Concrete poetry is a form of poetry that emerged in the 1960s and is characterized by the meaning or effect being conveyed partly or even entirely by visual means, either by using patterns of words or letters or by drawing on other typographical devices. British exponents include Edwin Morgan (b.1920), George MacBeth (1932-92) and Bob Cobbing (b.1920). The technique was foreshadowed by the US poet e.e. cummings (1894-1962).

Concrete poetry properly understood has a more specific definition created in the mid-1950s by the Swiss-Bolivian poet Eugen Gomringer and the Brazilian poets Décio Pignatari and Haroldo and Augusto de Campos. The original tenets of concrete poetry are clear in the early writings of the group. Their 1958 "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry" outlines a distinct approach in which form and meaning (material expression and reference field) would be as close to each other as possible. Thus, concrete suggests a unification of the word with its presentation. The poets derived certain ideas from the work of Ezra Pound, in particular his adoption of Ernest Fenollosa's productive misunderstanding of the Chinese ideogram as a self-identical verbal-visual expression. The concrete poets recast this notion into an idea of isomorphism (identity of shape and meaning) that they believed embodied an ideal of structure as content. This attempt to eliminate extraneous associations or ambiguities comports with the aesthetics of "specific objects" expressed by minimalist artists of the 1960s, who sought to strip art objects of all superfluous elements.

Gomringer's poem "silencio" (1953) exemplifies the concretists' aim of creating a total integration of word as image in a single aesthetic expression. By repeating the word "silence" eight times to frame an empty "quiet" space, Gomringer's poem is self-defining and self-referential. Gomringer had been the secretary to Max Bill, a visual artist and graphic designer affiliated with the New Bauhaus, a post—World War II Swiss movement with a highly formalist orientation. Bill used the term concrete to identify his own functionalist, analytical methodology, which had an influence on the development of Swiss-style graphic design. Though committed to principles of self-identical work, concrete poets were profoundly interested in and attracted by mass culture and the graphic langs. of signage and advertising. Pig-natari's famous "beba coca cola" (1957) reworks commercial lang. to critique corporate colonialism.

Concrete poets embraced the concept of intermedia works that could operate simultaneously in verbal-to-visual and acoustic modes. The use of sans serif typefaces, particularly Helvetica and Univers, lent the concrete poets an air of cool modernity that separated their work typographically from traditions of humanist poetry and lyric voice. Many concrete poets distanced themselves from earlier 20th-c. avant-garde movements by their less explicit political content and absence of inflammatory rhet. But they continued the trad. of writing manifestos to state their aesthetic positions.

Concrete poetry found many adherents, and the poets who identified themselves with the term quickly...
expanded to include major figures in Europe, the Brit. Isles, the U.S., Japan, and South America. With increased distance and time, the work of these groups and individuals expanded beyond the strict orthodoxy outlined in the pilot plan. Thus, many poets who experimented with visual forms and typographic features are loosely associated with concrete poetry, even though their work is only pictorial, composed as a field or a score, rather than conforming to the strictly self-referential guidelines of concretism. By the time the first three major anthologies of concrete poetry appeared, ed. by E. Williams (1967), S. Bann (1967) and M. E. Solt (1968), their editorial range included poets from around the globe.

Precedents for concrete poetry can be traced to cl. antiquity and followed into the Middle Ages when poems shaped as religious icons carried theological meaning (see CARMINA FIGURATA). Similar shaped works appeared in printed form in the Ren. and after as part of a contemplative trad. and then in a secular era as novelties and poetic amusements. Few visually shaped works follow the intellectual rigor of concrete poetry's self-identical reduction. Important later 20th-c. devels. brought concrete poetry into dialogue with procedural work, visual arts, installation, film, sound poetry, typewriter poetry, critical theories of deconstruction and performance, and later digital works using animation and graphic means.

See TECHNOPAEGNION, VISUAL POETRY.


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