



Field Poetics (a complete history of de-individualizing practices)

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Works embodying a field poetics display a systematic integrity that overrides individual authorial intention. The system in play may operate on an acoustic or on a visual level, or it may mix these registers, either by employing a formulaic methodology, randomizing text production, or contrariwise, by employing a methodology sometimes considered to be spontaneous (bop prosodies of mind-breath poetics, projective verse). The resulting verbal matrix, as it manifests itself on the page, is often likened to scored speech. Among the most uncompromising works of this order are the mesostics and chance-based compositions of John Cage, certain works by Jackson Mac Low, and works associated with Oulipo: Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle (Workshop of Potential Literature): Raymond Queneau, François Le Lionnais, Claude Berge, Georges Perec, and Italo Calvino. Typical of Oulipo poetics is the “S + 7” method, by means of which each noun is systematically replaced by the noun to be found seven places away in a chosen dictionary. The method frees text production from personal agency, yielding results that speak to the essential arbitrariness of all linguistic conventions. The Noigandres poets from São Paulo (Décio Pignatari, Haraldo and Augusto

de Campos), chose to identify their work by means of reference to an enigmatic phrase that preoccupies Ezra Pound in his Canto XX. Similar to many other poetries that fuse language with its visualization as concrete poetry or *poesía visiva*, the Noigandres poets, like those of Oulipo, manifest a deep distrust of intentional language.

Processes of text production like those cited reflect a widely held belief that alternative models of language hold the potential for renovating current usage and restoring human and spiritual universals that have become obscured by social alienation and consumerist values. In 1919, speaking for the Dadaist Revolutionary Central Council, Richard Huelsenbeck and Raul Hausmann demanded, among other items, "The immediate expropriation of property (socialization) and / the communal feeding of all; further, the erection of cities of light, and gardens which will belong to society as a whole and prepare man for a state of freedom." This manifesto reflects a desire that is characteristic of field poetics: to renew through radical change, evoking an anti-poetics of destruction.

Precursors of contemporary field poetics include the *symboliste* page of Stéphane Mallarmé, Futurism (both Italian and Russian), the Vorticism of Ezra Pound and his associates, as well as the anti-poetics of Dada. An important distinction must be made between the use of white space as a weighted silence in Mallarmé's "Un coup de dés" ("A Throw of the Dice") and the visualization of line and phrase as shaped by Pound (especially in his use of the typewriter in composing the *Pisan Cantos*). Pictorial function with respect to the appearance of the page is secondary for Pound (and following his example, Charles Olson), distinguishing these poems from emblems or word-pictures, for instance, the calligrammes in Apollinaire's collection of that title. In his "Vorticism" essay of 1914, Pound defined the

image as “the word beyond formulated language” (88). Although the image of the image of the vortex was integral to Italian Futurist poetics, pictorial or “retinal” function mimed a drama of reception rather than reflective thought in their work—for instance, in Carlo Carra’s *Interventionist Demonstration* (1914), associated with F. W. Marinetti’s “Paroles en liberta,” a spinning wheel of words, reflecting machine speed.

Futurism and Vorticism have left legacies, inflected with forms of fascism and with varying degrees of influence over avant-garde aesthetic production. No consolation here. Nonetheless, different, conceptually from the operation of the sign in Futurism, Pound’s theorization of systems of self-sustaining form that correlate with flows of energy is fundamental for most poetics that employ a field poetics. Materialization of semantic and spiritual energy, carried and shaped by the sounds of language, especially the tone-leading of the vowels, is fundamental to the practice of “composition by field” developed by Robert Duncan. Pound’s “unwobbling pivot” is seminal for the conceptualization of the poem as a field of energized particles, *semina motuum* or “seeds in motion,” identified with the ideogram ‘chi’ (Canto 105). The Noigandres poets of Brazil specifically acknowledged their indebtedness to Pound, as have other far flung avant-gardes, including the Vou club of Japan (Kitasono Katue) and the Objectivists associated with Louis Zukofsky in the United States.

Vou Club poetics, like works produced in Germany and associated with the Bauhaus or with the Merz poetics of Kurt Schwitters as well as works produced in Russia under a Suprematist or Cubo-Futurist impulse, implement a concrete and abstract formalism which might seem to belie the acoustic function of these texts as scored speech. Examples of

sound-text-art arising from these sources include the *zaum* texts of Velimir Khlebnikov, Kurt Schwitters's *Ursonate* and the sound poetry of Bernard Heidsick and Henri Chopin. The evolution of these forms of scored speech originates with Italian Futurism and then morphs, both in German through Dada and in Russian through Suprematism, into an abstract and highly formal or constructivist poetics. Continuing examples of this practice may be found in works by members of the Vienna Group. Readers of English are indebted to Rosmarie Waldrop for her translations of these texts and to Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop for their publication of them through Burning Deck's *Serie d'Ecriture*.

Italian Futurism itself generally prized explosive violence and machine aesthetics over individual expression. Many readers are distraught over this celebration of violence and the eventual association of Futurism with Fascism. Referring to the Italian campaign in Ethiopia, Marinetti wrote, "For twenty-seven years we Futurists have rebelled against the branding of war as anti-aesthetic Accordingly we state: ... War is beautiful because it establishes man's dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metalization of the human body." In Marinetti's visual texts, sonic structures replace the usual human markings of verbal expressions.

The Lettrism of Isadore Isou, very different in its political impulse, leading as it does to the politics of the Situationist International, undertakes to embrace a universal sense of human integrity, located in experiences of sound prior to conscious individualism. Lettrism derives from the performance art of the Dadaists, such as Hugo Ball and Marcel Janco. These artists explored the interface of antipoetic systems and acoustic experiment, verging on babbling.

Tristan Tzara and Francis Picabia pushed the relation between free form verbalism and machine aesthetics towards the mapping of individual psychic apparatuses.

The exploration of interiority is a continuing function of field poetics in so far as a search for spiritual integrity motivates the practice. Different practices of field poetics obviate the subjectively compromised spaces of the Freudian imagination. For instance, the sources of poetics as different as Cage's chance operations and Jack Kerouac's "spontaneous bop prosody" are Buddhist. Wilson Harris' "cross cultural imagination" evokes spiritual resonances with collective psychic processes described by Jung, as does the poetry of Charles Olson. Clausfriedrich Claus, working with small transparencies, creates overlays of Jungian and mystical texts where desiring machines, resembling large insects, crawl over the landscapes of layered texts.

A spiritual inflection is present in a wide variety of field poetics. Pound's composite or ideogrammic images inscribe readings of a divine imprint or coherence. Spiritually based readings associated with acrostics, riddles, and palimpsests are central to the alphabetic mysticisms of the Gnostics and Jewish interpreters of Kabala. Concrete poetry shares some aspects of this history, having an affinity with mystical functions of the emblem or icon. Field poetics, in its scoring of the visual and acoustic properties of language, operates as a distinctly empowering decoding or reading practice, taking the form of annotations, secret keys, and glosses of a source text. One of the most striking examples of this later process is the work of Susan Howe.

Religious traditions of visual poetry are also associated with trance states, producing glossolalia (or speaking in tongues), predecessors of the Dada performance pieces and also of the mystically inspired *Gematria* of Jerome Rothenberg and Harris Lenowitz and the ethnopoetic experiments undertaken by Rothenberg in association with tribal informants (for instance, *The Seventeen Horse Songs of Frank Mitchell*). The discovery of a divine or spiritual imprint within the textures of language reflects, for some, the ancient religious yearnings of human beings. In this context, poetry of pared down concretions, like Paul Celan's final works in *Threadsun*s (in Pierre Joris's translation), provide examples of processes associated with field poetics. For instance, in the lines cited here, images of holocaust and of feverish reading of sacred texts, collide:

Jetzt, da die betshemmel brennen,
eß ich das Buch
mit allen
Insignien
(Now, as the prayerstools burn.
I eat the book
with all the
insignia)

Seemingly unrelated to Celan's impulse, recent poetries such as those associated with Fluxus (Dick Higgins, George Brecht, Toshi Ichiyangi, and Yoko Ono, among other practitioners) or the work of Canada's Four-Horsemen (bp Nichol, Raphael Barreto-Rivera, Steve McCaffery, and Paul Dutton) share the desire to articulate a divine or spiritual presence. This vector has consistently identified field poetics in the English language practice. Charles Olson in his essay "The Human Universe" articulated the most

comprehensively constructed model of field poetics, citing the quantum mechanical realities described by Werner Heisenberg and Riemann calculus as well as his own fieldwork in the Yucatan. Olson's theorizations, especially his "Projective Verse" (1950), influenced Fluxus poetics and has a relation of co-sanguinity to the "bop" practices of Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. The sound poetry of Canada's Four Horsemen, also influenced by the range of Olson's practice, has been described as rhizomatic, "tunneling invisibly below the surface to appear in unexpected places."

In many ways the philosophy of desiring machines mapped by Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari is descriptive of the underlying push of all varieties of field poetics, understood as a vector or line of flight, leading away from individual egotism and towards an embrace of systems that either purify or renovate human affective potential, placing perception and process ahead of rationalization, and thereby warping the theory-practice loop which underlies Western pragmatism, print culture, and the accountant's grid.

The conceptual integrity of field poetics with respect to layered processes of composition was established early in the modern period. Like Pound, Marcel Duchamp considered the linear nature of standard syntax to be counterproductive to a grasp of the field of available meaning in any one instance. Duchamp, anticipating Ludwig Wittgenstein, employed language games that derive from the machine aesthetics of Futurism, the antipoetics of Dada, and the intellectual intensity that arises from ironic operations on language at the simple level of the phoneme. For instance, the title for his painting *Le passage de la vierge à la mariée* enacts a small warp in its verbal field, highlighting a complex punning association between "vierge" (or "virgin") and "verge" (the common French word for penis). The play

of significance lies in the difference created by the presence (or lack) of a single letter, the “i” of “vierge,” teasingly representative of an individual ego, among other possible meanings. Today’s language-centered poetries in the United States (by Charles Bernstein, for instance) embody a continuation of a similarly trenchant punning sensibility. Contemporary French poets identified with the practice of *écriture* (Anne-Marie Albiach, Claude Royet-Journoud, and Emmanuel Hocquard) explore the difference between subjective positions and author functions, modifying common senses of both “literal meaning” and “lyricism.”

An anti-humanistic aspect is common to different practices of field poetics. For some, like Duchamp, this impulse originates in a critique of the often selfish individualism associated with the family drama, hence the turn toward the purity of manufactured items or toward found-objects lacking personal history; for others, the wor[ld] system based on Western philosophical thought and its humanistic citation of the rights of man has been a mask for ruthless exploitation, including slavery and environmental destruction.

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