

# Effortlessness and effort

By Victoria Perin

The concrete poem is commonly understood as a refined artform: a cleaned up, nailed down, precisely formed visual statement. The pioneers of concrete poetry 'stressed the order and beauty of concrete'.<sup>i</sup> In this original formation of concrete poetry, which has become the popular assessment of the movement, what is prioritised is *effortlessness*. No matter how hard the poem was to write, typeset or print, the overall affect for the reader should be a cleanly simplicity, a serene ease, a cultivated and cut rose. 'If I was asked, "Why do you like concrete poetry",' mused British poet and concrete pioneer Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'I could truthfully answer "Because it is beautiful".'<sup>ii</sup>

This assumption of serenity has always grated some. Canadian concrete poet bill bissett associated clarity and minimalism in poetry with a 'representational language that the reader ought to passively consume with capitalism'.<sup>iii</sup> In 1968, French poet Julien Blaine complained that 'Concrete poetry is reactionary . . . the concrete poets, they're sitting round a table where the cloth is laid for the quasi-official avant-garde, and instead of destroying the word, instead of progressing towards a language which will be the one we so need, they play happily with yesterday's words . . . what matters [for them] is not action, but making something beautiful.'<sup>iv</sup>

These are not just the quarrels of distant poets. This same argument was played out in Melbourne from the early 1970s. The Australian poets who would most thoroughly question what a concrete poem could be were those associated with Collective Effort Press. It is no coincidence that they demand their work be assessed within the context of their struggle against academic and rarefying culture. In short, they define their collectivism in the context of *effort* rather than effortlessness.

There is perhaps no better illustration of this than thalia's poetry. Her startlingly original Pitman Shorthand poems take the leggy arabesques of this unspeakable writing and insist that it speak of politics, class warfare and state violence. When we see the utter gorgeousness of poems like 'SUMMER WINTER' (2014/1999), with its notation half-cobbled in pebbles, we see how Shorthand can be used to express an effortless whisper to the universe. Compare this simple, seductive poem with 'OF WEAPONS MASS DESTRUCTION' (2022/2002). Across four panels, the deceitful phrase gathers soldiers, with

loops and hooks gathering into fists. The contrast between these two poems allows us to admire thalia's restraint, as well as her staunchness. She's invented a beautiful form of concrete poetry, but she won't let it remain merely beautiful.

Collective Effort Press was inaugurated about 1978, around a lay-out table. They were interested in starting a new magazine about work and quickly developed 925. As a poetry magazine 925 looked towards a new readership of working people: 'our ranks began to swell with electricians, tram conductors, taxi drivers, nurses, cooks, cufflink cleaners and queue minders'.<sup>v</sup> 925 ran from 1978 to 1983, but members of Collective Effort had been associated with several 'little mags' before then, including *Archduke* (4 issues), *Fitzrot* (6 issues), *Parachute poems* (4 issues), *Born to concrete* (4 issues) *Poetry Etc i's and e's* (2 issues), *anarcho women* (1 issue), *FREE* (4 issues), *Foundation and reality* (4 issues). For them, the 1970s was a long decade of frantic publishing, all conducted alongside the poets' 9-to-5 jobs. Making their *work* into their *work* was a revelation for many in the group.

This was the publishing system they developed: once contributions had been collected, many solicited directly from peers, a lay-out party would be called. Early on, these working/social events were held at 11 Johnston Street, Collingwood, later shifting to Jeltje's house in Hilton Street, Clifton Hill. People would arrive and do more partying than publishing, so another meeting would be called soon after. The ones who dragged themselves back to Johnston and Hilton Streets were the ones who really got the magazines together, but the parties were important too. This organic process, based around mutual obligation, meant that the 'work of creating the magazine thus became a collective way of reimagining work itself'.<sup>vi</sup>

Peter Murphy made his first concrete poem around 1971, and his poetry grew in response to this ferment. His first collection of concrete poems, *Seen and Unseen*, appeared in 1975. When asked who his favourite concrete poets are, Murphy responds with a long list of Collective Effort poets. His work in the present anthology is clean and minimal, an aesthetic that points towards his early fascination in the work of his peer, Melbourne poet Alex Selenitsch. He began writing photographic poems in 1976. Finding wild visual poems in the sights and signs around him, Murphy points us towards what is not at all concrete, but only gestured to.

Arjun von Caemmerer is the most recent member of Collective Effort in this volume, having begun submitting his work from the second issue of their current magazine, ~~Unusual Work~~, established in 2005. His first concrete poem, 'hex-agony', was written around 1986. 'I was very excited at my discovery of "non linear writing" and thought, ignorantly, that I had

invented a whole new form'. After the thrill of (re)invention, von Caemmerer used visual poetry to explore his rich interests. One of his most important pieces, 'Patañjali's d'e(L)ight' (1996) is a sincere investigation of the 'eight limbs' of classical yoga. 'I don't know how many versions of the poem I drafted,' writes von Caemmerer, 'but easily dozens, over a couple of years.' The poem's long conception mirrors the demands it places upon the reader. It requires slow, dedicated study.

Several standout poems by von Caemmerer are devoted to experimental composers Edgard Varèse and Conlon Nancarrow, with further references to the vibrant Frank Zappa. Despite the esoteric heart of his poetry, von Caemmerer exploits the accessible self-typesetting feature of WordArt, enabled in Microsoft Word. Shaping and rotating each individual letter, von Caemmerer's digital aesthetic harks back to a DIY graphic golden age of Web 2.0, and connects his scholarly concrete poems with an endearing form of early 2000s fan art.

Sandy Caldwell began making visual poetry in the late 1980s, but for her it was in the context of anti-nuclear politics. Caldwell's poetry is still tied to an Earth-poetics, notably through her use of earthenware clays to make concretes. 'I enjoy physically and cerebrally making each letter of a word, making the alphabet solid. . . I shape them like I shape each word in a poem.' The poet's hand is visible in Caldwell's textured and flame-flashed letters that are like words. With this grounded quality and the fact that her work cultivates a simplicity of expression, associations with Hamilton Finlay's work come to mind. Yet the bottom of the suburban garden where Caldwell loads and unloads her kiln is no Little Sparta. While Hamilton Finlay's timeless carved poems seem to address the ages, Caldwell is interested in addressing our age specifically, and confronting its crises and concerns directly.

Jas H. Duke's Letraset poems, all dated before his untimely death in 1992, draw the reader in with swirling and spiral forms. Letraset is the corporate name for a process in which lettering could be transferred onto paper by rubbing the reverse of a pre-prepared typeface sheet. Out of the packet, Letraset type is neat and ordered, echoing its intended use in commercial headings and graphic design. Reading Duke's Letraset poems, our eye twirls, searching for the legibility that the typeface appears to offer. When used in a mis-registered, or intentionally 'wrong' manner, Letraset echoes Duke's varied and operatic vocal performances. These poems are tied to his orality and hint at the fact that Duke was one of the most skilled vocal performers that Melbourne had ever seen.

In contrast (and to bring us back to thalia's non-spoken strategies), π.o.'s number poems use a trans-lingual communication that is readable across cultures, but mostly

unspeakable. π.o.'s first number poem, his name, was conceived 'when I was in school'.<sup>vii</sup> His mathematics are liberated from the silo of precision and let loose in to fields of metaphor. This keeps the language of numerology unpredictable and creative, which avoids the weaponisation of statistics, accounting, and other non-neutral, political maths. 'I came to realise how numbers were being used against the working class,' he writes, 'Politicians do it all the time'.<sup>viii</sup> In a time where the internet is governed by algorithmic traps, the increasing relevance of the number poems makes π.o.'s prescience revelatory. Yet, almost unbelievably, the number poems are just one of the dazzling concrete inventions to come out of this dazzlingly inventive artist.

Indeed, originality is one of the striking characteristics of the work across Collective Effort Press. Driven by an independence from the academy, the work of these poets has a palpably competitive edge. With a membership that is informal and constantly fluctuating, their strength comes from the qualities of their labours, which are visible in their work both individually and collectively. Their concrete poems exemplify this. Not merely beautiful in one, clean way, but beautiful in muscle and fight, beautiful in bite.

i. Nicholas Zurbrugg, 'Towards the death of concrete poetry', originally published Winter 1970, republished in Zurbrugg *Visual poetics: concrete poetics and its contexts*, exhibition catalogue (Brisbane: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1989), p.66.

ii. Ibid.

iii. Lori Emerson, *Reading writing interfaces: from the digital to the bookbound* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p.102.

iv. Zurbrugg, 1970 (republished 1989), p.67.

v. π.o. (ed.), *Off the Record* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1985), p.14.

vi. Louis Klee, 'Weird Unemployment, Unusual Work', *Sydney Review of Books*, 20 March 2023.

vii. π.o. interview with Debris Facility, 'A poet is a worker in language', *Cordite Poetry Review*, 31 October 2021.

viii. Ibid.

\* all uncited quotations derived from conversations with the author.

## WAYWORD FORWARD

An exhibition of concrete poetry by Collective Effort Press

Curated by Collective Effort Press and Victoria Perin

5 – 21 May 2023

Missing Persons

Room 11-12, Level 4

37 Swanston Street, Melbourne, Victoria, 3000

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