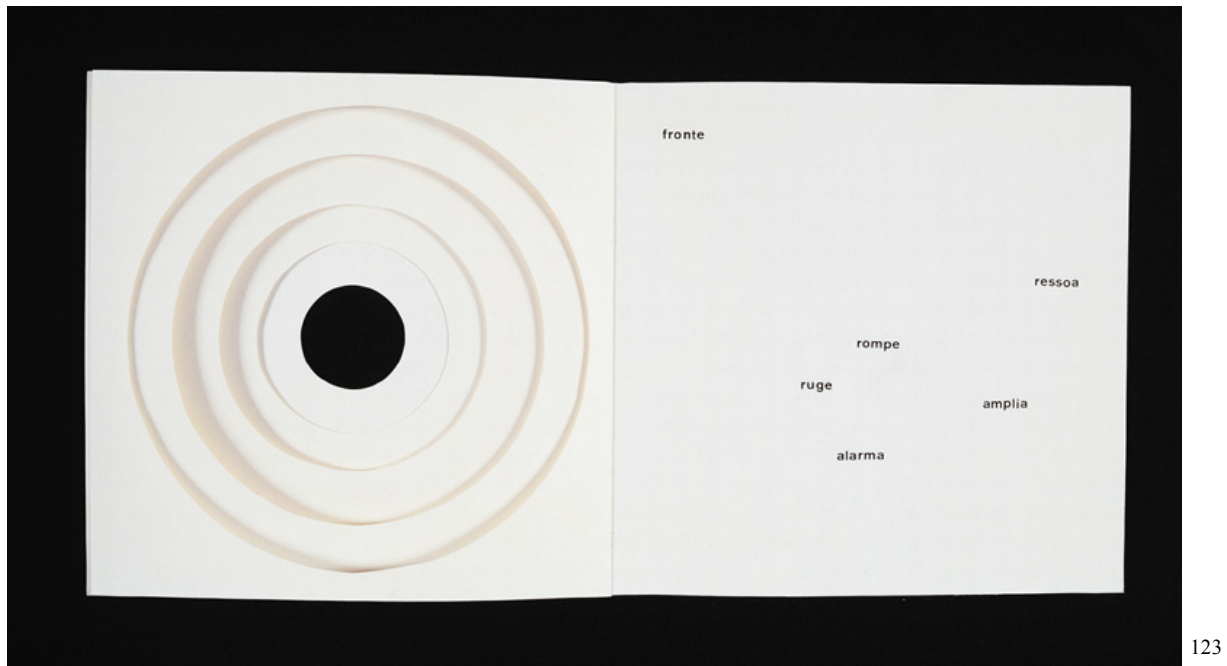
121. Adele Nelson, "Sensitive and Nondiscursive Things : Lygia Pape and the Reconception of Printmaking," *Art Journal* 71 (2012): 30.

fields, including painting, printmaking, and sculpture, as well as filmmaking, graphic design, installation, jewelry, and performance.”<sup>122</sup> What’s missing from this list, notably for this chapter’s concerns, is poetry, which has at least as longstanding a place in Pape’s career as any of the other “multifarious mediums” Nelson names, and which demands intervention from scholars of poetry and poetics. While art scholarship alone may be able to consider Pape’s contributions to genres ranging from painting to performance, it hasn’t so far been able to account for her contributions to poetry, or the ways that linguistic and poetic questions are often the thing that bind the artist’s varied and multiple practices together. In the remainder of this chapter, I hope to provide that account and to uncover another model for thinking the potential that material poetics have for our understanding of 20<sup>th</sup> century relational art practices (both poetic and plastic).

Though Pape’s poetry would eventually move beyond the example set by Gullar, in the years just prior to their signing of the “Neoconcrete Manifesto,” Pape produced her own book-poems, akin to those by her colleague. These, like the one below, shared features with those book poems by Gullar, including cut pages that, as the reader-participant turns them, reveal a limited set of words, one at a time.

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122. Ibid., 27.



In this example, the reader opens onto a series of concentric circles that grow larger with each turn. As she turns the pages, a spiral of words is revealed that begins with a rupture (“rompe” [break]) and ends with an embodied battle metaphor on “fronte,” meaning both front, as in wartime, and forehead. The other words here—roar, alarm, expand, and resound—amount to a poetic version of the manifesto published the same year. Though Gullar is known for most forcefully condemning the group’s concrete predecessors, this statement is no less strong. Pape’s, in fact, is fortified by its materialization as a book that can be read both as a poetic call to arms and a relational poetic object. Her book-poem marks its departure from concretism not just by announcing it, but by framing and inviting the readers’ sense participation into the very disclosing of this announcement. As with the “Buried Poem,” these words emerge via the reader’s entry into the materialized poem. This is another version of the phenomenological

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123. Lygia Pape, *Livros-poema*, 1959, Cardstock/text, 20 cm. x 20 cm., Projeto Lygia Pape, Rio de Janeiro.

openness that's characteristic of the relational object, one that, as poetry, again places language in its innermost space.

Pape and Gullar both partake of this strategy, but Pape's book-poem also makes use a number of features that are emblematic of her practice, most notably the concentric circles. This shape reappears in her famous *Livro da criação* (*Book of Creation*), which I will discuss shortly, and the circular form, more generally, materializes again and again throughout Pape's career. In this book-poem, it functions to both enclose the space where readers' senses are meant to focus, and to suggest the rippling, resonant potential of the neoconcrete project. Elsewhere, its meaning varies. As a result, the circle becomes a kind of floating signifier in Pape's career, a piece of material language that suggests the potential not just that words might—as the concretist project suggested—come to occupy a position parallel to objects, but that objects might function as words do.

In the *Book of Creation*, objects are meant to, for Pape, “‘narrate’ the creation of the world.”<sup>124</sup>

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124. Pape, Carneiro, and Pradilla, *Lygia Pape: Palavra do artista*, 31.





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Here, each of the freestanding pages represents one piece of a creation story that the reader-participant can assemble as she wishes. The *Book of Creation* manages to increase the relational potential of her earlier book-poem while also insisting on a fully materialized language in which material objects become language, not the other way around. Though the language Pape creates pre-exists its reading, the reader doesn't follow a pre-set path through the book. This is the first of a series of major differences that Pape's relational poetics have from Gullar's. Whereas Pape leaves the arranging of her book up to the reader, Gullar's neoconcrete poetry developed out of his wish to determine the order by which individual words would be apprehended. This resulted from what he saw as a faulty reading of the below poem:

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125. Lygia Pape, *Book of Creation*, 1959-60, Gouache on cardboard, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

verde	verde	verde	
verde	verde	verde	
verde	verde	verde	
verde	verde	verde	erva <sup>126</sup>

In Gullar's words,

When I published the poem in [the Sunday Supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil*], a friend called me up to say that he had found the poem interesting. I asked him: "Did you see how the repetition of the word green [verde] makes the word herb [erva] pop out of it?" His answer: "No, I didn't see anything like that, because I didn't read it word for word. As soon as I realized it was a repetition of the word 'green' I stopped reading."

This "reading" of the poem ran totally against my intentions, according to which it was indispensable that each instance of the word *verde* be read one by one until culminating in the word *erva*. This posed the following question: how does one produce a poem that results in an expressive visual structure and, at the same time, obliges the reader to read word by word? It was the need to resolve this problem that led me to invent the *book-poem*.

So where Gullar's relational poetics wishes to invite the reader to participate sensorially in the unfolding of book, it does not invite the reader to participate in the ordering of that experience.

In the *Book of Creation*, this opportunity is key. For Pape, then, to a greater degree than for Gullar, the relational space is one in which the reader and poet don't simply come together, but share in the act of creation. This is similar to the way that Lygia Clark's relational objects, such as *Caminhando*, also rely on the viewer-participant's manipulation for their realization. In Pape's example, though, this happens not as an outcome of the participant's following of the artist's score. Rather than following external instructions laid out through the artist's deployment of

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126. Gullar, *Experiência neoconcreta: Momento-limite da arte*, 34.

language, the participant, for Pape, comes to deploy the very (plastic) language that comprises the work.

If we take a closer look, we can see that this takes place in both the act of arranging the story and in the act of instilling it with meaning. Though the work, for Pape, is a creation story, she notes that “for another person, according to their particular sensibility and experience, those forms can have another meaning.”<sup>127</sup> It’s thus both a creation story as in “origin story” and a creation story as in a story that tells of its own creation.



Looking again at the concentric circle, we can see that its meaningful possibilities multiply by way of the relational encounter. This particular page of the *Book of Creation* carries the subtitle of “Man Discovered That the Sun Was the Center of the Universe.” But this wouldn’t necessarily be apparent to readers of the book. Instead, the circles might again suggest the movement of a pond’s surface, or of a planet and its rings, or, as the photograph above demonstrates, any

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127. Pape, Carneiro, and Pradilla, *Lygia Pape: Palavra do artista*, 31.

128. Lygia Pape, *Book of Creation*, 1959-60, Gouache on cardboard, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

number of “naturally” occurring concentric circles drawn from our experience of the sensible world. This is another way in which Pape’s poetics diverges from Gullar’s. Gullar’s work with the non-object insists on a complete resistance to representation and seeks a material language which comes, via its being experienced sensorially, to stand only for itself. Though Pape also emphasizes that the reader’s experience is what makes matter mean, her *Book of Creation* does not foreclose the object’s representative potential. Instead, it complicates it. *Book of Creation* makes use of forms that are especially, but not particularly, suggestive. Unlike the non-object, these objects aren’t tautological in their representative capacity. They can and do point outward to other objects and ideas. But, this field of possible representations is not strictly determined by authorial intent. Or it is, because, in the first place, Pape’s intent is toward openness. But in the end, exactly what *Book of Creation* represents can only be determined by the reader’s experience of both the work and the world in which they experience it.

This is not necessarily a new function of objects. They have, at least as long as language, held both symbolic value and the instability of representation that comes along with it. And this wouldn’t be news to the concretists, either, whose interest in semiotics included a special interest in Charles Peirce, into whose definition of the “icon,” Pape’s concentric circles could easily fit. The icon, as Peirce notes, “has no dynamical connection with the object it represents; it simply happens that its qualities resemble those of that object, and excite analogous sensations in the mind for which it is a likeness.”<sup>129</sup> It’s the likeness of Pape’s cardboard concentric circles to those created by a ripple on a pond’s surface that allows them to participate in what, in the pond’s case, is already an object-based metaphor for the way a disruptive idea travels. But though Pape may not be the first to use objects in the creation of meaning, her use of them

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129. Charles Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 114.

should not be overlooked, or casually folded into a history of art in which this is not a novel development.

Pape's objects come to function as language in the same poetic lineage where language was previously made to function as objects. This demonstrates another way that neoconcretism diverges from the concrete poetics that preceded it and, though Pape wasn't as outspoken a theorist of the group's practices as Gullar was, contributes to a broader vision of what relational poetics can be. If, in Gullar's examples, there is slippage between subject and object, in Pape's work, this slippage extends to language and object. In her plastic language, what's plastic is language and language is plastic.

The result of this slippage is that nearly none of Pape's post-neoconcrete works can be read cleanly as either plastic *or* linguistic art. They are always both, and so offer to both poetics and plastic art an opportunity to consider what it means when, though these histories are disciplinarily divided, the work itself entwines them. My hope here is not to entirely isolate the poetic in Pape's output, but to show that her works have the potential to radically alter the most basic of poetry's assumptions: that as a linguistic art, poetry must be made of words. This is something that, even in Gullar's poems, remains assumed. Words become few, words become part of the relational object, but they never quite merge with it. In Pape's relational objects, they do.

This slide from emphasizing subject/object slippage to emphasizing language/object slippage is important for two reasons. First, as I've noted, it proposes a poetry whose language doesn't just call attention to its own materiality, but takes shape in, and as, actual material objects. Second, it questions whether the indistinguishability of subject and object should be treated as a value at all. For Gullar, it is. And the joining of these two apparent poles in his

relational poetic objects offers an opportunity to make a philosophical problem a material reality. This, in turn, levels hierarchies between the poet, the reader, and the poem and suggests a relational space where each partakes in the materialization of the art object. But, as Pape points out, when the subject is a woman, the stakes of this philosophical play are different.

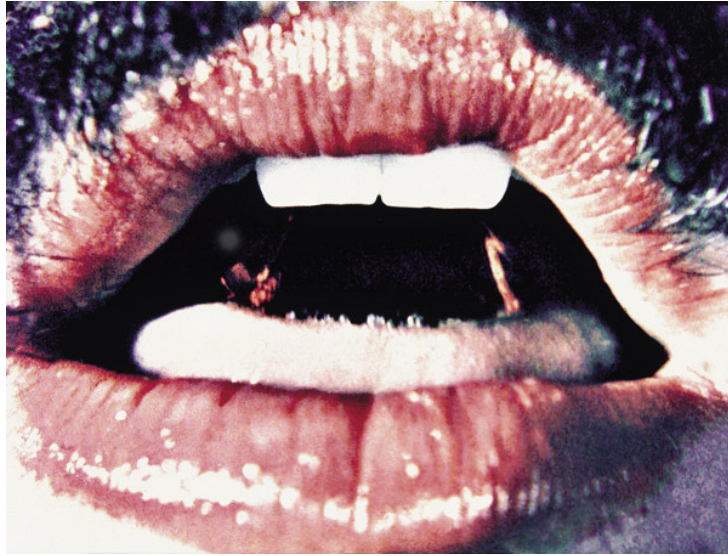
Pape brings this to the fore in *Eat Me*, where she “was ironizing the act of a woman transforming herself into an object.”<sup>130</sup> This work was made after the strictly neoconcrete period, but, as Nelson points out, *Eat Me* and *Book of Creation* share an interest in “ethical questions.”<sup>131</sup> Likewise, *Eat Me* continues to engage with the practices Pape began using during neoconcretism, including, as the work develops over the years, a tending toward a telos of plastic language. Like many of Pape’s works, *Eat Me* is more than a single work. As Osorio points out, “we see it developing into a film (1975), an exhibition of erotic objects (1976) and finally a book-sculpture (2001).”<sup>132</sup> This development indicates a shift in the relational leveling proposed by Pape’s work. The simple exchange of subject and object elsewhere is, throughout *Eat Me*’s transformation, complicated several times.

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130. Pape, Carneiro, and Pradilla, *Lygia Pape: Palavra do artista*, 51.

131. Nelson, “Sensitive and Nondiscursive Things : Lygia Pape and the Reconception of Printmaking,” 39.

132. Osorio, “Lygia Pape: Experimentation and Resistance,” 582.



133

In its first instantiation, the work is a film that shows a hair-rimmed, lipsticked mouth opening and closing, smoking, and revealing a moving tongue and teeth. It shows, as Pape says, “the woman as an object of consumption.”<sup>134</sup> This can be read in two directions: first, as a woman who is consumed as an object of sexual desire. But it can also be read as portraying a woman who is an object and consumes. This lines up with Pape’s claim that, after the 1967 exhibition “Nova objetividade brasileira,” at which she showed her work alongside other neoconcretists, including Clark and Oiticica, she “no longer worked with geometric forms” and instead substituted “living objects.”<sup>135</sup> This is literally in the case of the *Caixa das baratas*, which she showed at the exhibition and consisted, as the title says, of a box of cockroaches. But the suggestion of a living object extends to *Eat Me*’s mouth where the object to be consumed is also the site of consumption.

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133. Lygia Pape, *Eat Me: Gluttony or Lust*, 1975, 35 mm film, Projeto Lygia Pape, Rio de Janeiro.

134. Pape, Pedrosa, and Pimentel, *Lygia Pape*, 47.

135. Pape, Carneiro, and Pradilla, *Lygia Pape: Palavra do artista*, 50.

In Pape's work, the subject and object do come together, then, but differently from the example we saw with Gullar. Instead of a convergence of two poles, Pape uses this opportunity to make a political statement that ironizes and inverts the objectification of women via their very objectification. That this begins with the mouth is important. The mouth is, in the 1975 film, doubly a site of consumption. But, additionally, it's a place from where language proceeds. Because the work transforms later into a series of objects and finally a book-sculpture, it's clear that, for Pape, where there is an interchange of subject and object, there is also always language.

And it's language's ability to join with the subject and object in Pape's works that enables her to grow the neoconcrete project from a philosophical one to political one. Unlike a number of her contemporaries, Pape remained in Brazil during the military dictatorship that lasted from 1964 until 1985. In fact, she not only remained there, but openly took a political stance against the regime. In Pape's words, she was "one of few plastic artists who participated in that period, in the physical sense of the thing," and, as a result "really suffered."<sup>136</sup> This suffering is reflected in her work from the period, like the visual poem, *Língua apunhalada* (*Stabbed Tongue*) below.

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136. Ibid.,77.





137

The word “língua” means both tongue and language. Their linguistic bond precedes their stabbing (“apunhalar” is to stab), but it takes on a new importance here. This work from 1968 coincides with the tightening of the military regime that was, though not without violence, less strict during its initial four years. The photograph of the bleeding tongue, then, enacts the literal, violent silencing of artists and dissidents that was happening concurrently in the political sphere. As a poem, its message is both linguistically absent and utterly present. And this is made possible by Pape’s dedication to a plastic language that permits language to be at once missing and material. It’s this exact combination of methods that allows the *Stabbed Tongue* to speak, binding the tongue-object with the speaking subject inside a language that matters. As this example shows, Pape moved toward a fully materialized language that, despite its lack of words, was able to reintroduce the possibility for representation and discourse. In this way, Pape’s poetics counter

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137. Lygia Pape, *Poemas visuais: Língua apunhalada*, 1968, Photo: tongue and blood, Projeto Lygia Pape, Rio de Janeiro.

Gullar's assertion that neoconcretism led "to the progressive grinding-down of the language of art until all that was left was its primary elements: sensations"<sup>138</sup> by insisting that the sensible is already language.

This is how a relational poetics can move beyond the largely a-political philosophical experimentation that it was initially for Gullar toward a broader practice of relational aesthetics with political implications. Gullar would, as I've mentioned, eventually abandon his neoconcrete poetic practices under the dictatorship, but even prior to then, he began to question their continued vitality, so much so that he proposed the following:

an exhibition that would open at 5 p.m. and close at 6 p.m. Each object would have a bomb underneath it and at 6 p.m. we would tell the audience that they should leave the room, and at that moment the bombs would explode, thus ending the show. We didn't do that, obviously, but the very fact that I had imagined the possibility demonstrated my state of mind and the vision I had of those avant-garde experiments. In the end, I wound up distancing myself from everything—from my artist friends, and from art itself.<sup>139</sup>

Though I would argue a politics can be read in Gullar's neoconcrete works, I would concede that it is more of a micro-politics in which hierarchies are leveled between and among objects and a handful of participating subjects. It's not the capital-P Politics that Gullar would favor over neoconcretism in the years that followed, by working, first, as the director of the Brasília Cultural Foundation in the nation's capital, and later joining, and becoming a leader within the Brazilian communist party. During this time, he continued to write,<sup>140</sup> but no longer made use of the relational poetics he'd contributed so greatly to forming. Pape, on the other hand, would

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138. Gullar, *Experiência neoconcreta: Momento-limite da arte*, 131.

139. Gullar, *Ferreira Gullar in Conversation with = En conversación con Ariel Jiménez*, 85-86.

140. In fact, Gullar's poetry during the years following neoconcretism is much better known in Brazil, and includes his most famous work, a long poem called *Poema sujo* (Dirty Poem), which was first published in 1976 while Gullar lived in exile in Argentina. See Ferreira Gullar, *Poema sujo* (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio Editora, 2013).

press toward politics from within neoconcrete poetics. Going beyond Gullar's "terrorist act"<sup>141</sup> described above, Pape would, with *Lingua apunhalada*, actually commit violence against the art object (and subject) it/herself. But in her case, this would not spell the end of her neoconcrete practices. Rather, it would show that it was possible to use the violent act to merge the living object (the tongue) with the speaking subject inside of a plastic language that, despite being stabbed, had no trouble mouthing its message. Pape's neoconcrete poetics resist Gullar's suggestion that a relational poetry can't sustain the slide from philosophy to politics and offers a vision of the kind of future relational poetics can have—not simply a historical practice that took place in a specific location, during a handful of years, but practice that continues to have resonance within the larger field of relational art practices whose importance is ongoing.

In addition to the resonance these works can have within relational art, they produce many consequences for how we think of poetry, and for the ways poetry can think, name, and be in the world. But underlying these consequences is a single, profound assumption: that this is poetry at all. That's an assumption I've insisted on throughout this essay, and one I'll continue to insist on as I conclude. But, I do that not for a lack of awareness that this poetry finds itself at the boundaries of what we might imagine if we started from poetry—the category—and tried to think our way down to one of its instances. A move of that sort, which might, as a second order of business require a listing of poetry's criteria, would likely not lead to the "Buried Poem," and even more unlikely, to *Stabbed Tongue*. It would likely not even lead to the arguably less radical concrete poetry of the generation just prior to Gullar. So, in this way of thinking, these works are somewhere out there, beyond even other poetics whose relationship to poetry is already in question. Even Gullar recognizes this, when he asks himself, after the installation of the "Buried

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141. Gullar, *Ferreira Gullar in Conversation with = En conversación con Ariel Jiménez*, 85.

Poem”: “was I not becoming more of a plastic artist than a poet?”<sup>142</sup> Other than language, Pape’s and Gullar’s exemplary relational poems lack almost every criterion that might usually apply to poetry. They’re usually not written in line. They’re not always written on a page. They’re sometimes not *written* at all. But, of course, these things are true of other poems. And that’s the trouble with a move that begins from poetry and tries to find the poem. So, I urge an alternate movement that starts inside these examples and goes out to poetry from there.

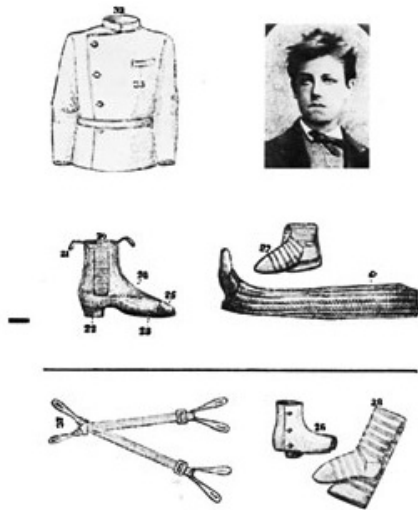
A movement of that sort can create all kinds of opportunities for readers and scholars of poetry today. For one, it significantly expands the borders of the category. Along with this, it welcomes the belonging of new poetic criteria. If you’re standing, for example, inside the “Buried Poem” as a poem, so much can come into view that might otherwise be disregarded as mere support. Boxes are part of the poem. Stairs are part of the poem. The smell of the earth is part of the poem. You, the reader, are part of the poem. If the “Buried Poem” is read as a work of plastic art that prizes the conceptual over the material, these material components might remain imperceptible, like the page to a reader of more familiar poetries. They aren’t the art, but a means of its conveyance. But as a poem, a work like this not only engages the participant’s sense experience, but trains those same senses to be able to sense the poem as material. Once those senses are trained, the participant can begin to look around. And this is where the relational poetic object’s most radical rejuvenation begins. It’s not at the ends of poetry. It’s the beginning of a new poetic sensibility.

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142. Gullar, *Experiência neoconcreta: Momento-limite da arte*, 129.

## ASSEMBLING *LA NUEVA NOVELA*

Despite its title, 1977's *La nueva novela* ("The New Novel" in English) is not actually a novel. Instead, it is a book-object assembled by Chilean poet Juan Luis Martínez from many diverse components including drawings, cartoons, math problems, paradoxes, photographs, other people's poems, homework assignments, and, in one case, fishhooks taped to the page, among many other things. Each of these components, according to Martínez, "constitutes a poem; but at the same time they are all fragments of the whole which is the book itself."<sup>143</sup> There is no value difference between these fragments, and the more readily recognizable poetry within the book is as much poetry as any of the book's other parts, as this page suggests:



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143. "Juanluismartinez.cl."

144. Juan Luis Martínez and Juan de Dios Martínez, *La nueva novela* (Santiago: Ediciones Archivo, 1985), 48.

Here, the equation of apparently unequal parts is staged literally, and visually. This is just one of several appearances of Etienne Carjat's famous 1871 photograph of Arthur Rimbaud, which circulates with and alongside an 1875 photograph of Karl Marx by John Jabez Mayall, throughout *La nueva novela*. Though equations like this one, which make up section three of the book, "Tareas de aritmética" (Arithmetic Homework),<sup>145</sup> don't really make sense, they are, like much of the book, made by sensible material. This is what I would like to call a material poetics of relation, which differs from the relational poetic and artistic practices discussed in the prior chapter, on Brazil's neoconcretism.

Still, *La nueva novela* partakes of the same history of material poetics to which the Brazilian concrete and neoconcrete poetries also belong. Like in the concrete poetries of Brazil, the poem's ability to be sensed contributes to what makes it poetry. For the São Paulo-based poets of the 1950s, the poem is sensed as a visual, vocal, and verbal object, one that must be seen, heard, and understood in order to be apprehended. For the neoconcrete poets, based in Rio de Janeiro in the early 1960s, the poem's material presence grows to include the haptic, inviting the reader to touch or physically co-create the poem. At times, this extends even to a fully immersive poetic experience, in which the reader finds herself not only co-creator of the poem, but a constitutive part of it. This is the case with Ferreira Gullar's "Buried Poem." Literally inside the poem, the reader must enter an underground room and uncover the word "rejuvenença" (rejuvenate) from a series of nested boxes. I have called these kinds of practices a relational poetics—one which closely resembles strategies employed by neoconcrete artists of the same period, including Lygia Clark, whose relational objects emphasize embodied participation over distant contemplation.

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145. English translations from *La nueva novela*, unless otherwise noted, are by Jack Schmitt and can be found online at "Juanluismartinez.cl."

Relation has been also been thought as a poetics by Martinican poet and theorist Édouard Glissant in *The Poetics of Relation*. There, Glissant makes use of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of the rhizome to rethink, among other hierarchies, the problem of center and periphery. As an alternative, Glissant's poetics of relation "make every periphery into a center,"<sup>146</sup> prizing errantry over rootedness and proposing "unities whose interdependent variances jointly piece together the interactive totality."<sup>147</sup> As a political poetics, this would level what Pascale Casanova calls "the opposition between the great national literary spaces, which are also the oldest—and, accordingly, the best endowed—and those literary spaces that have more recently appeared and that are poor by comparison."<sup>148</sup> In a world poetics of relation, the artistic output of former colonies and other so-called "peripheries" would, instead, come to hold a position equal in value to that of the "centers" because, in the rhizome, there is no center.

Glissant's poetics of relation will be key to this chapter, but my engagement with it is from an angle that is both literalist and materialist. In other words, if the *Poetics of Relation* has been read primarily as a *politics* of relation, I am interested primarily in its poetics. The materialism of this chapter, too, is literal. I mean "materialism" not as a placeholder for a politics but closer to the so-called "new" ways it is in use today. And this chapter will bring together Glissant's theorization of relation with Manuel DeLanda's elaboration of assemblage theory, which both extend from Deleuze and Guattari's work with the rhizome. That's how I get to a material poetics of relation. And when I say material, I mean *La nueva novela* and the parts it's made from—its language, its ink, its images, its paper, etc. And I am interested in how the book

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146. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 29.

147. Ibid., 93.

148. Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 83..

constructs itself as a material poetics of relation, creating a staging ground for the ways its parts make and are made as sense, and the ways they do or don't belong to, or in, the book at all.

That's not to say there's no politics in *La nueva novela*. There is, but it's mixed in there with everything else. For example, Marx's portrait appears five times but, as we'll see, always outside of what we might consider to be "his" context, always positioned in relation to other visual or textual materials that don't seem to belong together. There are other political aspects to *La nueva novela* as well. For instance, the book was composed before and just after the golpe de estado that established Pinochet's dictatorship in 1973. And there is a section whose title "Epígrafe para un libro condenado: La política" (Epigraph for a Condemned Book: Politics) is partially obscured by a fragile paper Chilean flag. But, my aim is not to subject this book to an allegorical reading in which *La nueva novela*'s confusing and apparently illogical parts come to be chaotically representative of the "context of social and political instability in Chile."<sup>149</sup> As Gwen Kirkpatrick points out, this book is not that simple and it "covers themes that are philosophical as well as literary and political." What's more, the book resists any absolute rootedness, and proposes, in its place, a rhizomatic horizontality where there is no hierarchy between these various "themes." And so, my aim, is to try and let the book be what it seems to be: a strange assemblage of mismatched materials that don't communicate a unified message and don't really appear to belong together, or in a book of poetry, at all.

That question of belonging extends to what we might usually call the author or the poet—the subject from which the poetic utterance could be said to have sprung. *La nueva novela* doesn't have an author of this sort. In Deleuze and Guattari's words, *La nueva novela* "has

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149. Gwen Kirkpatrick, "Desapariciones y ausencias en 'La nueva novela' de Juan Luis Martínez," *Revista de crítica literaria latinoamericana* 25 (1999): 227. This and future critical citations are my translations from Spanish unless otherwise noted.



neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters”<sup>150</sup> And I have taken pains in this chapter to avoid saying “Juan Luis Martínez’s *La nueva novela*” as a way of resisting, with the book, its belonging to a single author, something the book calls into question before it’s even opened. The rejection of the subject is not new to material poetics. In Brazilian concrete poetry, the “I” is effectively excised from the poem’s uses of language, and poems find ways of writing themselves.<sup>151</sup> In neoconcrete poetry, the subject and object converge such that the poem is created only when the difference between these two poles collapses.<sup>152</sup> In the case of *La nueva novela*, an undermining of the author-as-subject begins on the book’s cover.

There, the title appears, along with the author’s name twice, a name which is twice crossed out, and twice set inside parentheses, as (~~Juan Luis Martínez~~) and (~~Juan de Dios Martínez~~).<sup>153</sup> One of these names means “of God,” and God, in the Catholic tradition, is already a thrice split subject. And the book is full of other authors and their work, along with authors who appear not in the subject position as unified authorial “I”s, but as the subjects of, and enclosed in, other texts.

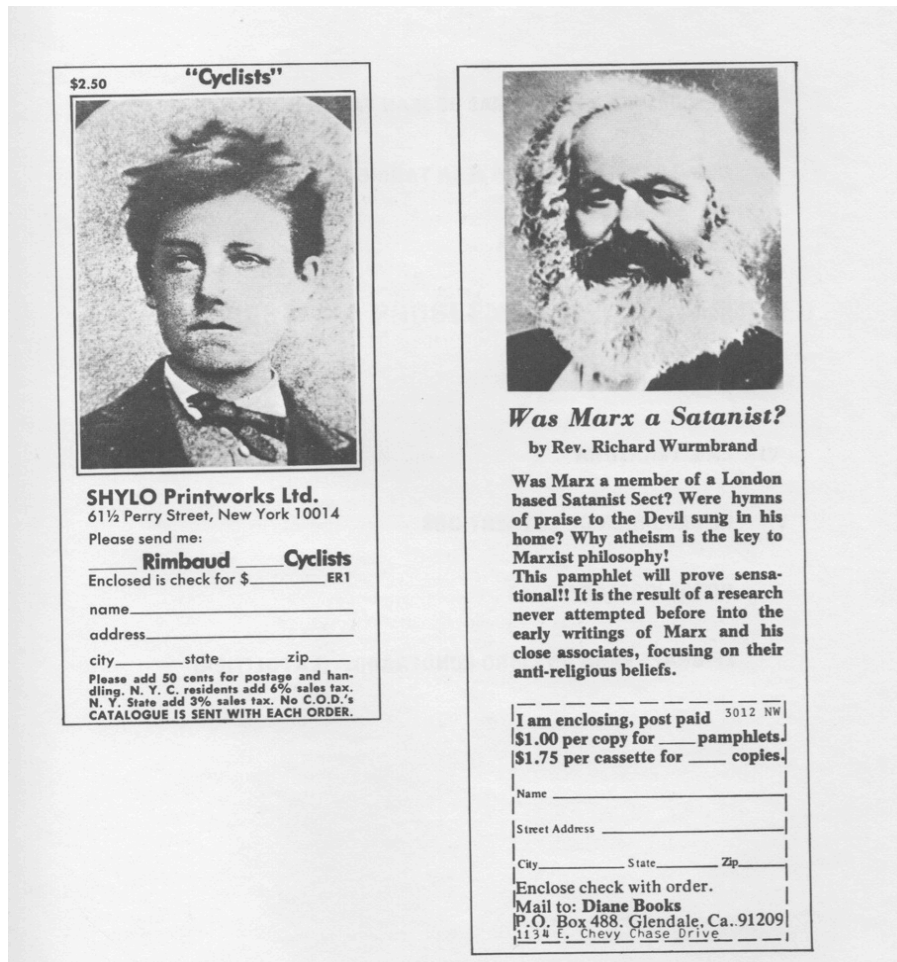
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150. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 3.

151. See chapter one’s discussion of “Alea 1—Variações semânticas,” an anagrammatic poem in which “the reader-operator is invited to extract other combinatory variations within the given semantic parameter” (my translation). de Campos, “Alea I - Variações Semânticas,” 32.

152. See chapter two.

153. Delightfully, the two author names are even extended to the ways the book is catalogued in library metadata, where it’s listed under both.



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For example, preceding the table of contents are two dedications “encontradas por (el autor) en un ejemplar del libro de Miguel Serrano: ‘Antología del verdadero cuento en Chile’” (that were found by (the author) in an edition of the book by Miguel Serrano: “Antología del verdadero cuento en Chile”).<sup>155</sup> Then, there appear what are made to look like two sales slips inviting the reader to mail-order away for *Rimbaud Cyclists* and *Was Marx a Satanist?*<sup>156</sup> by Rev. Richard Wurmbrand. Though the latter sounds the more improbable (or maybe it doesn’t), *Was Marx a Satanist?* is available today in English, German, or Russian. Each sales slip contains a portrait of the book’s subject beneath the Nietzsche-referencing heading, “El eterno retorno” (The Eternal

154. Martínez and Martínez, *La nueva novela*, unpaginated preface.

155. Ibid.

156. Both mail-order slips appear originally in English.

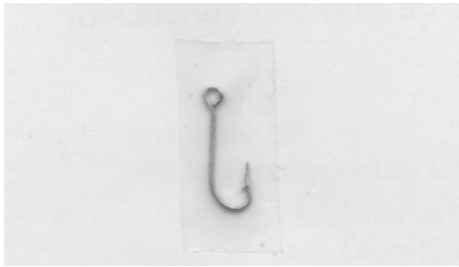
Return).<sup>157</sup> This heading previews the, at least occasional, return of these two images throughout the rest of the book. They appear, for example, as the heads on the bodies of Superman (Marx) and a Lois Lane-style distressed damsel (Rimbaud). Or in a Wanted Poster advertising a \$2000 reward. Or as components of math problems, as we've seen. In this, their first appearance, before the book even claims to officially begin, they are the subjects of other books. And so, before even arriving at the table of contents, this book works to establish itself not as a singular creation that belongs to a single authorial subject, but, as a "a system of references that operate permanently in every direction."<sup>158</sup>

To "read" *La nueva novela* is to engage with a whole labyrinthine library of other books, ideas, objects, images, etc. that aren't necessarily *La nueva novela*'s alone. Though bound together as this book, its parts work equally to unbind it, to point out toward other things, people, and places. The same might be said for any book which, made of language, is only ever a holding place for a series of word-parts it has gathered into a whole, but that don't only belong to it. But, *La nueva novela* makes this fact manifest, and in more than just in language. It may be a system of references, but these references are not just alluded to, but are made by and with materials borrowed from all kinds of things. The famous portraits of Rimbaud and Marx, for example, are images that have circulated through lots of other compositions. The various collages included in the book are constructions of clippings from newspapers and other printed materials. And the fishhooks that are taped to page 75 are really there, and may have been tied to the end of a line and stuck inside of a lip before composing part of what is titled "Ichthys." That these things are all copies, including the fishhooks, is only an extension of *La nueva novela*'s already confused borders.

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158. Martínez and Martínez, *La nueva novela*, unpaginated preface.

158. "Juanluismartinez.cl."



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As Zenaida Suárez points out about *La nueva novela* and *La poesía Chilena*,<sup>160</sup> “all of the objects [inside the books] possess a specific function outside of the system that we call ‘the poetic works of Juan Luis Martínez.’”<sup>161</sup> For Suárez, the objects that appear in *La nueva novela* are: “the Chinese calligram, the blank page, the parchment paper, the transparency, and the fishhooks” and can be separated into “invulnerable” and “vulnerable” categories.<sup>162</sup> Objects belonging to these categories either do, or do not, according to Suárez, “maintain, even after being introduced into [the book’s] system, the mark of their primary objectual domain.” She would categorize the fishhooks, for example, as invulnerable, and the transparency (a clear piece

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159. Martínez and Martínez, *La nueva novela*, 75.

160. Another of Martínez’s books that is:

a small box in black (predominantly) and white that contains an envelope with “earth from the valle central de Chile,” a set of bibliographic cards (authenticated with a stamp from the Biblioteca Nacional de Chile and which outline four important poem about the theme of death, by the poets Gabriela Mistral, “Los sonetos de la muerte,” from *Desolación* from 1922; Pablo Neruda, “Solo la muerte” from *Residencia en la Tierra*, Volume II, 1935; Pablo De Rokha, “Poesía funeraria,” from *Gran Temperatura*, 1937, and Vicente Huidobro, “Coronación de la muerte” from *Ultimos Poemas*, 1948, posthumous), together with Chilean flags and photocopies of the death certificates (of these four “founding fathers” of Chilean poetry, Gabriela Mistral, Vicente Huidobro, Pablo Neruda, and Pablo de Rokha, plus the biological father of Martínez, Luis Guillermo Martínez Villablanca) and a short but emotive poetic text in Latin that opens the set: “Ab imo pectore.”

Andrés Morales, “Para una lectura interpretativa de La Poesía Chilena de Juan Luis Martínez” *Revista chilena de literatura* 69 (2006): 108.

161. Zenaida M. Suárez, “Objetualismo en Juan Luis Martínez : El significante palpable,” *Estudios filológicos* 51 (2013): 88.

162. Ibid.

of plastic that acts like a window through pages 41 and 42) as vulnerable. For me, these five objects do not exhaust the potential “vulnerabilities” of *La nueva novela*’s parts. Like the found dedications that open the book, or Marx and Rimbaud’s portraits, or the references that appear on almost every page to other authors, other books, theorists, artists, etc., essentially all of *La nueva novela* is assembled from parts that, as Manuel DeLanda writes “may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which [their] interactions are different.”<sup>163</sup>

These are what DeLanda calls, after Deleuze and Guattari, “relations of exteriority” and what characterize an assemblage. Though, for DeLanda, assemblage theory is much bigger than the book, for Deleuze and Guattari, the book grounds the theory. As they write:

In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture. All this, lines and measurable speeds, constitutes an *assemblage*. A book is an assemblage of this kind, and as such is unattributable. It is a multiplicity.<sup>164</sup>

To be a multiplicity, the book can’t belong to a single author. As Guattari says in an interview with Martínez, “I don’t speak of ‘I’ but rather of existential territories that integrate the I.”<sup>165</sup>

This position stakes out a theory which would disperse authorship, in general, but for Martínez, dissolving the “I” is a deliberate project. As he tells Guattari in the same interview, “my primary interest is the absolute dissolution of authorship, anonymity, and the ideal, if that word can be used, is to make a work in which almost no line belongs to me, a long work in which are

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163. Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 10.

164. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 3-4.

165. Juan Luis Martínez and Félix Guattari, “Félix Guattari: Conversación con Juan Luis Martínez,” *Revista matadero*, July/August, 2000.

articulated many fragments and little pieces that connect.”<sup>166</sup>

The text’s author, then, “is done away with, to be revealed in the texture of his creation.”<sup>167</sup> But, though the stakes of this process are at play in *La nueva novela*, the crossing out and doubling of the author’s name on the book’s title is not merely game, and the apparent absurdities that abound inside the book’s binding are not just paradoxical jokes but ways of achieving the “deterritorialization” that Deleuze and Guattari describe. For Martínez, as the below page shows, this is the task of poetry.

#### TAREAS DE POESIA

a Alejandra Pizarnik



168

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166. Ibid.

167. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 25.

168. Martínez and Martínez, *La nueva novela*, 26. The title translates to “Poetry Homework” or “Tasks of Poetry.”

*La nueva novela* as an assemblage, one which puts into practice a material poetics of relation, undermines single-authorship, and reveals in its stead the book's construction in, and as, parts that bind and unbind it. These parts extend, in DeLanda's terms, from "a purely *material* role at one extreme of the axis, to a purely *expressive* role at the other extreme."<sup>169</sup> I will call these poles the sensible and the sensical. And though proponents of object-oriented ontologies might argue that an emphasis on a human's ability to "sense" this book leads toward a reconstitution of the subject, I wish to distinguish between the authorial subject and reading subjects. Though *La nueva novela* works to dissolve the authorial subject, its reading subjects are already dispersed, as the many dedications—to Roger Caillois, Pablo Neruda, Gilles Deleuze, Maurice Blanchot, Michel Foucault, and many more—that appear throughout the book demonstrate. The human does not vanish because the book is, as Deleuze and Guattari call it, "unattributable,"<sup>170</sup> but is, rather, also multiple. *La nueva novela* doesn't have a reader. It has readers.

Describing these poles as sensible and sensical does not mean that the two have no overlap. As DeLanda's language indicates, these are not distinct categories but ends of a spectrum on which "a given component may play a mixture of material and expressive roles."<sup>171</sup> This is, in fact, almost always the case with the components that compose *La nueva novela* which is not only full of expressive (and material) language, but, as Suárez writes:

promotes a kind of extremely complex coding where objects that already have a meaning and function outside of [the work] come to have their meaningful and functional

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12. 169. DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*,

170. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 3-4.

12. 171. DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*,

possibilities multiplied, and operate within the work like interpretable texts in the literary context to which they are attached.”<sup>172</sup>

But, though I agree with Suárez that the more material objects (like the fishhooks and transparency) can be read for meaning within the text, I also want to suggest that the material can’t simply be subsumed to the meaningful in *La nueva novela*. And I want to reiterate that the sensible and sensical are poles between which the book constructs itself. Because just as the objects that might be more readily identified as sensible can be interpreted meaningfully, the more apparently meaningful portion of the book—the text—is constantly calling into question its ability to make, in any straightforward manner, sense.

### ***The Sensible***

I will come back to the question of sense-making, but I want to begin by attempting to describe the book as a sensible object and resist, for the moment, as much as is possible, reading it. But, I should probably start with the understatement that this is a challenging proposition. On the one hand, there is the problem, as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus point out in their introduction to “surface reading,” of “whether we can ever set aside our responses in order to produce undistorted accounts of things.”<sup>173</sup> I’m going to go ahead and say it: I don’t think we can. But, I do think it’s worthwhile to attempt anyway. And the reasoning for this claim is bound up in another of *La nueva novela*’s particular challenges to its being described as a sensible object: it’s incredibly complex. If I do want to read the book for meaning, which I will do in the next section, then I owe readers the chance to familiarize themselves with the book as a whole.

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172. Suárez, “Objetualismo en Juan Luis Martínez : El significante palpable,” 88.

173. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108, vol. 1 (2009): 18.



More than other books, this is needed in *La nueva novela*'s case. Its extreme complexity makes description urgent. It also makes it impossible. Every book could probably be called complex, but it might be complex, at least, within a single domain. A novel might have a complex plotline. Or it might have a complex relationship to the historical context in which it takes place. Or a combination of these and other factors. But in addition to being complex in terms of what "inside" *La nueva novela*'s contents, *La nueva novela* is complex in terms of its material contents themselves.

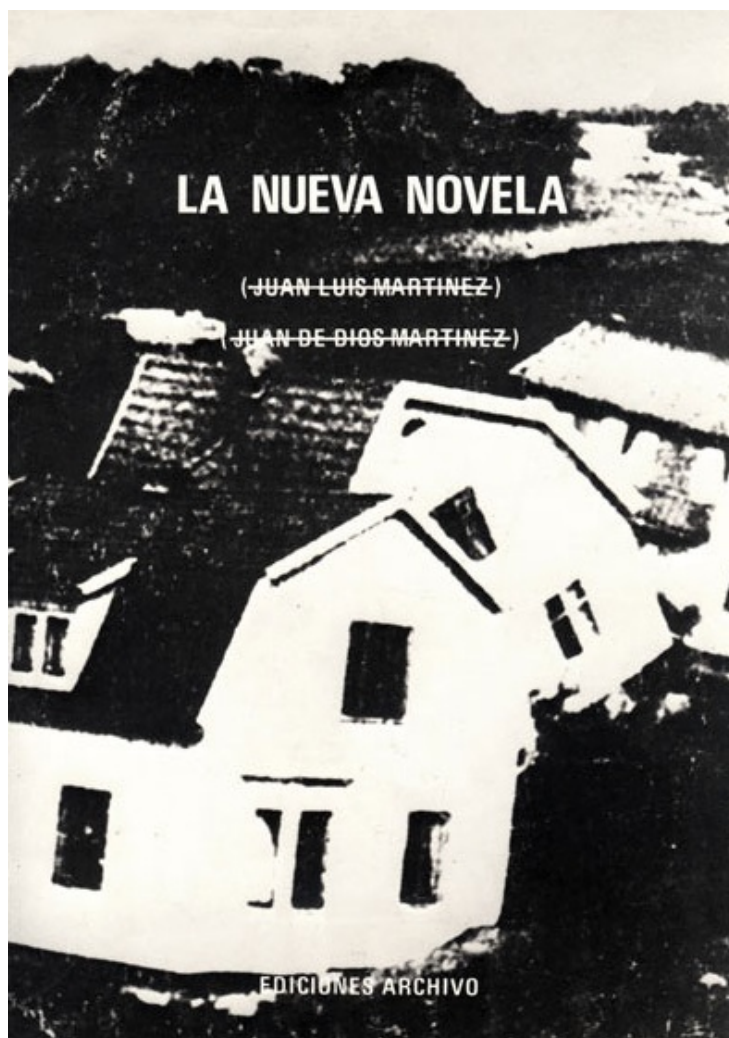
And, because these contents don't really belong together in any way other than the fact of their belonging together in the book, it's not easy to summarize them. The only account of the book which might be considered "undistorted" would end up looking like the unwieldy map in Borges's "On Exactitude in Science" in which "the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it."<sup>174</sup> I would like, for example, to be able to offer an account of some of the images in the book. But if a picture is worth a thousand words, how many are you willing to read? And if, as a shortcut, I offer an image of one of those images, have I left the domain of description and begun to create a partial Map of the Empire? Also, if the book is a sensible object, which of its sensible aspects should I mention? A mapmaker can indicate a forest without drawing every tree, but, in the case of *La nueva novela*, the forest isn't trees. It's hundreds of dissimilar pieces without a taxonomic relation.

I'm going to leave all those hesitations on the table but work to give you an account of the book-object anyway. To begin simply, *La nueva novela* is approximately 27 x 19 x 1.5 cm. It is printed entirely in black ink, and has 147 pages, not counting the colophon or the final blank

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174. Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 325.

page before the back binding. As the colophon notes, it was initially published as a single original in January 1977, and later in a “very limited edition” of 1000 copies, something which, for Oscar Sarmiento “suggests that it effectively insists on its presence as a dissonant object.”<sup>175</sup> I would add that this dissonance is not just against a background of other objects and books, but is also a good way of describing the clash of its contents. This begins on the book’s cover, where, in addition to the two crossed-out, parenthetical names there is a black and white, overexposed photographic image of houses that appear to be tumbling into one another.



176

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175. Oscar Sarmiento, “Intersecting Reflections: Huidobro Through Juan Luís Martínez’s *La Nueva Novela*,” *Hispanic Issues On Line* 6 (2010): 158.

176. Martínez and Martínez, *La nueva novela*, cover.

The back cover is a graph-paper-like grid with instructions that read: “Dibuje el contorno de cada cuarto incluyendo puertas y ventanas. Marque dos rutas de escape para cada miembro de su familia. Cada cuadradito equivale 2 cm.<sup>2</sup>” (Draw the contour of every square, including doors and windows. Mark two escape routes for every member of your family. Each little square equals 2 cm.<sup>2</sup>).<sup>177</sup> The table of contents separates the book into seven sections plus two extra: “I Respuestas a problemas de Jean Tardieu,” “II Cinco problemas para Jean Tardieu,” “III Tareas de aritmética, IV El espacio y el tiempo,” “V La zoología, VI La literatura,” “VII El desorden de los sentidos,” plus “Notas y referencias” and “Epígrafe para un libro condenado: (La política).” Each section begins with the section’s title set alone on the page, and contains additional pages that are usually, but not always, broken out with their own titles, or headings.

I could stop here. I’ve given you, so far, a description of the *La nueva novela*’s skeleton, those things that bind it together as a book—its covers, and the sections its contents are divided into. But, there’s lots more to it, of course. So, let’s continue. The first section, “Respuestas a problemas de Jean Tardieu,” (Answers to the Problems of Jean Tardieu) doesn’t so much contain “answers” as more problems, for example, on a page titled “El tiempo” (Time), there is the instruction, “Medir en décimos de segundo el tiempo que se necesita para pronunciar la palabra ‘eternidad’”<sup>178</sup> (Measure in tenths of a second the time required to pronounce the word “eternity”). Elsewhere, there are images, or calls for images such as, following a page titled “La psicología” (Psychology), the question: “¿Cómo se representa usted la falta de pescado?”<sup>179</sup>

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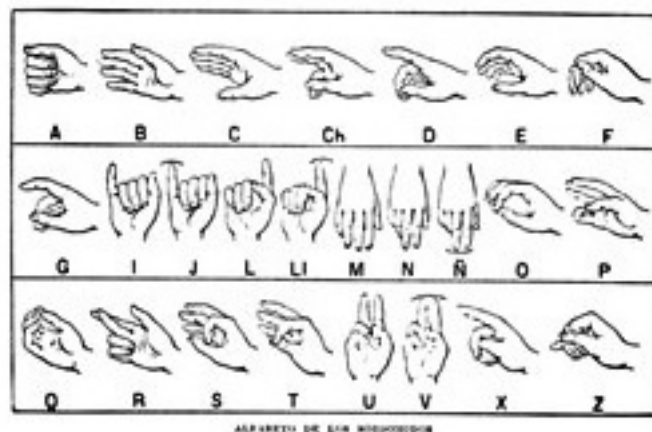
177. Ibid., back cover. My translation.

178. Ibid., 13.

179. Martínez and Martínez, *La nueva novela*, 17.

(How do you represent the lack of fish?). And, on the following page, there are three examples that show how this might be done.

The second section “Cinco problemas para Jean Tardieu” (Five Problems for Jean Tardieu) has more than five problems, which include, for example, a page titled “El lenguaje” (Language) on which the below appears.



Tardieu, a partir de la afirmación de que generalmente no se usa el sexto dedo porque su existencia no es físicamente perceptible, modifique el alfabeto que aparece en la lámina superior.

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(Tardieu, beginning with the affirmation that the sixth finger is not generally used because its existence is not physically perceptible, modify the alphabet that appears in the illustration above.)

This section also marks the appearance of the transparency, which works as a window through a page titled “Un problema transparente” (A Transparent Problem) and reveals, depending on which way the page is turned, one of the following: either “Si La Transparencia se observara a sí misma, ¿Qué observaría?” (If Transparency observed itself, What would it observe?) or “La

Transparencia no podrá nunca observarse a sí misma.” (Transparency will never be able to observe itself).

Section three, Tareas de aritmética (Arithmetic Homework), contains arithmetic problems like the one featuring Rimbaud shown at the opening of this essay and others, in words, such as “Una máquina de coser x Una lámpara de lágrimas = Una viuda con 12 hijos” (A sewing machine x A torch of tears = A widow with 12 children) which carries the footnote “En el estricto plano del lenguaje nada más triste que una lámpara de lágrimas.” (Strictly on the level of language, nothing sadder than a torch of tears.).<sup>181</sup>

“El espacio y el tiempo” (Space and Time) is the title of section four, and also the title of individual subsections in sections one and two. Section four has an image on every page except 62, which is blank other than its heading—“La proximidad” (Proximity)—and a footnote to that heading—“Si La Proximidad se acercara un poquito más a las cosas, se convertiría en las cosas.” (If Proximity approximated things a little more, it would become things.).<sup>182</sup> Most of the other images in this section are reproductions of photographs, including three that are overexposed similarly to the image of the three crumbling houses on the book’s cover. These appear under the title “La curvatura del tiempo” (The curvature of time), dedicated to Deleuze.

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181. Ibid., 51.

182. Ibid., 62.



Existe un lugar (Ej. Las Ruinas del Partenón) cuyo interés no reside ya en la importancia arqueológica que alguna vez haya tenido, sino en la creciente inquietud que provoca vislumbrar fugazmente en los alrededores del Templo, la coincidencia de un momento y un lugar privilegiados y desde cuyo ángulo es posible verificar que el espacio transparente y azul que rodea a las columnas, exhibe ya también, visibles señales de deterioro.

183

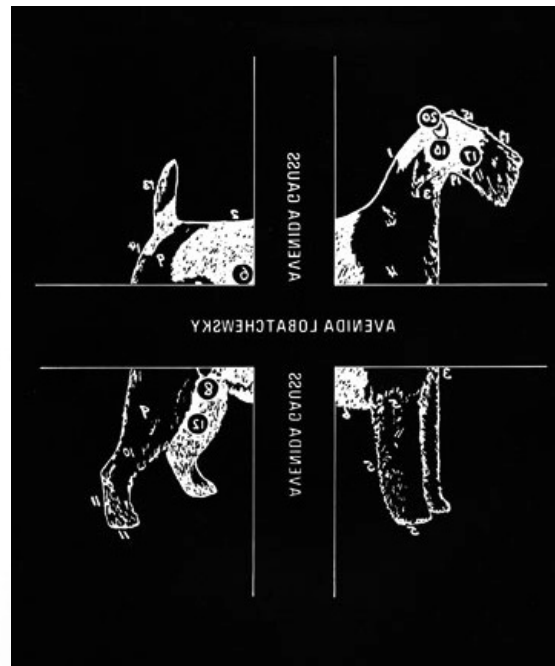
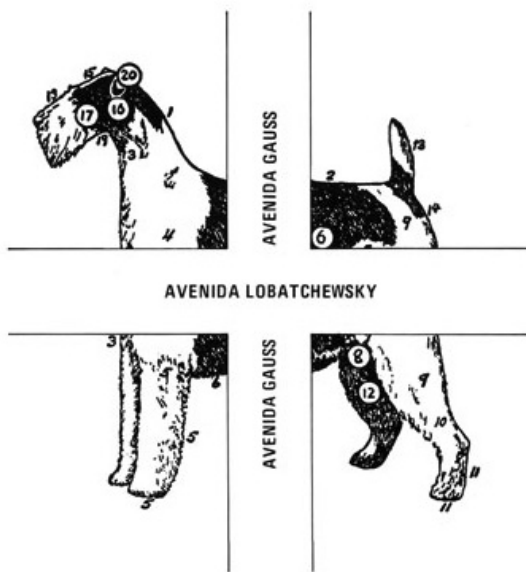
(There is a place (e.g., The Ruins of the Parthenon) whose interest no longer lies in the archeological importance that it may have once had, but in the growing uneasiness provoked by a fleeting glimpse of the Temple's surroundings, the coincidence of a privileged moment and place from whose vantage point it is possibly to verify that the transparent blue space surrounding the columns also now shows visible signs of deterioration.)

Section five, "La zoología" (Zoology), features the fishhooks page, along with other references to animals (imaginary and not) including a "Bibliografía general sobre los gatos"

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183. Ibid., 63.

(General Bibliography on Cats) that lists T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*<sup>184</sup> among other titles. There are also two images—negative and positive—of a fox terrier that appears elsewhere in the book, including on the title page, and following the colophon on the last page, where he is there labeled “El Guardián del Libro” (The Guardian of the Book). In “La zoología,” the terrier is split in four by two intersecting avenues, each named after mathematicians.



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The opposing pages are titled “Fox terrier desaparece en la intersección de las avenidas Gauss y Lobatchewsky” (Fox Terrier Disappears in the Intersection of Gauss and Lobatchewsky Avenues) and “Fox terrier no desaparecido no reaparece en la no-intersección de las no-

184. Ibid., 77.

185. Ibid., 80 and 82.

avenidas” (~~Gauss y Lobatchewsky~~)<sup>186</sup> (Non-Disappeared Fox Terrier Doesn’t Reappear in the Non-Intersection of the Non-Avenues (~~Gauss and Lobatchewsky~~)).

“La literatura” (Literature), the sixth section, is home to “La página en blanco” (The Blank Page), a semi-transparent piece of vellum with that title on it, along with a footnote that reads “(El Cisne de Ana Pavlova sigue siendo la mayor página en blanco).” (Ana Pavlova’s Swan continues to be the best blank page).<sup>187</sup> The page that follows is actually a blank page. This section is also home to what Suárez calls the “Chinese calligram,” a thin piece of paper, smaller than the rest of the book which is folded in half and tucked between two pages<sup>188</sup> on which Chinese characters appear. There is also a repeating photograph of a young girl,<sup>189</sup> an image of musical notations that look to be spilling from the mouths of birds,<sup>190</sup> and, a page titled “Meditaciones sobre René Magritte” (Mediations on René Magritte).

In the final numbered section, “El desorden del los sentidos” (Disorder of the Senses), the first page is titled “El oído” (The Inner Ear),<sup>191</sup> but none of the remaining pages are titled after sense organs. Instead, they reference and picture Napoleon,<sup>192</sup> Hitler,<sup>193</sup> and Tania Savich.<sup>194</sup> Hitler’s and Savich’s photos appear inside a line drawing of a square and circle, respectively under the titles “Adolf Hitler y la metáfora del cuadrado” (Adolf Hitler and the Metaphor of the Square) and “Tania Savich y la fenomenología de lo redondo” (Tania Savich and the

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186. Ibid., 81 and 83.

187. Ibid., 87.

188. Ibid., tucked between pages 96 and 97.

189. Ibid., 86 and 105.

190. Ibid., 88.

191. Ibid., 108.

192. Ibid., 109-111.

193. Ibid., 113.

194. Ibid., 114.



Phenomenology of Roundness)).<sup>195</sup> The last two pages of this section reproduce, in positive and negative, a photograph of Dennis Oppenheim's *Rocked Circle* in which the artist can be seen standing inside a rectangular patio stone, inside a circle.<sup>196</sup>

Now I've given you a description of each of the book's main sections that, I expect, has been both boring and interesting. Boring because this has mostly been a list of the materials that comprise the book, and interesting for the same reason. These materials are interesting and, because they refer to or are borrowed from so many other things and people, they make you want to read them for meaning and not just know about them. And that makes an account like this frustrating. As a methodological approach, it's giving me the chance to "show" you much more of the book than a more purely interpretational account would have the time to do. But it also means I'm not able to do all the interpreting. This is in line with the book's playful provocations, and so in some ways, my description is replicating the effect *La nueva novela* has on its readers—it opens a series of questions but it doesn't answer them for you.

It does offer a section of "Notas y referencias" (Notes and References), though, where there are notes and references to prior sections. As might be expected by now, these are not in the usual style of other books' notes and references. For example, this note which refers to the negative image of the fox terrier from section five:

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195. "The Phenomenology of Roundness" is also the title of chapter ten in Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

196. *Ibid.*, 116-117.

NOTA 4.

FOX TERRIER NO DESAPARECIDO  
EN LA NO-INTERSECCION DE LAS NO-AVENIDAS  
(GAUSS Y LOBACHEWSKY)

"ese era su nombre"  
(Sogol -- Logos)



BIBLIOGRAFIA:  
La Transversal, Félix GUATTARI,  
Rev., Psychiatrie institutionnelle, núm. 1.

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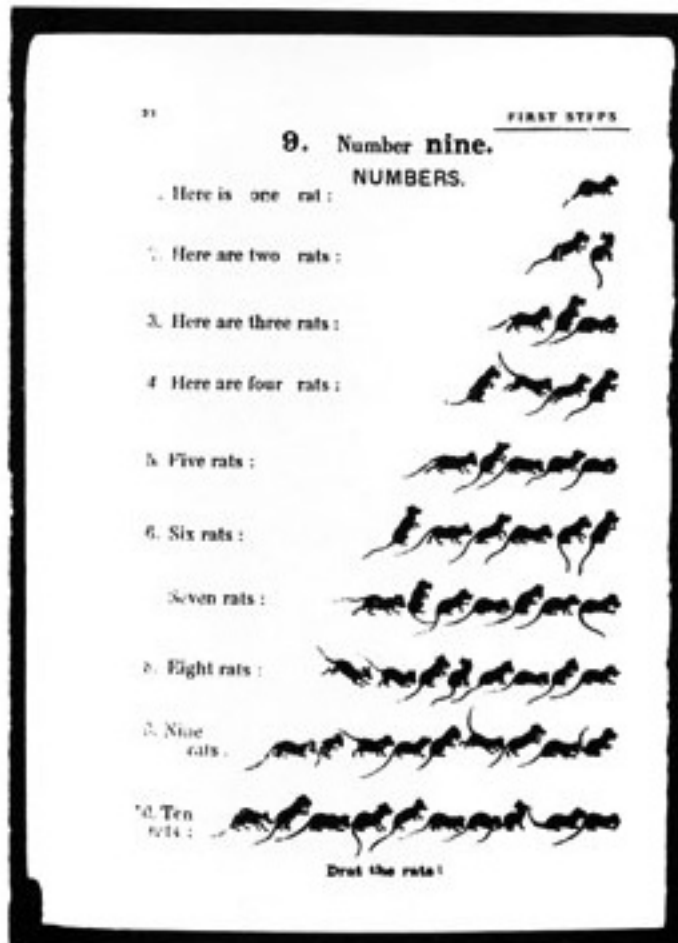
The cover of Hobbes's 1669 *Quadratura Circuli, Cubatio Sphaerae, Duplicatio Cubi, Breviter Demonstrata* appears as note 12, referring back to the images of Hitler and Tania Savich.<sup>198</sup>

The book's final section, "Epígrafe para un libro condenado: La política" (Epigraph for a Condemned Book: Politics), opens with a tissue paper version of the Chilean flag, tucked just

197. Ibid., 125.

198. Ibid., 133.

before the section's title page and contains, among other things, the below image of rats under the title "La estructura del pensamiento político" (The Structure of Political Thought).



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There is also a pink page, the thickness of cardstock, on one side of which appears the text from its facing page printed in mirror image, and the other side of which is titled, in English, "Thought [*sic*] the Looking Glass, and What the Poet Found There."<sup>200</sup> A reproduction of

199. Ibid., 139.

200. Ibid., 141-142.

Albrecht Dürer's rabbit also appears there, as well as on the section's second page.<sup>201</sup> Near the end of the section are two more appearances of Marx and Rimbaud, in the wanted poster,<sup>202</sup> and as heads pasted onto a drawing of the bodies of Superman (Marx) and a naked woman (Rimbaud).<sup>203</sup> Between these two pages is a reproduction of Ezra Pound's letter about *The Cantos* to the censors during his internment in Pisa.

This is the end of my description. Though I have tried to avoid interpreting what I've described above, inevitably, my intervention deeply marks the material I've described, and implicit value judgments about what ought to appear in the description, when to include images from the book, and even what "counts" as material for it have affected what appears in the preceding pages. I have for example, not remarked on the smell of the pages, though the smell of books likely holds a special nostalgic importance for many of their readers. Though I did list its dimensions, I have not discussed its weight, or how heavy it *feels* when I carry it.

As expected, this was not a simple operation and *La nueva novela* cannot be described simply. It's not, for example, a story about two lovers torn apart by circumstance, or a series of poems about the forest. It's not really a book *about* anything, except in the sense that "there is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made."<sup>204</sup> Instead, *La nueva novela* is a collection of parts both sensible and sensical that, as DeLanda describes, also vacillate along a second axis: between "territorialization" and "deterritorialization." In his words, these terms refer to the process whereby an assemblage's components "either stabilize the identity of an assemblage, by increasing its degree of internal homogeneity or the degree of sharpness of its

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201. Ibid., 136.

202. Ibid., 145.

203. Ibid., 147.

204. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 4.

boundaries, or destabilize it.”<sup>205</sup> Because we’re talking about a book here, I’ve been calling these processes binding and unbinding. Though, as DeLanda notes, “one and the same component may participate in both processes,”<sup>206</sup> there are parts of the book which act more deeply in one or the other direction. The front and back covers, for example, literally help to bind the book. And the table of contents and section headings, not surprising things to find in books, generically speaking, help to bring this book’s diverse contents together into a whole, even though the contents themselves perform the unbinding work of constantly reminding the reader that *La nueva novela* exists in, and as, relations of exteriority. The rabbit, for example, is part of the book, but is also Dürer’s rabbit. Rimbaud’s and Marx’s images are part of this book, but they are also someones else’s photographs, not to mention someones else’s faces. To try, as a scholarly exercise, to give readers a sense of this book demands some kind of thorough description, precisely because its contents are so diverse and so overtly operate along the spectrums DeLanda describes, as materials that are, at once, binding and unbinding, sensible and sensical.

### ***The Sensical***

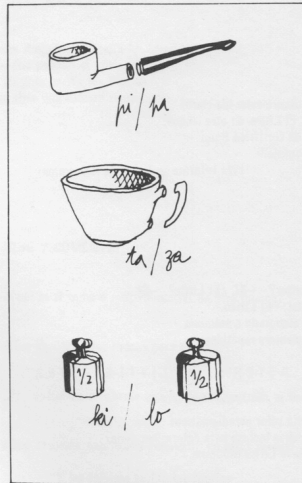
To move toward the sensical, then, is not as simple as turning to talk, now, about what this book means. Neither is it as simple as treating what were its material facts as, now, material symbols, though we can begin that way.

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12. 205. DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*,

206. Ibid.

(Mis propiedades)



207

In “Meditaciones sobre René Magritte” (Meditations on René Magritte),” both visual and the verbal materials work, and in an almost identical manner, to convey meaning. Or, I might say, rather, that a visual functioning is part of the verbal functioning of this poem, as the words “pipa” (pipe), “taza” (cup), and “kilo” are split with an orthographic mark “/” which works to visually break the words in the same way that the drawings, too, are broken. In a twist on the idea that, in Foucault’s words, “things and language happen to be separate,”<sup>208</sup> in this poem, things and language happen to be separated.

That this separation happens on a page meditating on Magritte, of course, makes sense. The page’s title is a reference to the artist’s famous commentary on the very separation to which Foucault refers, 1929’s *The Treason of Images*, a painting which depicts a pipe above the caption

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207. Ibid., 93

208. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, (New York: Random House, 1994), 132.

“Ceci n’est pas une pipe.” (This is not a pipe.). *The Treason of Images* points to the fact that neither the word “pipe” nor the painting of the pipe are, in fact, a pipe. And the image and text on Martínez’s page all work together to make, and remake, this point. But, at the same time, both the words and the drawings resist being pulled entirely to the expressive end of DeLanda’s spectrum. Though these things mean, they also matter. And yet, the meaning of the words and things pictured in the center of the page—pipe, cup, and kilo—doesn’t really matter. The pipe does make it easier to connect, along with the page’s title, to Magritte’s painting. But it could easily be anything else, as the cup and kilo show. These words and drawings aren’t there because they mean pipe, cup, or kilo. Instead, they function as what Augustine has called a “verbum” where “a word is uttered for its own sake”<sup>209</sup> as when someone says, for example, “take the word *pipe*.” On this page, that “ta/za” refers to a cup has little importance. Instead, what matters, and what means, is that the word and image of the cup is split.

This is another way of thinking about the territorialization-deterritorialization axis of the assemblage. You can see this page working to bind materials that are also at work unbinding it—“cups” that want to be cups, so to speak. And, though cups do go on being cups, that “ta/za” isn’t really about a cup for this page means that it also succeeds in resisting the separation between words and things because the word “ta/za” really is about “ta/za.” This is underscored by the parenthetical “mis propiedades” (my belongings) that introduces the three image/word pairs on the page. Whether the image or word belongs to the thing it represents is mostly irrelevant here. The images and words, themselves, are belongings—components that bind this page as it constructs itself as part of an even larger assemblage, the book.

Word and image function together in “Meditaciones sobre René Magritte” to convey

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209. Augustine, *De Dialectica*, (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1975), 89.

meaning, but it's not always the case that the book's material functions expressively. For one thing, there are lots of parts of this book that would find themselves performing "a purely material role"<sup>210</sup> like the glue or stitching of the binding. But, it's also the case that much of *La nueva novela* actively resists making sense. One way in which this works is through the book's use of "a series of *illogical* investigations, constructed in a general sense as paradoxes or aporias, but that only serve to interrupt and confound [the book's] reading."<sup>211</sup> These paradoxes do interrupt as Scott Weintraub notes, and, by interrupting, they prevent readers from moving smoothly through language to the things it means. Consider, for example, "Un problema transparente" (A Transparent Problem) which asks, "Si La Transparencia se observara a sí misma, ¿Qué observaría?" (If Transparency observed itself, What would it observe?).<sup>212</sup> This is just one of the many paradoxes that appear throughout the book. It's unsolvable, and in this way, it can't be read "transparently."

In other words, readers aren't able to move from the words on this page to the meaning outside of it. There's no seeing out of this "transparent problem." And so, a resistance to meaning also performs the role of binding this book. It's not just the glue and thread that keeps it together. *La nueva novela*'s paradoxes do too. Imagining an extra-literary transparency that might be capable of observing itself, isn't really of much help. So, there is nowhere to turn outside the book, and instead, readers are forced back inside the question, and to the real transparency that appears on the following page—a piece of plastic fixed inside the paper.

Bill Brown describes a novel in which the protagonist "looks up at a filthy window and

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210. DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, 12.

211. Scott Weintraub, "Juan Luis Martínez y las otredades de la metafísica: Apuntes patafísicos y Carrollianos," *Estudios* 18 (2010): 150.

212. Martínez and Martínez, *La nueva novela*, 40.



epiphanically thinks, ‘I must have *things*,’”<sup>213</sup> arguing that “the interruption of the habit of looking *through* windows as transparencies enables the protagonist to look *at*<sup>214</sup> a window itself in its opacity.”<sup>215</sup> Though Brown goes on to use this as a way of distinguishing objects from things, this observation could be applied to *La nueva novela*’s transparent problem. There, both the language-based paradox and the actual transparency serve to force attention onto the “opacity” of this book-object instead of allowing readers to look cleanly through the window language often functions as. In this book, the words themselves resist making sense and function like the object on the following page to disrupt the transparency of both language and, literally, transparencies. As a result, this object demands that readers look *at* it, consider the alignment and size of the words on the page, which match the size and position of the transparency so that, when the page is turned, the non-transparent question remains visible, even when readers do look through the window.

But, there’s more going on here. This paradox turns a resistance to expressivity into a performance of territorialization, but, it also provokes questions about how the object is capable of acting and what the object is. Let’s take seriously, for a moment, the question of what the transparency would observe if it could observe itself. Well, the transparency is transparent, meaning that, if it could observe itself, it wouldn’t be limited to observing its surface. It could observe right on through.

So, what’s inside there? If we can get past the object’s surface, can we get down to the heart of things? On a page titled “La metafísica” (Metaphysics) a similar question is posed: “¿La Esencia está mezclado con los objetos en forma de polvo? ¿O como un liquid? ¿O bien como

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213. Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001): 1.

214. All emphasis original.

215. Ibid., 4.

raíces muy sùtiles inmersas en el centro de las cosas?” (Is Essence blended with objects in the form of dust? Or as a liquid? Or like extremely delicate roots immersed in the center of things?)<sup>216</sup> This question, like other of the book’s paradoxes, asserts a similar resistance to transparently making sense. But, the notion that “essence” could be a dust, liquid, or root, isn’t nonsense. Instead, it is an insistence that the interiority of material objects is other material objects. DeLanda makes this claim when talking about genes, arguing that “the interactions of genes with the rest of a body’s machinery should not be viewed as if they constituted the defining essence of that machinery.”<sup>217</sup> Instead, genes “are simply one more component entering into relations of exteriority.”<sup>218</sup> The transparency suggests the same thing in a slightly different way—that what’s observable on the outside is also what’s inside. The surface is also “the center of things,” and the “delicate roots” that the question about essence references don’t grow down, but out. Or, as Deleuze and Guattari write, “all multiplicities are flat.”<sup>219</sup>

The flatness of the multiplicity that is *La nueva novela* may, ironically, be best seen on a page whose component parts actually stick out.

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216. Martínez and Martínez, *La nueva novela*, 31.

217. DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, 16.

218. Ibid.

219. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 9.

ICTHYS



Quorum: Porque en los primeros siglos  
JESUS fue CETUS, La Ballena.  
Y los cristianos eran los pececillos.

(Cf. Nb. XVI, 31, Is. V, 14, Dt. XI, 6, Ps. Cv. Dei. 17, Is. XXVI, 11).  
En bon fils de l'Océan, le Cachalot  
(car c'est d'un Cachalot, Sperm Whale, qu'il s'agit . . . )

Quorum: JESUS El Salvador era CETUS El Leviatán.  
Y los cristianos eran los pececillos.

Et nous n'employons le mot "BALEINE"  
qu'en tant qu'il est consacré par l'usage . . . et l'ignorance.

MORE THAN JUST EYE APPEAL . . . POWERFUL FISH APPEAL

EL SUBLIME PESCADOR ES EL CRISTO DE LA MANO ROTA  
a cuyo anzuelo aún nos resistimos.

( -¿Seguirás, en una convalecencia ictiológica,  
viviendo a merced de las corrientes? ).

Quorum: SINKER - 3 to 8 FT. 30 M. - 3 3/4 " L. 1/2 OZ. FLOATER - 0 to 1 FT.  
35 M. - 3 1/4 " L. - 9/16 OZ. OTHER SIZES AVAILABLE.  
BUY IT FOR A DOLLAR, OR MAKE IT FOR A DIME.  
L & S. MIRROLURES. SEND TO DEPT. BL. FOR TREE CATALOG SHEETS  
BRADLEY ILLINOIS 60915 \* LARGO, FLORIDA 33540.

. . . POWERFUL FISH APPEAL

MORE THAN JUST EYE APPEAL.



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For Suárez, the fishhook is invulnerable, meaning “upon introducing it to *La nueva novela*, it don’t lose any of the principal axioms it participates in outside of the book.”<sup>221</sup> If we think about this as contributing to deterritorialization, it’s easy to see how the fishhooks work to unbind *La nueva novela*. In a very material sense, because they stick out, they put pressure on the book’s

220. Martínez and Martínez, *La nueva novela*, 75.

221. Suárez, “Objetualismo en Juan Luis Martínez : El significante palpable,” 92.

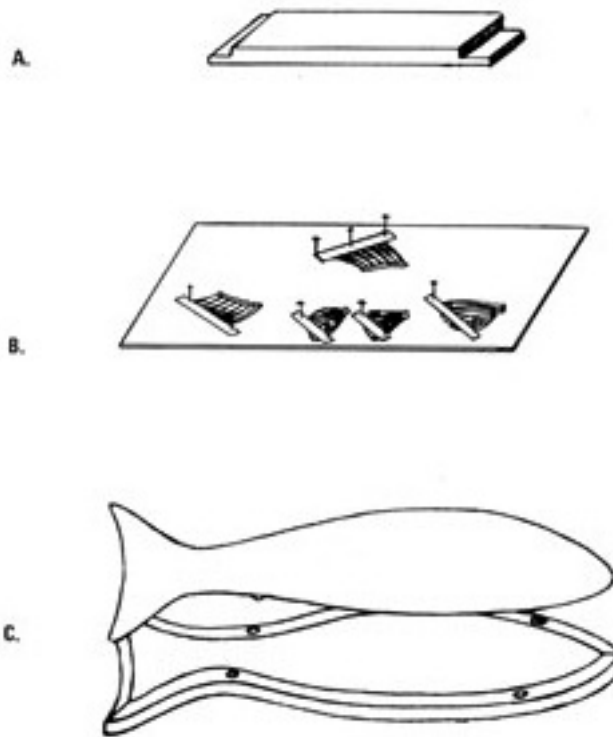
binding. But metaphorically speaking, they, perhaps more clearly than other of the book's component parts, point away from the book. It's possible they were used to actually perform the job we associate them with. And, even if not, they were likely bought from a seller who had this in mind, as the catalog-style text in the "Quorum" section at the bottom of the page suggests.

But their deterritorializing function also doesn't hurt the book as a whole. Rather, it's exactly in the outward pull of unbinding, and inward push of binding, that the book happens. The page, whose title is "Ichthys" points to this again and again. "Ichthys," from the Greek for "fish" is also the word for the symbol of the fish that stands for Christ. There are, in this, at least seven movements of deterritorialization, likely more: 1) the word "ichthys," meaning "fish"; 2) fish 3) Jesus, the once-live man; 4) Jesus, the religious symbol; 5) "Jesus" as a name for both the man and the symbol; 6) "ⲓϥ" as a symbol for fish; and 7) "ⲓϥ" as a symbol for Jesus. It's in these moving parts that *La nueva novela* constructs itself, and how the book becomes "all the more total for being fragmented."<sup>222</sup>

The book insists on itself as a fragmented whole repeatedly, and via its very repetitions. The unbinding pull of deterritorialization doesn't just lead to some other exterior thing, but back to the book itself. If the fishhooks point out that they, and all the other circulating "fishes" that Ichthys sets in motion, aren't bound only to this book, that doesn't threaten the book as a whole. We can let them swim away. Even the hole they leave behind can work to bind this book whole. This is shown when *La nueva novela* includes a space to "represent the lack of fish."

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222. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 6.



(Estos son sólo ejemplos ).

223<sub>1</sub>

So, the lack of fish isn't an emptiness that threatens the wholeness of *La nueva novela*. For one, their lack contributes materially to the book. But also, their movement in and out of the book is precisely what makes the book. And this is how the book shows its parts to be in a rhizomatic relation with one another. It's not just a collage. In collage, juxtaposition is a dominant factor and the proximity of unlike things enables these things to be seen in a new comparative light. In

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223. Martínez and Martínez, *La nueva novela*, 18.

*La nueva novela*, materials aren't just juxtaposed with some other materials, but always in relation with everything else.

The book makes this manifest by keeping its parts moving, and by having them constantly show up in new places, where they can then expose new relations that the book consists of, and exists as. “La página sesenta y uno” (Page Sixty-One) and “La página noventa y nueve” (Page Ninety-Nine), for example, emphasize the movement of the book's parts, inside, out of, and around, itself.

## LA PAGINA SESENTA Y UNO



A.  
En este cuadro hubo personas que ya no es posible encontrar en esta página, pues ellas se dirigen a presenciar los acontecimientos de la página 99.

B.  
Las personas que pueden observarse en este cuadro, regresaron sólo minutos antes que usted tomara este libro. Ellas venían de leer las notas del final y luego de haber estado detenidas durante varios días en la página 99.

C.  
Suponga ahora que las personas de este tercer cuadro vienen directamente del prólogo y se dirigen ya al cuadro B de la página 99 donde usted las encontrará viniendo de releer las notas del final del libro.

D.  
Suponga también que las personas que deberían encontrarse en este cuadro se encuentran en alguna página intermedia entre las notas del libro y el cuadro C de la página 99.

E.  
La persona que en este cuadro se ve en primer plano es (el autor) del libro y no deseando atrasar a su lector se dirige rápidamente a esperarlo en la página 99.

## LA PAGINA NOVENTA Y NUEVE



A.

En la página 61 usted debió suponer que las personas del cuadro A llegarían a presenciar los acontecimientos de esta página. Esas personas se encuentran ahora en el cuadro B de la página 61 después de haber estado algunos días en esta página.

B.

Las personas de este cuadro son las mismas que usted encontró en el cuadro C de la página 61. En ese instante venían de leer el prólogo. Ahora usted las encuentra de regreso a esta página, viniendo de releer las notas del final del libro.

C.

Suponga que las personas de este tercer cuadro son las mismas que usted debió encontrar en el cuadro D de la página 61 y que en ese instante se encontraban en alguna página intermedia entre el cuadro D de la página 61 y este cuadro.

D.

Las personas que usted ya no encuentra en este cuadro, se han alejado rápidamente de esta página en dirección a la página 61. (Si usted ha leído ordenadamente este libro debería haberlas encontrado en alguna página intermedia).

E.

Las intenciones del (autor) eran esperar al lector en este cuadro, pero habiéndose el lector atrasado demasiado en su lectura, (el autor) ya se encuentra nuevamente en la página 61, esperando a un siguiente lector, que más rápido en su lectura, alcance a encontrarlo en esta página.

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Here, the book's "lines of flight" (in Deleuze and Guattari's words) aren't just between the images of legs and other objects exterior to the book, like the legs that posed for these



photographs. Their movements are also within the book itself, as notes “E.” on both of the pages (among others) show. In English, these notes read:

The person seen in the foreground of this frame is (the author) of this book who, desiring not to delay his reader, is rushing off to wait for her/him on page 99.

and

It was the (author’s) intention to wait for the reader in this frame but, as the reader lagged behind in his/her reading, (the author) is already back on page 61, waiting for a subsequent reader who, faster in his/her reading, may manage to find him on this page.

Here, the “(the author)” is proposed to be inside the book, and shown to be literally inside the text in the form of a pair of parentheses. So, even though the word “author” could suggest a separate subject that might pull away from this book, the book binds the word to it, without limiting its freedom to move about. The same is true of its readers who, though moving at different speeds, are also pulled into the frame by the book.

So the book shows itself capable not only of having parts that can detach from it and attach to a different assemblage, but parts that can detach and attach in different places within this same assemblage. Though its sections and pages are numbered, they are not ordered, and the book “has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle.”<sup>225</sup> In this way, it’s not just that every periphery becomes a center, but that, an assemblage like *La nueva novela* “abolishes the very notion of the center and periphery”<sup>226</sup> and brings everything into its edgeless middle. It turns surfaces into essences, outsides in. As a poetic project, *La nueva novela* is more than just a catalog of references its readers can trace, but a sensible and sensical assembling of them—a material poetics of relation.

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225. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 25.

226. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 29.

To read *La nueva novela* as a sensical object, then, is not just to turn from description to interpretation. It also requires that interpretation attend to the material aspects of the book—the parts it's made from and how they are bound together. Though I tried to separate the two approaches to “reading” that this book's material-expressive axis demands, they are inevitably inextricable. Part of what allows sense to be made from, for instance, the question of authorship for this book, is also the fact that the author or (author) or (~~authors~~) appear in different places, looking different ways, within the text. Those are material facts of the book as well as meaningful opportunities the text offers to its readers. It's a book-object where the dash that separates those categories doesn't represent a gap between them, but their coincidence.

In her article on the “descriptive turn” in literary studies, Heather Love writes that her method, which stages an “encounter between literary studies and sociology” doesn't require “a complete renunciation of the text (to focus, for instance, on books as objects or commodities).”<sup>227</sup> I've left the commodity aside here, but I hope the ways it fits into the picture with the text, the object, and the book-as-object is taken up by other scholars. In the encounter *La nueva novela* has helped me stage between literary studies and studies of objects, I have found the relation between the object and the book to be utterly unrenounceable in that what it means is bound up in how it's constructed. I have tried to let its construction guide my approach to its reading, something I have worked to do with all of the poetic objects that appear in this dissertation. In this way, I align with the approach described by Best and Marcus in assuming “that texts can reveal their own truths because texts mediate themselves,” which they expand upon by adding the idea that “what we think theory brings to texts (form, structure, meaning) is

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227. Heather Love, “Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 375.

already present in them.”<sup>228</sup> As is clear, theory—both that which belongs to the book and that which the book binds to itself—is here. And part of my method has been to show the ways *La nueva novela* not only reveals its own truths but offers readers its literal, material framework, giving them the chance to sense and *make* sense of the book, and the chance to perceive the complex, rhizomatic network in, and out of which, the book constructs itself—its material poetics of relation.

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228. Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction.”

## CHAPTER 4

### BUILDING RONALD JOHNSON'S *ARK*

In a 1996 interview with Peter O'Leary, Ronald Johnson claims that his *ARK* is both an epic without history<sup>229</sup> and a concrete poem that "took it way beyond"<sup>230</sup> concrete poetry. If without history, the book nevertheless came to be in history, as it was written over a period of more than twenty years from the late 1960s through to its eventual publication-in-parts in the 1980s and 90s. And as a concrete poem beyond concrete poetry, the book's 2013 full release from Flood Editions is a literal monument to behold, taking up the kind of three-dimensional space that usually eludes the strictly-practiced concrete poetry of, for example, 1950s Brazil. There, poetry's spatiality was usually made visible through the unconventional arrangement of words on a single page or plane of text. This is true of *ARK*, too, but *ARK* is also three hundred pages long. And it takes a great deal of time to read. This differs from the early practice of concrete poetry in Brazil because, *ARK* does not manage, nor set out to, put "into effect an immediate form of communication"<sup>231</sup> whereby the reader can look at and apprehend the whole of the work in an apparent instant, as might seem to be the case when looking at, for example, an object of plastic art.

If "the concrete poem communicates its own structure: structure-content,"<sup>232</sup> *ARK*, too, communicates its structure, but it doesn't do this in the way early, and more orthodox practices of concrete poetry do, where the poem's entire structure is almost immediately visible. And this

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229. Peter O'Leary and Ronald Johnson, "An Interview with Ronald Johnson," *Chicago Review* 42, no. 1 (1996): 33. Peter O'Leary is now Ronald Johnson's literary executor and editor of the book's most recent release from Flood Editions.

230. *Ibid.*, 47.

231. de Campos, "Concrete Poetry-Language-Communication," 243.

232. de Campos, de Campos, and Pignatari, "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry," 218.

is just the beginning of the ways *ARK* diverges from many of the givens of concrete poetics. In early Brazilian concrete poetry, for example, the “poem [wa]s an object in an of itself, not the interpreter of more or less subjective feelings.”<sup>233</sup> But *ARK* is full of subjective feelings, and the language describing them. As an example, these lines ask:

What will I tell in it?  
but jolt amazements of being  
wholly imagination<sup>234</sup>

The book does not resist subjectivity, as the presence of the “I” here indicates. It also does not resist naming or describing feelings. And, as these lines suggest, *ARK* works, at least in part, via imagination. This is another major departure from strictly practiced concrete poetry, not only because imagination is an indicator of subjectivity, but also because imagination is what makes the great metaphors of *ARK* work.

Concrete poetry does not rely on metaphor in its aim to become an “object in and of itself.” It is a poem-object in and of itself, not a poem that helps readers imagine extra-poetic objects. *ARK*, though, *is* a poem that asks readers to imagine objects, and one kind in particular: architecture. Concrete poetry, as an object, is sensible by human readers/viewers. *ARK* is too, but *ARK* is also a poem about sensation, and about its potential to synaesthetically combine and confuse the senses. As an architecture, *ARK* is an epic concrete poem that is able to build from the principles of concrete poetry without having to excise concrete poetry’s excisions. *ARK* is a spatial poem that is also temporal. *ARK* is a literal object that is also metaphorical. *ARK* is an object with a subject. And *ARK* is a sensible object that is also about how sensation works. And

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233. Ibid.

234. Ronald Johnson, *ARK* (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2013), 291.

in this chapter, my aim is to show *ARK* playing these doubles and to argue in favor of a hybrid future for concrete poetry, one that can continue to work with the axioms of the original international movement, without giving up its ability to keep on moving.

### *Literary Spacetime*

*ARK* constructs itself inside the space of time. If that's a contradiction of terms, well, contradictions find themselves at home in *ARK*. As Johnson tells it, the book "begins with sunrise and ends at the end of the night,"<sup>235</sup> but its components aren't moments. Rather, they're material. The book's three parts are "The Foundations," "The Spires," and "The Ramparts," and each of these three parts is composed, respectively, of smaller parts called "Beams," "Spires," and "Arches." And speaking of spacetime, the book's very first and very last lines narrate the launching of a spaceship:

Over the rim  
body of earth    rays exit sun<sup>236</sup>

*ad astra per aspera*  
countdown for Lift Off<sup>237</sup>

*ARK* may be without history, but it's not that it's without time. Because it took over 20 years to write, this time was always shifting toward a new now, a present-ness that stays present. The book is finished now, but it finds ways of writing its experience of time into itself. The spaceship, for example, doesn't come to land at the end of the book/at the end of the night. It's

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235. O'Leary and Johnson, "An Interview with Ronald Johnson," 48.

236. Johnson, *ARK*, 5.

237. Ibid., 307.

forever taking off. That the book begins with daybreak and ends with the night's end is another way of saying this, because the end of the night *is* daybreak. And this morning was yesterday's future. Like the dream of space travel, which, though achieved, hasn't lost any of its symbolic power to keep standing for "The Future," *ARK* doesn't end. It moves around in time, just as its rocket hurtles outward into space.

As a construction in time and space, *ARK* is built, as Johnson says, out "of things in [his] time."<sup>238</sup> As Johnson tells O'Leary:

in all art, you are building. I think at the heart of *ARK* is my father's lumber yard. He and his father before him managed this lumber yard and I helped there and did all kinds of things. It was a huge building with these slots for different kinds and lengths of wood. And it was kind of a maze of wood. There were secret rooms and belfries—there was one with bats. And you could get up on the roof and there were black walnut trees and you could drop black walnuts before people and not exactly hit them. We weren't allowed to go there.<sup>239</sup>

To build a structure from childhood memories and imagination is to bring them into the present and give them a material endurance they otherwise lack. *ARK* does this work in other ways too. For example, Johnson writes that "*ARK* is fitted together with shards of language, in a kind of cement of music. Based on trinities, its cornerstones [are] the eye, the ear, the mind."<sup>240</sup> Here, sense perception is materialized doubly. It's not the experience of sight, but the embodied eye itself, and that eye is, in turn, a cornerstone of the book's architecture. The trinity he refers to is also a structural one, as the book's three parts are each constructed of 33 others. But, of course, the trinity also refers to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, themselves made material in flesh. The book's title points in this way too, toward Noah's Ark or the Ark of the Covenant, which are built objects that carry material remnants of God's destructive and creative acts.

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238. O'Leary and Johnson, "An Interview with Ronald Johnson," 33.

239. Ibid., 40.

240. Johnson, *ARK*, 312.

As Johnson tells it, the title means all those things, and others:

I didn't think about Noah—well, Noah gets in there. He's got to get his lick in. I don't know. I just thought *ARK* because it also included the rainbow—the rainbow goes all the way through the poem, that kind of arch, “arc.” It has all kinds of meaning, like “A” has meaning for Zukofsky. You have to look at that several different ways to translate that title. I thought *ARK* had as many, and it was a structure, which I wanted; it was to save mankind, and the animal and vegetable and mineral world; and so I set off on a kind of science fiction, like building a time-capsule of everything I've heard and seen, to go out to the dark, to the stars.<sup>241</sup>

The time capsule, like the biblical Arks, is an apt metaphor for the work *ARK* keeps on doing. It gathers the materials of its moment, constructs them solid, and keeps moving them along in time *and* space, which points to the ways that the architecture of *ARK* is not that of a still-standing structure, but of a ship that takes off and never comes back to land.

ARK 81, Arches XV begins:

Noah on board  
(Dialogue between Eddy & Flo)  
agenda: eternal purr<sup>242</sup>

Here, we have Noah getting his lick in. He's there, though this *ARK* isn't Noah's, but Johnson's. This stanza repeats the version of time suggested by the first and last lines of the book. This ship's journey doesn't come to a close but “dialogues” between the continuous movement of “flow” and the continuous return of the “eddy,” which we are reminded is a whirlpool whose circular current runs counter to the stream it interrupts, but runs nonetheless. The circle and the stream are familiar metaphors for how time works—the calendar comes back around, the day begins again every morning, and time keeps on flowing forward. *ARK* constructs itself from

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241. O'Leary and Johnson, “An Interview with Ronald Johnson, 34.”

242. Johnson, *ARK*, 251.



these kinds of metaphors in which space and spatial structures can stand for time. For example, in the prose Beam 12 of the book's first section, Johnson writes:

If we represent the three-dimensional world we live in as a line, ray, or passage, between the fourth dimension as a globe, then as the universe expands this line describes involutions within that globe.<sup>243</sup>

This passage is hard to understand, in part because of its many “involutions.” In mathematics, an involution is a “function or transformation that is equal to its inverse.”<sup>244</sup> Time and space are often treated as opposites, but for *ARK*, they're equal. The “three-dimensional world” here is proposed to be represented by the line, more commonly used to represent time, as in timeline. And the fourth dimension—time—becomes a globe. Beyond the metaphor, *ARK* itself is a structure in space and time, a concrete poem that takes up space and a long, epic poem that has an obvious physical thickness and, and unlike orthodox concrete poetry, takes a long time to read.

*ARK*'s is not the only literary mixing of space and time. Any (printed) book that takes a long time to read is likely to also be thick. But aside from the strain a backpack full of these might cause, that fact is usually incidental. In *ARK*, it's monumental. The concrete poem, though spatial, is usually flat, but *ARK* is a three-dimensional object. This is true of books, in general, but because it's usually not true of concrete poetry, *ARK*'s thickness matters in a way books' thickness usually doesn't. And, in this, *ARK* constructs a challenge to long-held assumptions about the domains of space and time as they belong to the arts.

In a famous series of essays called “Spatial Form in Modern Literature” Joseph Frank engages with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, noting that the plastic arts are often presumed to be

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243. Ibid., 34.

244. “involution, n.,” *OED Online*, March 2015, Oxford University Press.

“spatial, because the visible aspect of objects can best be presented juxtaposed in an instant of time.”<sup>245</sup> “Literature, on the other hand, makes use of language, composed of a succession of words proceeding through time.”<sup>246</sup> As a narrative poetic form, the epic would appear to represent this distinction at its most distinct. Not apprehensible in an instant like a work of plastic art would seem to be, the epic has to be read (or recited and listened) through, over the course of time. But, the time of the epic—that is, the history it tells—is, like an object on display appears to be, already finished. The story of Johnson’s epic, on the other hand, is always only beginning. And this begins to muddle the apparent distinction between space as the domain of the plastic arts and time as the domain of the literary.

But the truth is, that distinction was already muddled. As W. J. T. Mitchell points out in his engagement with Frank’s essays, time and space are scrambled by all kinds of everyday experience, knowledge, and modes of understanding:

a more sensible solution is to note that we experience time in a wide variety of ways and that we consistently use spatial imagery to describe these experiences. In literature, our sense of continuity, sequence, and linear progression is not nonspatial because it is temporal. Continuity and sequentiality are spatial images based in the schema of the unbroken line or surface; the experience of simultaneity or discontinuity is simply based in different kinds of spatial images from those involved in continuous, sequential experiences of time.<sup>247</sup>

Spatial form is not simply the opposite of continuity through time. And the two are hardly separable anyway. As Mitchell argues, space absolutely pervades our experience and accounting of literature, from discussions of “high” and “low” levels within a literary work, to structure and

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245. Frank, “Spatial Form in Modern Literature : Part I,” 223.

246. Ibid.

247. W. J. T. Mitchell, “Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 6, no. 3 (1980): 542.

form, to what we “see in our mind’s eye” as we read.<sup>248</sup> My description of an epic’s reading above is itself guilty of this kind of reliance on spatial metaphors when I say a poem of this sort must be read “*through, over* the course of time.”

Still, the notion that time and space each pertain to a single generic domain has long held sway. Ezra Pound, for his part, offered the definition of the image as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time,” going on to claim that “it is the presentation of such a ‘complex’ instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.”<sup>249</sup> The image, for Pound, is a way of compressing the passing of time and spreading out—all the way out—into space. Because what’s beyond the limits of space, for the image, isn’t something other to space. Rather, it’s more spatial possibilities, a “growth” that wouldn’t be possible inside the usual material constraints of space as we live it. Compressed time isn’t other to time either, but it does point to the assumption that where an image belongs is in big space and tiny time. And space’s growth comes at the expense of time’s shrinking.

This is an old idea. For example, ekphrasis has long been described as the situation in which “a poem aspires to the atemporal ‘eternity’ of the stopped-action painting, or laments its inability to achieve it.”<sup>250</sup> Ekphrasis necessarily carries this double trouble, what Mitchell calls “ekphrastic hope” and “ekphrastic fear,” where literature, or text’s, aspiration isn’t just to get outside of time but to get outside of itself entirely, to overcome its own otherness with regard to

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248. Ibid, 550-553.

249. Ezra Pound, “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste,” *Poetry* 1, no. 6 (1913): 200.

250. Wendy Steiner, *Pictures of Romance: Form Against Context in Painting and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 13-14.

the object it works to bring into language.<sup>251</sup> Ekphrastic fear, in the other direction, sees the possibility for exchange between the plastic and textual arts as “a dangerous promiscuity and tries to regulate the borders with firm distinctions between the senses, modes of representation, and the objects proper to each.”<sup>252</sup> Part of what has composed these borders, historically, is the apparent non-coincidence of time and space, and ekphrasis’s own promise and impasse has, despite the work it does at these very borders, helped to maintain them. As Mitchell notes, “the image, the space of reference, projection, or formal patterning, cannot literally come into view. If it did, we would have left the genre of ekphrasis for concrete or shaped poetry, and the written signifiers would themselves take on iconic characteristics.”<sup>253</sup>

Concrete poetry, then, as opposed to ekphrasis or Pound’s image, doesn’t just work at the borders between the textual and plastic arts; it leaves these hopeful and fearful tensions entirely, and gives way to the realized promise of hybridity inside these otherwise distinct domains. Still, as we’ve seen, in more strictly considered concrete poetry, text may overcome the divide between itself and other objects, in order to finally become an object itself. But this often comes at the expense of the longer temporality usually associated with literature. Bolivian-born Swiss concrete poet, Eugen Gomringer, who, together with the Brazilian concretists, is considered a founder of the practice, could be said to have created poems in which space comes at the expense of time.

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251. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 156.

252. Ibid., 155.

253. Ibid., 158.

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

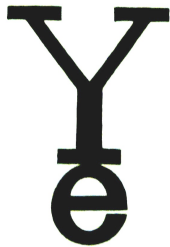
254

“Silencio” works like this, by making way for space by diminishing the time it takes to read. It’s not necessary, or even productive, to read this poem word by word. And readers can see that the second they look at this poem, and it takes only a split second more to “get” it. As I’ve said, this isn’t always the case with concrete poetry, and in the years following its stricter roll-out in the 50s, its practitioners experimented with other like-minded, but distinct, approaches. This poem, though, demonstrates the ways concrete poetry can compress the time of reading in order to become a spatial object.

“Silencio” was published in the *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* put out by Something Else Press in 1967, the first major collection of its kind in the United States. Early concrete poems by Ronald Johnson appeared there too, and these already showed an interest in time and space and the potential for non-instantaneity in concrete poetry. As an example, we might take a look at the below section of Johnson’s poem “Io and the Ox-Eye-Daisy”:

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254. Emmett Williams, *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (New York: Primary Information, 2013), unpaginated. This edition is a reprint of Something Else Press’s original 1967 collection.



255

This poem cannot be read in an instant. It's no epic either, but it does take time to read, and indeed constructs itself in time and space, as the "e" in the palindromic "eye" takes time to move from top to bottom. That it's a palindrome also reiterates the circularity of time seen in *ARK*. This poem invites a reading that has the potential to go on forever, and the reader is encouraged to not only read from top to bottom, but from bottom to top, back down again, and so on.

A version of this poem makes it into *ARK* as well, in Beam 5 of "The Foundations":

eyeye<sup>256</sup>

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255. Ibid., unpaginated.

256. Johnson, *ARK*, 16.

This version turns the operation on its side but doesn't give up any of the palindromic cycling the word sets in motion in the previous version. If anything, its presence in *ARK* some thirty years later is proof of the earlier version's suggestion that it can keep on going forever, even inside a new construction that spreads out in time and space. What was, elsewhere, a small concrete poem, is, in *ARK*, just part of the picture. And in *ARK*, this and other more concretely concrete sections act like interruptions in the flow of the long text. In many ways, they could be said to represent a similar impulse to ekphrasis, which also interrupts the narrative flow. But, besides being textual objects, Johnson's concrete interjections don't propose the same stillness that ekphrasis does. Instead, they act like eddies in the flow of time, interrupting time's linearity but not time itself. In Johnson's *ARK*, text doesn't just take on the characteristics of the visual or plastic by foregoing its time for something else's space, but also confuses and then constructs itself out of both time and space at once.

### ***Objects Out of Time***

This dissertation looks at different ways concrete and material poetics work to become object-like. In the case of *ARK*, architecture isn't just a convenient metaphor the title begins to sound out for us, but a specific type of type—an object that reveals certain aspects of what it means to be an object that often get hidden in the ways we think about them. Importantly for the purposes of this chapter, architecture reveals the temporal aspects of objects. If literary invocations or descriptions of the object shrink their time in order to grow in space, accounts of objects often treat objects as solely spatial-material, not belonging to time, or simply: done.

Criticizing Heidegger's theory of time with regard to objects, Graham Harman writes:

All that emerges from his ‘temporal’ analysis of a hammer is that the hammer must be regarded both as the execution of a real effect (a.k.a. “past”) and as a discrete reality determined by its significance for a human involved in a specific projection of the world (a.k.a. “future”). The ambiguous co-existence of these two moments gives us Heidegger’s “present.” Voilà! There you have it: the supposed Heideggerian theory of time, which would hold good even if a sorcerer were able to freeze time forever in its tracks.<sup>257</sup>

Part of what bothers Harman here is that, for him, Heidegger’s ready-to-hand and present-at-hand hammers gets the human in the way of the hammer. Tool or broken tool, for Harman, the problem is that the human won’t let go of the hammer. Or rather, who cares if the human’s holding the hammer or what he’s been using it for? As Harman describes it (this time with billiard balls as the exemplar object), “the problem lies in assuming that two balls in collision do not also objectify each other, as if humans faced a world of still unperceived depths but inanimate objects exhausted one another’s reality upon the slightest contact.”<sup>258</sup> If the human is the problem here, and time is wrapped up with him, then, for Harman, that notion of time is also a problem. That’s another version of the same trope we’ve seen assumed by literature. Text is temporal because a human has to read or write it. However, the world of objects is spatial whether a human’s around to notice it or not. Harman’s figurative sorcerer points to this too, as he doesn’t “stop” time, but “freezes” it “in its tracks,” in other words, turns it into another spatial, material object.

And that kind of spatiality isn’t usually thought of as “time.” Sure, the hammer-object used to be wood and steel, but those are just wood-object and steel-object, stable in their objectness regardless of what they could or did go on to become. Like the impression of ekphrasis’s pausing-effect on the unfolding of narrative time, “in the world of solid objects

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257. Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 99.

258. *Ibid.*, 100.



envisaged by material-culture theorists,” Tim Ingold writes, “the flux of materials is stifled and stilled.”<sup>259</sup> As Ingold points out,

We see the building and not the plaster of its walls, the words and not the ink with which they were written. In reality, of course, the materials are still there and continue to mingle and react as they have always done, forever threatening the things they comprise with dissolution or even ‘dematerialization’. Plaster can crumble and ink can fade.<sup>260</sup>

Rather than dematerialization, we might call this process “rematerialization” as a way of highlighting Ingold’s point that “despite the best efforts of curators and conservationists, no object lasts forever. Materials always and inevitably win out over materiality in the long term.”<sup>261</sup> The building, in other words, doesn’t dematerialize; it just turns into other materials with the passage of time. And that movement uncovers the materials the building already was—plaster, brick, wood, and so on.

This is one way time registers on objects. It doesn’t intervene in some purely temporal sense, but reveals that the object used to be made of other material objects. And this is where maybe the broken hammer does matter. Not just because it can’t be used by a human anymore, or because it makes the human stop and notice it, but because the broken hammer contributes to next stage of the rematerialization of those objects that were a hammer, and before that, wood and steel. But objects are good at hiding the work time does to them, and good at purporting to be something much simpler, and stabler, than everything it took to make them. Marx knew this of course, and, Shadi Bartsch and Jaś Elsner describe how ekphrasis is complicit in the commodity’s occlusion: “the ekphrasis of almost any cultural object,” they write, “elides the cost

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259. Tim Ingold, “Materials Against Materiality,” *Archaeological Dialogues* 14, no. 1 (2007): 11.

260. *Ibid.*, 9.

261. *Ibid.*, 10.

of its production in human labor.”<sup>262</sup> These alone are reasons to be suspicious of the idea that objects are without time, which anyway, they aren’t. Even without a human around to take note, objects are beholden to time. This is true of the hammer, the wood, and the tree they used to be. The tree, though, may make it clearer to the people around to notice that something’s changing, as its materials differ visibly from season to season.

But if the presence of those people is a problem for Harman, it’s not a problem for *ARK*, and, in addition to built objects, *ARK* is deeply interested living ones—both people and not. Even before *ARK*, Johnson had an interest in the living world and its intersection with poetry—from the actual fields of his native Kansas to Charles Olson’s notions of field theory and from the actual gardens of his longtime interlocutor, Scottish poet Ian Hamilton Finlay, to the poetic garden of Johnson’s book, *The Shrubberies*.<sup>263</sup> These interests play out in *ARK*, too, and are entangled with *ARK*’s usual tangles of time and space, humans and objects. Beam 30, The Garden, adds the divine to this mix, telling readers, for example, that “The Lord is a delicate hammerer”<sup>264</sup> (does that count as a hammer without a human?). And divine causality is of course at the heart of the story of Noah’s Ark. In Johnson’s *ARK*, though, objects, living and otherwise, also “objectify each other,” as Harman would say:

Literally, a flowing: form-take-hand  
 -with-form  
 (That Which Fasteneth Us)  
 pillar to pillar the great dance arch itself through all that  
 is or was or will be,  $\frac{3}{4}$  time. This will be a glade

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262. Shadi Bartsch and Jaś Elsner, “Eight Ways of Looking at at Ekphrasis,” *Classical Philology* 102, no. 1 (2007): iii.

263. Ronald Johnson, *The Shrubberies* (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2001).

264. Johnson, *ARK*, 84.

at the head of one stream<sup>265</sup>

There's humanity in these lines, but it's woven with, and not apart from, the objects that also appear. Forms go hand in hand. That they have hands is personifying, but a hand without a human is more object than person. In the third line here, though, pillar takes to pillar without human intervention. And what fastens everything together is a "that," not a "he," nor a "He," for that matter.

All of these things are *in* time. And this time is, again, the circular time of *ARK*. In the fourth line above, *ARK*'s arc makes an appearance. And we should remember that, though we can usually only see half of the rainbow, rainbows, too, are circles. So, the "arch" "through all that is was or will be" is on a course to come back around again. Too, the stanza begins and ends with the stream, whose familiar flow travels all around *ARK*. And, in a rewrite of the idiom, "from pillar to post," meaning from one place to another, Johnson substitutes "pillar to pillar"—from one place back to that same place. All of this is set to a  $\frac{3}{4}$  time dance, and the most famous of these is the waltz, which consists of moving in a "box step" around in the room in a counter-clockwise loop. Even the square, it seems, comes back around. And that's not the first time *ARK* says as much:

c l r c  
l e c i  
r c l e<sup>266</sup>

And this circular time, as its shapely metaphor suggests, is not apart from space. All of the spatial objects dance in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time and that dance moves them in place and around through space. The

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265. Johnson, *ARK*, 84.

266. *Ibid.*, 16.

human wouldn't be out of place in this scene, but at the same time, none of its objects seem to have particular need for a human's actions (past or potential) to make this happen.

The concrete poem from Beam 5 (above), in which the circle is squared, says the same thing. A visual pun for the "circle<sup>2</sup>," that poem is equal to "circle x circle." And so, it's an example that shows *ARK* does not, as Harman warns, "assum[e] that two balls in collision do not also objectify each other."<sup>267</sup> The circle is a spatial metaphor that represents the way time works in *ARK*. But it's also a place where *ARK* shows itself to be an object made of other objects, even if it was put together by a person.

### ***Inside the Archi-type***

When Ingold wrote that "we see the building and not the plaster of its walls, the words and not the ink with which they were written," he was pointing to the ways objects often not only hide the past of their production, but their pasts as other objects, or what Ingold calls "materials." This might be true of objects in general, but the examples he gives are curious. Like what Bartsch and Elsner call "almost any cultural object," buildings and words are guilty of elision. But, they might be worse at it than other things. Buildings, once they've been built for a while, can and do hide the labor that built them. If this weren't the case, then the question of how the Egyptian pyramids were built wouldn't be such consistent fodder for popular television documentaries, and we would have no need for calls to remind us that the white men whose pictures line the hallways were not the people who actually "built" our nation's capital. But buildings, as opposed to many kinds of cultural objects, whose production happens somewhere behind the closed doors of capitalism, aren't just encountered when they're already done. The

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267. Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 100.

pre-fab home is a rare exception, but even it passes by on the highway in two or more parts, exposing itself as an object-in-progress. In most other cases, the building is built exactly where it will stand. And so we are witness to its becoming-building in the way Johnson was witness, in his father's lumber yard, to the "raw" materials that inspired the building of *ARK*.

Ingold writes that "we commonly describe materials as 'raw' but never 'cooked'—for by the time they have congealed into objects they have already disappeared."<sup>268</sup> Johnson would, perhaps more than most, be inclined to see the raw in the cooked. In addition to being a material and otherwise experimental poet, he was a cookbook author. His oeuvre includes a surprising blend of titles like *To Do As Adam Did: Selected Poems of Ronald Johnson* and *Simple Fare: Rediscovering the Pleasures of Real Food*. Cookbooks, and cooks, are first-hand witnesses to the becoming-object of raw materials. Unlike a cake on a shelf, which is already a cake, a recipe for a cake always represents the future of the ingredients it lists as well as acting as record for the cake's past in parts.

Buildings, too, register their pasts in this way. If Heidegger's hammer bothers Harman for being too entirely inside the grasp or awareness of the human, that same hammer's past as other materials has the opposite problem. It's invisible to the hammering human, except, of course, in the rare artisanal case in which that same human carved/welded it. But humans see buildings under construction all the time. They get frustrated by the fact that the contractor told them the building should have already been done by now. They wander through the open "rooms" of unfinished buildings and imagine what they'll look like once the drywall goes up. And because, even once they're done, humans rely on buildings as a shield from the weather, they have a way of frustratingly revealing themselves to be made of materials again. And that's one way the

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268. Ingold, "Materials Against Materiality," 9.

building registers time, by showing itself to be not just a building-object, but a building made of other material objects. Buildings are talked about as being “in-progress” as if they’ll progress to some final point and then time will stop for them and they’ll simply take up space. But the truth is, they are constantly demonstrating the ways they are caught up in the progress of time. Even the word itself tells us this. A “building” is a noun, but it’s also a present participle, a continuous tense that grammatically traps its action into acting forever.

*ARK* is (a) building, but it’s not attached to the earth, which means its materials are even more subject to the flux of time *and* space. This, anyway, is the metaphor it operates as. Literally, though, *ARK* is a literal object—a book made of words and images, made of letters and marks on pages of paper. After buildings, words were the other example Ingold gave for objects that hide the materials they are made of. And like buildings, which show themselves in the making, words are a type of object which, despite what Ingold says, do show what they are made of, and not just when their ink begins to break down. This, as a matter of fact, is the very stuff concrete poetry is made of. Concrete poetry works by reminding readers that words are made of letters and ink, that they are objects which can be broken down, and out, and looked at or listened to in parts.

The repeating letter “O,” which appears throughout *ARK*, both in and outside of words is, in addition to being another circle, an example of this type of concrete functioning in the book. In Ark 55, The ABC Spire, words’ materials are building materials for the spire, for example:

n   n   n   n  
n   ODE   n  
n   ODE   n  
n   n   n   n <sup>269</sup>

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269. Johnson, *ARK*, 170.

or

t e l l   t i m e  
t o m b   t u r n  
t i d e   t u n e  
t a l e   t r e e<sup>270</sup>

These concrete building blocks don't just show the ways *ARK* can reveal the materials words were before they were (and while they are) words. They also, again, work to lengthen the time of concrete poetry. A single one of these blocks may be possible to apprehend in what feels like an instant. The “node” example above, for instance, works like this. But, stacked together, one after the other in alphabetical order, they invite a kind of reading that combines the momentary with the monumental. Like the building under construction, readers watch this poem come together in time and in space.

### ***Synaesthetic Foundations***

The steady presence of those readers points to another characteristic of buildings and words are: they're the kind of objects that humans fill in. And *ARK*'s desire to “make it an architecture”<sup>271</sup> is not a desire to build a building without a builder or inhabitants. Humans are all over *ARK*, and this is another way Johnson's concrete poetics differ from stricter versions. Unlike the early practice in Brazil, which sought ways to get poetry out from under subjectivity's thumb, *ARK*'s concrete epic poem is full of people, bodies, and even a subjective voice more

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270. Ibid., 172.

271. O'Leary and Johnson, “An Interview with Ronald Johnson, 35.”

proper to the lyric. The first line of Beam 3 is, for example, *I KNEW THEN THAT I HAD COME TO A PLACE*.<sup>272</sup> And so, here “I” is! It’s both prominent in the book, and entangled with its spacetime, emerging inside the “then” of time and the “place” of space.

The “I” is important for *ARK*, but not just as an abstract placeholder for the “voice” from which this poem, in part anyway, is constructed. This “I” is also always an embodied subject that contributes its sense organs to the material construction and function of the poem. Remember that *ARK*’s foundation is not grounded like a building. It’s a ship cornerstoned by “the eye, the ear, the mind.”<sup>273</sup> So “I” is the “eye” (and the ear and mind). The word “eye,” in fact, appears first, alone as the fourth line of *ARK*’s first Beam, just after the blast-off scene of the book’s opening. And the first time “I” appears, in Beam 2, it’s in this phrase: “in what I see.”<sup>274</sup> So, the “I” is a seeing “eye,” a sensing subject inside the sensible object that is *ARK*. *ARK* is founded on the “eye,” and on the other sensory organs too, but the “eye” comes first.

As a practice in material poetics, *ARK* is an architecture that is built out of, and perceivable by the human’s senses. This, too, involves an exchange of time and space as *ARK* takes shape in the time of perception—the time it takes to listen and look. Of the book’s three sections, “The Foundations” is the most variously sensible. In Beam 5, for example, there are lots of little concrete poems, like the squared circle we looked at earlier, and on the same page, these three lines:

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272. Johnson, *ARK*, 9.

273. Ibid., 312.

274. Ibid., 7.



*i n m i n d i n*

a e a e a e a e a e  
w v w v w v w v w v

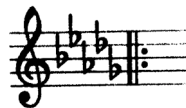
**eyeyeye**

275

The waves are an example of a concrete poem that “communicates its own structure”<sup>276</sup> in that what the poem spells out is also *how* the poem is spelled out. But waves also represent sound, meaning in this little triad, the eye, ear, and mind cornerstones of *ARK* come literally into view. And along with them comes their confusion. Because, like time and space, *ARK*’s senses are not distinct aesthetic categories. Instead, they build into a kind of poetic synaesthesia in which sound emerges from sight, and vice versa, and the mind is caught up in it all.

In addition to its palindromic back and forth, “**eyeyeye**” is a synaesthetic concrete poem that produces a sensible chain reaction as it is read. Seeing “**eyeyeye**” is one thing. Hearing it is another. It could be “eye ye ye” but it probably sounds more like the Spanish, “ay ay ay,” which we say in English too, as an interjection that doesn’t grammatically mean anything, but instead sounds out a feeling, usually in the zone of worry or concern. And this sound, and that feeling, come out of the poem’s “eyes.”

Later in the poem, what looks like the beginnings of a musical score turns out to be a key made of a series of flats with no notes to flatten, followed by lines of text.



“bear” (Polar) among the asphodel, singing Bach’s Unaccompanied

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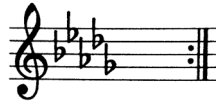
275. Ibid., 16.

276. de Campos, de Campos, and Pignatari, “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry,” 218.

Cello.

Ear (solar) in Bosch metanoias—nose to nose ls, ls, ls  
(noise)

Polyphony of epiphanies



277

Musical scores are always visual symbols meant to be heard. But in this one, language, not music, is sounded out. These lines play with the musicality of language itself, but they also work to turn sound into other senses. For instance, a coupling is suggested between “bear” and “Ear” but, unlike “Polar” and “solar,” the rhyme never emerges. Instead, their relationship is mostly visual as is the one between “nose to nose ls, ls, ls” and “(noise).” The letters (as visual symbols) are what echoes, not overall the sounds. Along the same lines, “ls” can be heard two ways: as “is” or as a plural “I.” And, so “noise” itself is shown to be made of noses and, if you listen without looking, “eyes.” Finally, there’s singing, Bach, and a cello, but the ear itself is in line with Bosch, the painter.

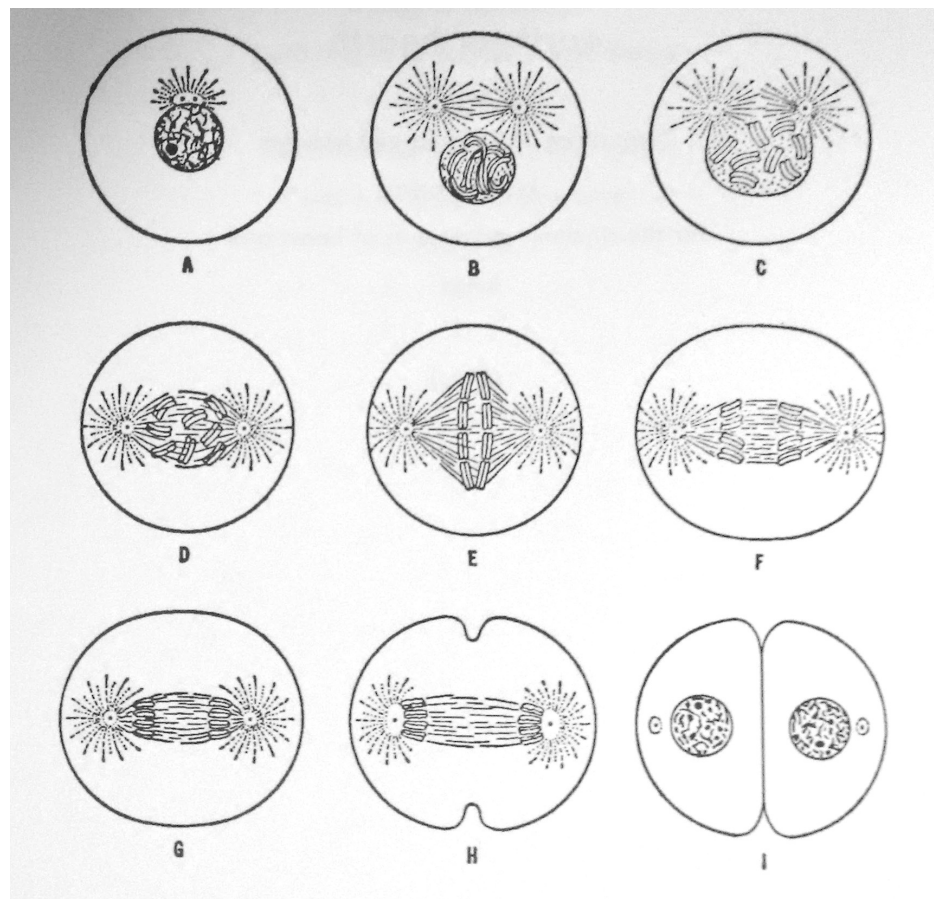
The symbol at end of the stanza tells us to go back to the beginning and do it all over again, another of *ARK*’s circular eddies, but this time in a musical score. Music shares with literature the distinction of long having been considered a temporal art, something that “differentiates it from the visual arts of architecture, sculpture, and painting, and sets it in a

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277. Johnson, *ARK*, 17-18.

certain relationship to drama, poetry, and the dance.”<sup>278</sup> As we might expect by now, *ARK* isn’t convinced of these distinctions. Instead, it works to show itself as constructed precisely out of the aesthetic confusions among the senses and between time and space. In a sense, all are welcome and indistinct.

Beam 25, “A Bicentennial Hymn,” is another example of this welcome indistinction. It depicts a series of stages of cellular mitosis.



279

The title refers to music, and though the poem goes on to invoke, among other things,

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278. Joan Stambaugh, “Music as a Temporal Form,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 9 (1964): 265.

279. Johnson, *ARK*, 68.

FIREWORKS MUSIC:<sup>280</sup>

the cell divisions don't sound the same song. Theirs is the sound of science. But the sound of *ARK*'s science isn't silence. Because each stage of the mitosis is mapped onto a letter from the alphabet, these scientific pictures are a kind of image-text code that might be used in lieu of the letters that form the basis of our written language, and ultimately, the sounds of our speech. For example, the three images that comprise the upper left corner spell "BAD." Add the image just second from the left in the second from the top row, and you have "BEAD," among other possibilities. If not obviously a music, the mitosis is a language which works like a visual word search, in which readers are encouraged to make their own words out of the partial alphabet these splitting cells act as. But this only comes to be if someone is willing to take the time to look around, and the imagistic display of mitosis itself works like the building-in-progress to reveal the two cells' pasts as a single cell. This in turn refers back to the "Unaccompanied Cello" of Beam 5, whose second word can be read as "cell-o," the opposite arrangement of the opening lines of Beam 25 (in which the mitosis appears):

prosper  
O  
cell  
281

If these cells have music in them, it registers visually, through a play of language that takes shape on the page. In addition to being cell-o's, the splitting cells are also image-based explosions that evoke the "FIREWORKS MUSIC" mentioned on the following page—something that, as a spectacle, is sensed through sound and sight, in time and space.

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280. Ibid., 69.

281. Ibid., 68.

The word search-like form of the mitosis also belongs to an ancient tradition of (what we might retroactively call) concrete poetry. Michael Squire, for example, describes a poem by 4<sup>th</sup> century poet Optatian, also laid out like a word search, in which the “letters are shown to depict not only visual patterns, but also Greek texts concealed within and behind the Latin” which produce, among other results, “a field of epic sounding poetry simultaneously shrunk into epigrammatic ‘play.’”<sup>282</sup> Johnson’s concrete epic *ARK* is at home in this tradition, though, if we read the stages of cell mitosis in alphabetical order, its outcome is not a shrinking, but a doubling of its original single cell. Still, as the mitosis suggests, *ARK* shares an interest in the ways two apparently distinct forms can coincide in the same space.

And this coincidence in space is also an insistence on the synaesthetic lack of disparity between the senses. Readers can “see” the sound of fireworks and “watch” the cells divide in time. The mind, *ARK*’s other cornerstone, gets in on this confusion too, when, later in the poem,

:the mind become its own subject matter:<sup>283</sup>

So subjectivity is undivided from the mind’s matter. And matter and mind, for that matter, are also not divided hierarchically, as Beam 3 suggests:

mind over (under, behind, ahead) matter<sup>284</sup>

For *ARK*, mind is one matter in relation with others. Like points on a circle, these relations can look to be under, over, behind, or ahead depending on who’s looking, and from what vantage point.

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282. Michael Squire, *The Iliad in a Nutshell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 220-221.

283. Johnson, *ARK*, 70.

284. Ibid., 9.

For Merleau-Ponty, the question of who's looking and with what frame of reference has contributed to a lack of understanding of synaesthesia. As he writes,

Synaesthetic perception is the rule, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the centre of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how to see, hear, and generally speak, feel, in order to deduce, from our own bodily organization and the world as the physicist conceives it, what we are to see, hear and feel.<sup>285</sup>

But if believing the physicist and not the evidence of the senses is, for Merleau-Ponty, what has prevented synaesthesia from being recognized, that's not the case for *ARK*. There, science is proof of synaesthesia. We saw this in the scientific "language" of cellular mitosis that visually expressed the sound of fireworks, among other things, and it is visible-audible in Beam 14 when a scientific aside is followed immediately by the crash of a kind of false palindrome which straddles the boundary between sight and sound:

(As Bohm posited: at zeropoint

of energy

a cubic centimeter of space = 10,000,000,000 tons

uranium) underneathunder

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Unlike Merleau-Ponty's physicist, the presence of physicist David Bohm in this poem does not stand in the way of synaesthetic experience. Instead, he's beside it. The words "underneath" and "under," which follow his appearance in the poem, visually crash into one another, literally making "thunder," which is both evocative of the noisy weather event and a newly

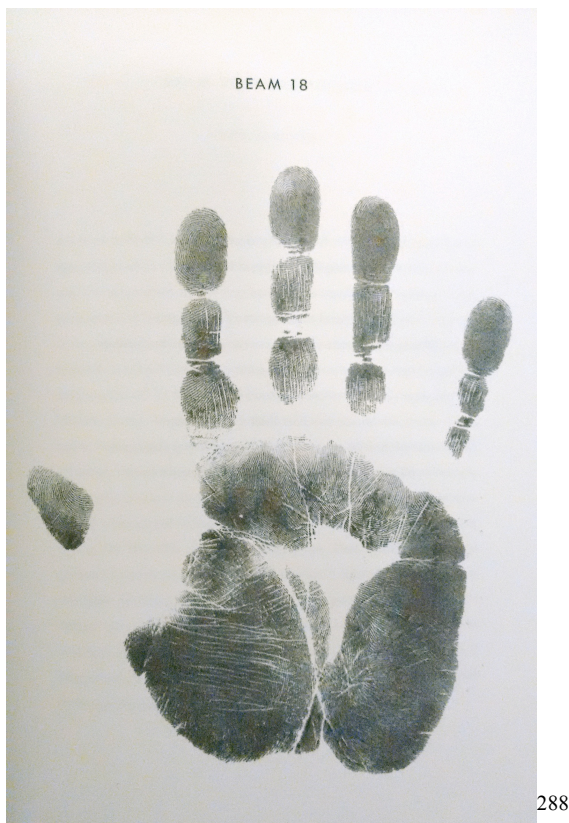
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285. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 266.

286. Johnson, *ARK*, 38.

pronounceable word that emerges from the visual combination of two others. And it's the passage these words make from the eyes to the mind, out of the mouth, and back into the ear that makes all this possible.

The Brazilian concrete poets might call this “verbivocovisual”—a poem that constructs itself out of materials that can be understood, heard, and seen. *ARK*'s cornerstones of the eye, the ear, and the mind clearly share a relationship with the three pegs of the verbivocovisual stool. But, unlike the concrete poets, who did not much venture toward the tactile,<sup>287</sup> *ARK* reaches out.



Jena Osman connects this hand to the Orpheus myth that runs throughout *ARK*, but especially through Beams 21, 22, and 23, which, together, form the section “The Song of Orpheus.” Part of

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287. Tactile engagement with poetry would become a major aim of *neoconcrete* poetry, which followed on the heels of concrete poetry in Brazil. See chapter two for more on neoconcretism.

288. *Ibid.*, 49.

this song, in turn, is composed via erasure from the Psalms. Johnson erases words from the Psalms to compose a portion of the poem called “Palms,” whose title, itself, is composed by erasing the first ‘s’ in Psalms.<sup>289</sup>

The palm comes through the Orpheus myth via Jean Cocteau's film, *Orphée* which Johnson refers to in his interview with Peter O'Leary. In their conversation, Johnson says “Orpheus went into the underworld, which I take to be the unconscious, and there he finds Eurydice and tries to lead her out. Cocteau did this as a mirror, which was a bath of mercury. Which is one of the reasons the palm is there [‘Beam 18’], is that palm going into the mercury to get to the underworld.”<sup>290</sup> With all this in mind, Osman claims that “the palm is reaching down for us, the readers. We are the ones who are in fact beneath the surface—the reader is the ‘eye’ beneath the water.”<sup>291</sup> But, if the underworld is the unconscious, it’s the material hand that drags us out from “beneath the surface.”

The hand is the part of the body we use for touching. And Beam 18’s hand is an insistence on the presence of touch within what might be assumed to be the non-tactile space of language. Seeing this palm print makes the generally hidden role of touch within the reading process explicit. And, as the reader imagines placing his palm against Johnson's, he also becomes (self-)aware of what he is touching, which is not just the page but “a veritable touching of the touch.”<sup>292</sup> This is one of several places in *ARK* where the unconscious—which shares a relationship with the cornerstone, “mind”—is made to matter. This happens with Beam 18’s

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289. Johnson was interested in erasure poetry and used the method throughout his career. See, for example, his *RADI OS*, an erasure poem composed from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Ronald Johnson, *RADI OS* (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2005).

290. O’Leary and Johnson, “An Interview with Ronald Johnson,” 50.

291. Jen Osman, “Paranomastic Migrations,” in *Ronald Johnson: Life and Works*, ed. Joel Bettridge, Eric Murphy Selinger (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 2008), 236.

292. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 133.



palm print as readers “see” touch, another synaesthetic undoing of the divisions between the human body’s sense perceptions. In Beam 26, Johnson cites Carl Jung.

Jung: “There are unconscious aspects of our perception of reality. The first is the fact that even when our senses react to real phenomena, sights, and sounds, they are somehow translated from the real of reality into that of the mind. Within the mind they become psychic events whose ultimate

nature is <sup>293</sup>

The remainder of the page is left blank, suggesting a nearly endless field of possibilities for what might follow. Among them, readers are invited to become writers and, literally, fill in the blank. There’s also an additional confusion of authorship. These are Jung’s words, but, like the erasures that allows the Psalms to become *ARK*’s “Palms,” the spacing that places “nature is” apart from the rest of the quote makes Jung’s words into something that’s no longer his. The quotation opens in Beam 26, but doesn’t close there. The title, “BEAM 27,” on the next page, is the next text to appear after the “is” in “nature is.” A third effect of the blank page is to suggest nothing. Nature is...empty. Alternately, nature is space. But space, for *ARK*, is never just empty.

The quotation does eventually close. After the title of Beam 27, there are several more blank lines and then:

unknowable.”<sup>294</sup>

So, the mind is not the site of knowing in the citation. But *ARK*’s spatial intervention before “unknowable” provokes the reader to try and know anyhow. Or at least wonder about it. And, in

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293. Johnson, *ARK*, 72.

294. Ibid., 73.

this, the poem enacts the process described in Jung's quote. Readers see the blank space of the page, their senses "react to" it as a "real phenomen[on]," but they can't really know what the blank, ultimately, is. It's an opportunity, it's an open question, it's nothing. It's all these things and also, materially, space. And, in *ARK*, space is not just the space of the page, but the outer space the ship is destined for. In this Beam, space is also time. When readers arrive at the blank space that follows "is," they pause before they get to "unknowable." And so, amid the senses and their mixing, space and time are mixed again too.

Before *ARK* was called *ARK*, *ARK* was called *WOR(L)DS*. According to Johnson, "the book was a concrete poem with the word 'worlds' with an el in parentheses so it would make 'words' or 'worlds' depending on your focus." As a note of explanation, Johnson goes on to say, "that was its original title. I think it's still a good title. But Guy Davenport said never title a book something you can't pronounce. And I believed him."<sup>295</sup> "*WOR(L)DS*," though, is pronounceable, doubly so as Johnson points out. The pronunciation problem lies only in the fact that the two words can't be pronounced at once. The same cannot be said for their perception. The word play in the discarded title can be perceived almost immediately and the two words read together. In other words, the title can be heard with the eyes. This is *ARK*'s object. It constructs itself inside what we often assume are impossible places—the gaps between genres, time and space, the senses, mind and matter, and so on. But instead of acting like scaffolding that keeps these poles apart, *ARK* proves that the concrete can be the epic, that space can equate to time, that the eyes can do the work of the ears, and that all these things can happen both *in* the poem and *as* the poem.

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295. O'Leary and Johnson, "An Interview with Ronald Johnson," 34.

*ARK* is an object that makes these mixed-perceptions possible at every turn. It builds itself in time and space and reveals itself to be a spatial object that is also, always, in time. And space and time reveal themselves to be two more perceivable aspects of *ARK*'s object. Readers can see, hear, and feel *ARK*. They can read *ARK* for meaning. And they can perceive it as spatial-temporal. The synaesthetic mixing of sight and sound and touch in "The Foundations" extends to a time-space synaesthesia in which the experience of one always requires the experience of the other.

In this, *ARK* shows itself to be an object-in-the-making and also a metaphor for that same object. If the concrete poem is an object, and this is a concrete poem in progress, then *ARK* also represents one version of how concrete poetry *can* progress. One criticism of concrete poetry has been that it represents a dead end, a 20<sup>th</sup> century vanguardism that led poetry to a place with nowhere left to go. In other words, concrete poetry was a stasis inside of poetry, an object that put a stop to the literary genre's forward momentum. The chapters in this dissertation that look at neoconcretism in Brazil and the book-object in Chile already demonstrate this notion to be a fallacy. *ARK* shows the fallacy by showing itself to be not just a concrete poem in progress, but concrete poetry in progress. Its particular progression involves the many circular eddies that in the book interrupt, but don't stop, the movement of time. This is the way *ARK* progresses as concrete poetry. It doesn't leave the practice behind in order to get back on track. Instead, it circles in and out of concrete poetry, showing itself to be architecture built from prior poetic objects that are still headed toward the future.

All aboard the *ARK*.

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation began, as I wrote in the introduction, from the assumption that poetry matters. In part, this way of beginning was born from an absolute fatigue of the question of if, or whether, poetry matters at all. If you follow Don Share, current editor of *Poetry* magazine, on any of his social media, you've no doubt come into contact with the vast archive of articles that ask this question in one form or another. Does poetry matter? Is poetry dead? The statistics are in, they say, and no one's really reading poetry anymore. But, these articles continue and that's evidence enough to say that well, if poetry really were dead, it wouldn't have much need for the question. For the most part, this dissertation has focused on the question of *how* poetry matters. This is a pun, of course—one that plays, like the poetries I've discussed here, with the meaning of matter. But I've largely stayed away from the question of whether or not poetry is dead or alive in our time.

But this question is important to the examples this dissertation looks at, and one that, for material poetics, is bound up in the matter of poetry. "Poetry" could well be the missing subject in Haroldo de Campos's poem that begins "se nasce morre nasce morre nasce morre" ([something] is born dies is born dies is born dies).<sup>296</sup> The Portuguese leaves it unclear who (or what) is being born or dying. But, if we take the poem, as concrete poetry would want us to, to be a structure that speaks its own content, then what we have is, literally, poetry being born and dying on the page before our eyes. In many ways, this is also the implicit claim of Ferreira Gullar's "Buried Poem"<sup>297</sup> in which a reader descends into an underground room and uncovers a series of nested boxes to finally discover the word "rejuvenesça" (rejuvenate). Though this dissertation is primarily concerned with the ways that poem stages a relational exchange between

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296. A more in-depth discussion of this poem can be found in chapter one.

297. Further discussed in chapter two.

subject and object, another way of reading the “Buried Poem” is as a tomb in which poetry itself is born anew. For this neoconcrete poem, like all the examples in this dissertation, poetry comes alive in and as material. It’s not an intangible truth, or a muse-inspired musing, or a textual record of an extra-literary real. It’s its own real thing, whose evidence that it is alive is the evidence that it materialized. In other words, poetry matters because it’s matter.

New materialisms are claiming now that matter matters, that the time has come, and is long overdue, for us think seriously about more than ourselves. This also means taking material objects seriously—beginning from the assumption that matter matters. As is clear, I share that assumption, but this dissertation diverges from the great majority of object studies by taking poetry as its exemplar object. And by this I don’t mean, as this dissertation stresses, the objects that appear in poetry—objects that language is capable of naming—but poetry itself, the object that is the poem, or language. My project works to test some of the tenets of object-oriented thinking but substituting the poetic object for the exemplar objects that more typically appear in these discussions, which vary greatly—from billiard balls to political assemblages—but, regardless, aren’t usually poetry. If the advantage of a flat ontology is that one might begin with anything, then my claim is that poetry ought to be as good a thing as any.

But the findings of this dissertation show that this might not be so simple, or that poetry, as an exemplar object, might call for a different approach to theory than a billiard ball might. And this is true despite my choice of poetries. This dissertation considers four examples of material poetry—poetry at its most object-like, poetry that stresses its materiality, and self-theorizes as an object. And still, it poses challenges to our imaginings of objects, even when it tries to uphold some of these very same imaginings. Of all of these, the most challenging is the notion that the poetic object might break from subjectivity.

This is less true in Ronald Johnson's *ARK*, but in the other chapters, the examples I consider work, in one way or another, to undo, erase, or undermine the subject. This is a tricky proposal for poetry for a number of reasons. First of all, poetry, for the most part, has to be written by someone. And second, however much they might depart from the conventions of reading, poems (even these poems) are meant to be, and are, read. Largely, the examples I look at here are less concerned with eliminating the reader-subject than they are with eliminating the author-as-subject and the notion that what poetry is, is the subjective outpouring from that authorial voice. But, despite these difficulties, I have tried throughout this dissertation to take that possibility seriously, and to explore the ways in which material poetics manage to find ways out of subjectivity.

In concrete poetry, this ultimately manifests in poems capable of writing themselves. At the end of chapter one, I look at an anagrammatic poem in which readers are explicitly invited to create their own letter combinations and continue writing the poem. As I argue there, these readers don't even need to be human. A computer program could do this sort of reading/writing as easily as—perhaps more easily than—a human reader could. So, there's one strategy. That poem is a more extreme example, but it uses a similar strategy to the one made use of throughout Brazilian concrete poetry in which the materials of language, more than a human author, are what "write" the concrete poem. The poet may select the words of the poem, but it's language's materiality that, in the end, delimits what the poem will be made of. In an anagram, for example, the poet selects the words the poem will grow from. But, after that, it's the letters of those words that determine the poem's possibilities, not the subjective intervention of the author.

In neoconcretism, subjectivity is undermined not by trying to work around it, but by merging the subject with the object. In this way, neither position is pure. Objects become subject-

like. For example, objects act. They invite certain interactions. They foreclose others. Subjects, on the other hand, come to be objects by entering and helping to compose (as in constitute, as opposed to write) the poem. In *La nueva novela*, subjectivity's challenge is a matter of textual strategy. The author's name, where it appears, appears ~~crossed-out~~ and/or (inside of parentheses) such that Juan Luis Martínez, or pseudonym Juan de Dios Martínez, is never outside of the book-object, never a separate being, always embedded and bound inside the text. *ARK*, as I've noted, is less concerned with the textual deletion or absorption of the subject, and markers of subjectivity appear all over the text—from frequent use of what elsewhere might be called the “lyrical I,” to an insistence that the book is an architecture whose cornerstones are not the stuff of the post-anthropocene, but human sense organs, lyrical “eyes.”

*ARK* is the most contemporary of the examples this dissertation considers. I've organized these chapters in roughly historical order, beginning with the foundational concrete movement in 1950s Brazil, moving through and past that decade with neoconcretism, into the 1970s with *La nueva novela*, and finally ending on *ARK*, which was written over a period of twenty years and first published in the 1990s. Despite this arrangement, I don't wish to propose a telos that ends with *ARK*, though I do argue that *ARK* represents the future of concrete poetry. In that chapter, I look at the ways *ARK* proposes a model for the time of concrete poetry. I claim, first of all, that this is not the instantaneous time of earlier versions of the practice, where a small poem can be apprehended in what feels like an instant. I also go on to show that *ARK*, though a long poem that proceeds through time, does not unfold in a linear fashion. It rejects linearity, as well as instantaneity and the pausing of time associated with ekphrasis. Instead, *ARK* proposes a circular time which is itself interrupted by many circular eddies that wind the reader back through concrete poetry even as the book continues to move “forward.”

*ARK* is a strange book and a strange example to end on. I've chosen to include two chapters that focus on Brazilian movements, one on a Chilean book-object, and one on *ARK*, the only example from the United States. Brazil takes up two chapters because it was home to two major movements that established and then renewed the practice and theory of concrete poetry in the Americas. Though I only have one chapter whose object is located in Chile, Juan Luis Martínez belongs to a robust tradition of Chilean visual and material practices in poetry that would include major figures like Vicente Huidobro and Nicanor Parra. In the United States, there wasn't really ever a concrete poetry movement. That's not to say there was no concrete or material poetry. As Mary Ellen Solt wrote in her 1968 critical anthology, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, "the impetus towards concretization has been strong in American poetry since Whitman began to make his long catalogues to name the objects in his New World, leaving the rose for Gertrude Stein."<sup>298</sup> As Solt goes on to say, it may be that "we were too close to concrete poetry to require a "movement," for with very little effort one can find concrete poems written by distinguished American poets simply included in their collections without its having occurred to anyone to attach a new label."<sup>299</sup>

Well, Johnson did attach that label. And that's partly why this dissertation is interested in his work. I'm interested in what it means for *ARK*, a 300 page "epic" poem, to be a concrete poem. So, I end with that book as a way of exploring the changes concrete and material poetics underwent in the Americas as the 20<sup>th</sup> century came to a close. But, I'm also interested in the ways *ARK*, with its complete lack of a hardline as to what constitutes concrete poetry, can tell us

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298. Mary Ellen Solt, "*Concrete Poetry: A World View*," (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968), 47.

299. Ibid.



about how these poetries work and what they contribute to poetics, to the ways we read, and to theories of the object.

One of the things I hope to show with this dissertation is that material poetry did not come alive and die in the 1950s and 60s. Many people have that impression—that concrete and material poetics were something people tried out for a while before getting back to the real thing. I don't think that's the case, and I hope to show, with *ARK*, that poetry at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century absorbed the lessons of concrete poetry. I also hope to show that it absorbed its failures. And by this I don't mean continued failing, but that it found ways of bringing the things earlier practices in material poetry tried so hard (but not always successfully) to rid itself of, into itself—to make these earlier excisions part of what concrete poetry could be going forward.

As I've already pointed out, the most primary of these attempted excisions is subjectivity. Concrete poetry, neoconcrete poetry, and *La nueva novela* all work to rid themselves of the subject. And, as I've shown, I do think they find ways of rising to this challenge. For the most part, this dissertation has tried to take a generous approach with this possibility. Rather than naming it as an *impossibility* and getting on with things, I have worked hard to read these material poetries in light of the theories they claim to materialize. For example, I have tried to make *La nueva novela*, and not just Juan Luis Martínez, the actor of my sentences. I say things like "*La nueva novela* works/does/claims/shows/etc." rather than "Juan Luis Martínez works/does/claims/shows/etc." I do this in solidarity with the book's poetics, but also with the author's proclaimed intention.

And this is where things get complicated. As I wrote in the introduction, though I engage throughout this project with theorists interested in language, phenomenology, and objects, the primary theorists of this dissertation are the poets themselves. And that is a reification of the

subject if ever there were one. It's also a return to the notion of author intentionality. This is a welcome paradox for this project, which works to show how poetry can rid itself of subjectivity and authorship *because the author said so*. I know this is a paradox but I have not tried to write it out of this project. Its presence does several things for me. For one, it hints from the background at the importance of subjectivity even, or especially, for those poetic approaches that would seek to diminish it. And secondly, it marks the specific sort of critical formalism I am interested in resurrecting.

Formalism's turn away from authorship has the potential downside of proffering a universalism that risks leaving out (or does leave out) the specific context in which literature is made. This is a criticism once-neoconcretist Ferreira Gullar makes of concrete poetry when moving away from his own vanguard practices and toward political radicalization. The avant-garde formalism of concrete poetry, he claimed in his period following neoconcretism, was an artistic dead-end and "the real artistic vanguard, in an underdeveloped country, is that which, in seeking the new, seeks human liberation, from its concrete, international and national, situation."<sup>300</sup> In a future project, I hope to return to this debate that a newly radicalized Gullar is having with his concrete predecessors, in part because I'm interested in the ways he "translates" the meanings of key words for concrete poetry into the era of the Brazilian dictatorship without abandoning the terms themselves. But, for now, I want to point out that these critiques of formalism are both longstanding and valid, and not just historically.

I've been accused of taking my poets' words for it, of giving them too much say over how I read their work. That's true. And I do it deliberately, because I believe the outcome of this approach to formalism—one that also takes into account the author's intention or poetics, when

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300. Ferreira Gullar, *Vanguarda E Subdesenvolvimento: Ensaio Sobre Arte*, (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Civilização Brasileira S. A., 1978), 24.

available—can help to prevent form from always turning toward an abstract universal that isn't universal so much as first-world, global north whiteness by another name. As Ken Chen writes about Kenneth Goldsmith, a North American poet whose form-interested, subject-denying “conceptual poetry” has been under fire for its racist appropriation of Michael Brown's autopsy report, “the decentered self imagined by these [conceptual] poets is the elite white self.”<sup>301</sup> I agree with Chen, but as the poets in this dissertation show, an appeal to a decentered self doesn't only come from elite white selves. This notion was circulating all through Latin American vanguard practices in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in that context, speaks to a liberating potential of decentering the self—whereby the self that matters doesn't just come from one of the so-called “centers” of culture. I've tried in this project to let *these* decentered selves guide my thinking about how poetry works and what it is, ought to, or can be. Though Latin America is my primary context, Ronald Johnson's appearance here also speaks to a kind of decentering—he was a concrete poet who found himself both outside the centers of any major North American poetic movements and outside the geographical centers of the poetry he practiced.

Decentering is part of what appeals to me about Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*. To his title, I've added, in my chapter on *La nueva novela, material* poetics of relation, because I see an interest in materiality as a way of grounding these decentered centers, as a way of insisting on the specificity of a single example even when it does aspire, as concrete poetry does, to be universal. Even in that case, I side with Jacques Derrida in claiming that concrete poetry is “at once on the side of the universal and nonetheless on the side of the most irreducible uniqueness

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301. Ken Chen, “Authenticity Obsession, or Conceptualism as Minstrel Show,” *The Margins*, last modified June 11, 2015, <http://aaww.org/authenticity-obsession/>.

of the idiom.”<sup>302</sup> This is because even if the approach could be taken up, as it has been, by any number of languages, what happens inside the poem is always particular to that exact language, those exact words, and those exact letters. In neoconcretism, the poem is so specific that it literally does not exist without a reader or participant’s engaging it. The reader is part of the poem and the poem comes to be in the reader’s sensing of it. So, in the case of neoconcretism, there is no universal, only a series of particular relational poetic objects that emerge anytime someone takes the time to perceive their materiality. Though writing about materiality is another paradox which this dissertation upholds, I wish to write about that materiality, in all of its specificity, because it mattered to these poets and their poetry.

So, an important part of my critical approach *is* to take my poets’ words for it. This aligns with what Heather Love calls “the possibility of an alternative ethics, one grounded in documentation and description rather than empathy and witness.”<sup>303</sup> I do not wish to treat the poets I write about as hostile witnesses, nor as voices that must always stand for a chorus of extra-poetic testimony. Instead, I choose to believe that what the poets say they are up to is what they are really up to. I realize this information is not always available, and this is not a manifesto about how we all ought to do (or not do) criticism now. But, in the case of the poets this dissertation considers, especially the Brazilian groups, a great deal of theoretical and poetics-interested writing is available to supplement the poems themselves. And, I find it productive to read their poetry as a genuine attempt to work out the ideas they describe in their poetics, even

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302. Jacques Derrida, “Coasts, Third Banks, Encounters,” in *Haroldo de Campos in Conversation: In Memoriam 1929-2003*, ed. Bernard McGuirk and Else R. P. Vieira (London: Zoilus Press, 2009), 305.

303. Love, “Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn.”

when that means I am reading for ways out of authorship because the author told me that's what he was after.

As the introduction begins to suggest, this approach offers several opportunities for thinking about the ways literary studies interact with studies of the object. My interest in theories of the object here has, for the most part, also been a generous one that's less interested in, for example, arguing about whether or not objects have agency than in trying to find poetic evidence for the possibility that they might. Like the assumptions I've stated in my introduction—that poetry does matter, that poetry is matter, that poets are theorists, etc.—I am more interested in a method that first accepts a theoretical proposal, and then watches as the consequences of that acceptance begin to show themselves. This requires, again, taking the author seriously. And that's where I see studies and philosophies of language and literature as having the most to contribute to the development of object studies.

In chapter one, I argue a bit with Graham Harman's claim that the philosophy of language "leaves humans in absolute command" while the "arena of the world is packed with diverse objects" that go largely ignored.<sup>304</sup> My point there is that concrete poetry is a philosophy of language *and* a philosophy of objects. That's not the case for most philosophies of objects, which, though they would probably agree that language, words, and poems could be called objects, don't spend as much time as this dissertation does thinking about what that means. But what philosophies of objects are doing all the time is writing about objects *in language*. And the philosophers of objects are authors and subjects who, by bracketing the achievements of the philosophies of language, implicitly make the arguments that, first, what they mean to say is

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304. Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 94.

what they say, second, that it ought to be taken seriously, and third, that the translation of objects into language is something that doesn't much need to be interrogated.

For the most part, my method has included taking for granted the first two of these arguments, and in that move, I not only try to take at face value, and seriously, the claims of object oriented ontologies and new materialisms, but I also, inevitably reify the subject position of any of its authors. There's more work to do in this area. But, that work has, like my affirmation of authorial intent with regard to material poetics, largely taken place in the background of this text. What's been in the foreground is another version of the third implicit argument I refer to above—this dissertation is constantly working at and trying to expose the many ways objects and language can come together, or come to be the other. Literary studies and the philosophies of language have a long history of thinking about the relationship between words and things. And this thinking can be reinvigorated in light of recent developments in the theories of the object. I've contributed one approach that, rather than working at the ways language names objects, thinks about the object-condition of language—poetic language—itself. I'm certainly not the first or only one to do this, but I think there's more room here.

In my project, I've proposed four poetic object paradigms—autonomous, relational, assembled, and architecture. In addition to questions about how poetry can manage to become these kinds of objects, this dissertation asks fundamental questions about what poetry is, what it's made of, how it's read, and who writes it. In the end, my claims are underscored by an investment in my own authorial intention, which says that lots of nontraditional materials are poetry, and asks you to believe me when I say so. I have tried not to work from the category of poetry down, but rather from the examples of what I call poetry here, up. As a way of closing,

that gives me the chance, now, to create a list of the characteristics of poetry, when material poetry is the poetry characterized.

As concrete poetry first teaches us, poetry is something that takes up space. It's something that can be apprehended with the eyes, with the ears, and with the mind. Neoconcretism adds that poetry is something that can be touched. It can be recorded in a book, but it doesn't have to be. It can be recorded on a page, but it doesn't have to be. Neoconcretism also tells us that poetry doesn't even need to be made of language. Poetry can be an object—a photograph, a painting, a person. This is one of things we can also learn from *La nueva novela*, where poetry is words but also pieces of plastic, fishhooks, and tape. Poetry can make use of metaphor but can also turn metaphor literal, as *ARK* does. As *ARK* points out, too, poetry takes time. In *ARK* it's long. In the concrete poetry of this dissertation's first chapter, it's short. As I've been claiming in this conclusion, poetry can find ways out of subjectivity, even if that requires first taking a subject's word for it. Most of all, though, what we can learn from this poetry is that poetry matters. And I'll end there, as I began: poetry matters.

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